

Volume Three

**Improving the Educational Experiences
of Aboriginal Children
and Young People**

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PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey has been carried out under the direction of the project's Aboriginal Steering Committee. Present and past members of the Committee include Ted Wilkes (Chair), Ken Wyatt, Gloria Khan, Gordon Cole, Bruce Roper, Pat Kopusar, Danny Ford, Shane Houston, Henry Councillor, Gregg Stubbs, Shirley Bennell, Lester Coyne, Irene Stainton, Heather D'Antoine and Daniel McAullay.

As the Aboriginal custodians of the survey data, the Aboriginal Steering Committee is responsible for the cultural integrity of the survey content, field methodology, analysis and interpretation of findings. This committee also has oversight of the survey's community feedback and dissemination strategy to ensure the appropriate utilisation of the data for the benefit of Aboriginal people.

PROJECT FUNDERS

The funding for survey design, interviewer training, field work, data analysis and reporting of this and previous volumes of findings was secured from competitive grants (Healthway and Lotterywest); the Australian Government (Department of Health and Ageing – coordinated through the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Office for Indigenous Policy Coordination, Attorney-General's Department, Department of Education, Science and Training and Department of Family and Community Services); the Government of Western Australia (Departments of the Premier and Cabinet, Health, Education and Training, Justice, and Housing and Works; the Department for Community Development including the former Office of Youth Affairs; the Disability Services Commission; Western Australia Police; and the West Australian Drug Strategy); and corporate sponsorship (the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation).

EDUCATION REFERENCE GROUP

Production of this volume was guided by a reference group that comprised the following people: Kevin O'Keefe (Chair), Sandra Harris (Executive Officer), Lyn Acacio, Geoff Bowley, Jim Codde, Robyn Collard, Wendy Dawson, Ron Gorman, John Gregg, John Harris, Katrina Hopkins, Les Mack, Yvonne Patterson, Deb Shaw, Anna Sinclair, Kia Skonis, Robert Somerville, Karen Taylor, Bev Vickers and Grant Wheatley.

The role of the reference group was to ensure the policy relevance of the data analysis and reporting, to assist with development of appropriate commentary in each chapter, to oversee the peer review process, to facilitate the uptake of findings into policy and practice and to plan for the launch of the volume.



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Finally, we extend sincere thanks to the Western Australian regional office of the ABS which provided, under the terms of our consultancy contract, invaluable technical advice and practical support. In particular we would like to thank Nev Cooney, Alan Hubbard, Chris Spencer and Ken Tallis from the ABS.



FOREWORD

'Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of the peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that the child of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation.'

— Nelson Mandela

Of the numerous research reports into Aboriginal education there is none so profound as *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey — Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. It provides confronting evidence that the benefits of education remain poorly realised by the vast majority of Western Australian Aboriginal children. The more fundamental issue is the failure over the past 30 years by education providers to improve the educational outcomes of the vast majority of Aboriginal school children.

Whilst there is a need to acknowledge individual commitment and localised success, the survey findings provide compelling evidence of the need for change and an insightful understanding of the challenges facing governments, educators, Aboriginal Australians and Australian society in providing educational opportunities for Aboriginal children and youth.

The information provided by Aboriginal students, principals, teachers and parents is rich in detail and provides a wonderful opportunity for change through developing strategies for engaging in a whole-of-government approach to the early years of life and learning. The findings of this report provide an opportunity to re-engineer existing programmes, strategies and student support services, realign resources and redefine the role of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to focus on the foundation of early childhood education and re-engaging Aboriginal parents as educators of their children and young people.

It is important to accept the reality that the failure over the past thirty years to improve the educational outcomes of the vast majority of Aboriginal school children has affected three generations of Aboriginal children and young people who are highly likely to have had limited access to lifelong learning, employment and economic opportunities. The ultimate impact is being felt within communities where the social, human, economic and community capacity is not being optimised for the post-ATSIC changes occurring at the local and regional level.

Whilst the findings are confronting and the message unpalatable for all education providers, this publication is not a report of blame and incrimination. It is a document that enables a way forward for all to make a genuine and concerted effort to change the status quo. It is an opportunity to set aside differences to bring about change to improve educational outcomes and impact on lifelong learning and life outcomes for all Aboriginal children and young people.

There has been tacit acceptance of the non-achievement of educational standards by Aboriginal children and young people. The resultant acceptance of this lack of educational success has a cumulative effect. It is based on the belief that Aboriginal children and young people will never reach their full potential and if they fall behind society then welfare will protect them. Their low level of educational success is accepted as a normative expectation. This has to change.



It has become acceptable for Aboriginal children and young people to work at their level unless it becomes problematic or the socio-political structures are pressured to bring change. This publication provides a catalyst to bring about required change and a joint approach by all education providers to achieve the resultant improvement in educational outcomes. Aboriginal children and young people move between the sectors depending on geographic location and social circumstances at a given time so it is obvious that a joint approach is needed to affect meaningful change.

Aboriginal communities and governments must work in partnership and share responsibility for achieving outcomes and for building the capacity of people in communities to manage their own affairs. The alternatives are bleak because they will experience poor health, take on family and parenting commitments too soon, enter into a cycle of poverty earlier, experience the down side to socio-economic status, unemployment, street life, premature death, incarceration, substance abuse, mental health problems, violence and sexual abuse.

RE-ENGAGING ABORIGINAL PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS IN EDUCATION

Re-engaging Aboriginal parents and caregivers as educators of their children in the first five years of life is critical if there is to be a strong relationship between home and school that can be utilised to develop common understandings, shared knowledge and mutual support in developing approaches to improving educational attainment. Aboriginal parents have always valued education. They want their children to succeed in mainstream education and have the same employment opportunities as other Australian children whilst retaining their cultural integrity.

Within traditional society there existed rich and diverse educational and teaching practices and support of appropriate processes for the education of children and young people which ensured they learnt both life skills and the cultural knowledge expected of them in perpetuating the continuance and survival of their community and families. This was altered with the progressive colonisation of Australia.

It is apparent that Aboriginal parents and caregivers strongly believe that their children are learning literacy and numeracy skills through regular participation in formal schooling and that their young people will have the appropriate skills necessary for accessing further study, employment and managing the community. This is not the reality. There is a moral obligation to redress the needs of Aboriginal children and young people to be successful and achieve the level of educational attainment that builds social and human capital to be achievers in the Australian and global community.

Currently there is a lack of agreement between parents and caregivers regarding the success of their children in the classroom and their children's educational attainment as measured against expected standards of achievement for that year level. Education providers, principals and teachers need to ensure parents and caregivers are well informed and have an opportunity to be active participants in their child's education and have an understanding of their actual level of educational attainment so as to work collaboratively to achieve improved outcomes.

INVESTING IN EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE

Education is recognised by OECD member states as a fundamental key to wealth creation and competitiveness in the current global information economy. Those societies which continue to invest in the education and training of their people have



prospered and enjoy a high standard of living and access to resources, health, human and social capital which builds upon individual and societal success.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Education, Science and Training, acknowledges that investing in education and training is essential for Australia's economic and social prosperity. This is reflected in the agency's vision statement — 'A better future for all Australians through learning, science and innovation.'

The new economic reform agenda is about positioning Australia to meet the new challenges and opportunities in international markets in a world without economic borders, the emerging new knowledge-based society, the pressures for change, global and international competitiveness, access to information and technology and new and emerging global clients. Australia will require a flexible, well-educated, high performing workforce to achieve and sustain these reforms. This will pose problems for Aboriginal children and young people who continue to perform poorly with their education because they will not access the opportunities, which will flow for Australians.

The ongoing economic reform agenda including the restructuring of the Australian economy and Australian industries along with global change has led to increased specialisation and a decline in employment in many traditional industries. There is growing demand for an educated, more highly trained and more technically skilled workforce. However, most Aboriginal workers are at the lower, shrinking end of the employment market and are becoming part of the growing underclass. These structural changes will require highly skilled and well-informed people who will contribute to advancing activities, which will address the needs of large corporations and Governments. Education systems and training providers will have to provide the skills required for the workforce, in this emerging new trend.

The question that arises for Aboriginal children and young people is why are they excluded from the advantages of being an integral part of a vision in which 'Australia's global competitiveness and future depends on all Australians having the necessary education, training and learning ability and is dependent upon the application of knowledge to support innovation, stimulate business development and improve workforce productivity to live productive and fulfilling lives'.¹

Aboriginal young people do not experience a level playing field due to poor educational outcomes, as a result of systemic failure over the past 30 years to improve the educational attainment of Aboriginal children.

The importance of achieving literacy, numeracy and other educational outcomes was reinforced at the Conference *Issues Confronting Australian Business And Opportunities for Indigenous Australians*. Mark Patterson, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industries identified the key attributes that the business sector requires for employees:

'In the countless surveys that we undertake with employees across all sectors throughout the country there are six key attributes that they repeatedly identify for us when they talk about their recruitment preferences.

- ◆ *The first is reliability*
- ◆ *The second punctuality*
- ◆ *The third work motivation*
- ◆ *The fourth being committed to pursuing the work activity*



- ◆ *The fifth basic levels of literacy*
- ◆ *The sixth, basic numeracy skills.*

Employers are generally looking for a series of key attributes of individuals — a willingness to work, a willingness to commit themselves to the process, being reliable, being punctual and having reasonable levels of both numeracy and literacy, providing them the opportunity for the employer to provide the required training to ensure that the individual can undertake the task at hand, and I think that's important for us in looking at creating employment opportunities. The general business climate and operating conditions that apply in Australia affect us all.'

It is important for Aboriginal children and young people to acquire and become proficient in Standard Australian English as well as to be taught to recognise the way in which language is used, contextualised and understood and applied within a global and knowledge-based society in order to participate in Australia's economy. The point that Diana Eades makes is valid and needs to be factored into the development of literacy skills.

'You see two people can speak exactly the same words, with the same grammar, but if their cultures are different, then they can't have the same meaning. Because the way people interpret each other speaking isn't just a matter of words and grammar. It's all tied up with the way people relate to each other, the way people act and think about their world — in other words, their culture.'

The task of developing appropriate resources and teaching Aboriginal students to become proficient in Standard Australian English should be achievable. Over a period of twelve years a student should be able to learn English when it is considered in this context — English has 26 letters and only 44 sounds, has an approximate total of 550,000 words, 2,000 words make up 90 per cent of most speech, 400 words make up 65 per cent of most writing and there are only 70 main spelling combinations.²

Graduation from the final year of secondary schooling provides measures of success including the completion of school, entry to University and higher education, access to TAFE, apprenticeships, traineeships, employment and an income. Aboriginal children and young people who do not achieve secondary education and do not acquire the basic skills of literacy and numeracy are unlikely to be competitive in the labour market. They will subsequently remain vulnerable to structural changes within the labour market, government reform and the responses to these changes through education and training policies and therefore will be reliant on government income support.

One way of changing the status quo for Aboriginal children and young people in addressing the salient messages within this publication would be to implement goal one of *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century*. Goal one proposes that schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. Aboriginal children and young people would then have the requisite employment-related skills and an understanding of the work environment, career options and pathways as a foundation for, and positive attitudes towards, vocational education and training, further education, employment and life-long learning.



COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

Aboriginal communities, parents and caregivers expect education and training providers to prepare future generations of Aboriginal children and young people to achieve educational outcomes that make a difference, equip them with the knowledge and skills to enable them to cope with change that comes with the rapid development of science and technology, the knowledge explosion and the transformation of a global economy.

There is a need to provide a framework of education which is inclusive of and acknowledges the cultural capital that Aboriginal children and young people bring with them at the beginning of their schooling process, and allows this cultural capital to remain intact because they are the future leaders of tomorrow who will guide the future generations of Aboriginal people. Therefore, it is important that education provides the opportunity for them to be active participants in mainstream Australian society and the global community.

At the conclusion of twelve years of schooling Aboriginal parents and caregivers would expect that any Aboriginal student would have an education that was as broad and multi-faceted as life itself, and one that recognised the multiple roles that an individual will be called upon to play in both their community and society in the future including those of efficient producer, public-spirited citizen, responsible parent, reliable and convivial friend and lifelong learner.

They would expect that a well rounded education would enable an Aboriginal child or young person to have the:

- ◆ learning to know, so as to acquire the instruments for understanding the world.
- ◆ learning to do, so as to be able to turn knowledge and understanding into useful action.
- ◆ learning to live together, in order to participate and cooperate with others in all human activities.
- ◆ learning to be involved in the development of a greater capacity for autonomy and judgement, which goes together with strengthening the feeling of personal responsibility for a collective destiny, self-determination and self-management.

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ENDNOTES

1. Department of Education, Science and Training. *Corporate Plan*. Canberra: DEST; 2002.
2. Adapted from slide presentation to *The Peoples Network Mastermind conference*, Dallas, Texas, June 1996. Gordon Dryden.
3. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. World Conference. *Education For All*. 1990.



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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This publication was produced by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (ICHR) through its Kulunga Research and Training Network, a formal partnership between the Institute and the Western Australian Aboriginal community controlled health sector, with the assistance of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

ATTRIBUTABLE COMMENTS

The views expressed in the numbered chapters of this publication relating to the implications of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) findings and for future directions in Aboriginal health are those of the Institute. Views expressed in the Foreword and in the Preface are those of the authors.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

This publication is the third of five volumes planned for release from the results of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey. The focus of this volume is Education. The first volume, released in June 2004, focused on Physical Health while the second volume, released in April 2005, focused on Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Forthcoming volumes will focus on: Family and Community; and Justice issues.

CUSTODY OF THE DATA

An Aboriginal Steering Committee directed all phases of the Survey. This Committee remains the custodian of all data collected and is responsible for the cultural integrity of the survey methods, analysis and dissemination processes.

UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

The tables and text included in this volume are derived either directly from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, or through linkage of WAACHS data and administrative data. Survey reports were provided by carers and teachers of Aboriginal children, by Aboriginal young people aged 12–17 years, and by school principals. These reports were accepted as given. Interviewers were not in a position to verify responses either at time of interview or afterwards.

ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

All data presented in this volume have been subject to rigorous statistical analysis. Estimates from the survey have been calculated at a 95% level of confidence. The confidence intervals are displayed on graphs by means of vertical confidence interval bars ($\bar{\pm}$). There is a 95% chance that the true value for a data item lies between the upper and lower limits indicated by the confidence bars for that item. Figures have been rounded to three significant digits. Therefore discrepancies may occur between the sums of the component items and totals.



COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

The Kulunga Research Network has designed a communication strategy which will maximise information available to Aboriginal communities. The results and findings are being reported and profiled for each of the ICC regions throughout the state.

CONTACT FOR INQUIRIES

If you would like more information about any topics covered in this volume or about the survey in general, please email us at:

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A summary booklet for this volume is available in hard copy as well as electronically on the Institute's web site.





THE DAWNING OF KNOWLEDGE: WHITE MATTER; GREY MATTER; BLACK MATTER

The first mind was created as a baby bird in the earth being allowed to grow within the womb of the universe. Fed by the placenta, the mother of creation nurtured the little bird beneath her branches deep in the earth. The creature was fed on ancient knowledge, universal and collective, that would sustain the bird on its journey through life and in turn would contribute experience and wisdom back to the collective consciousness. The milk of the tree nurtured the bird, connecting the spiritual and physical sides of life through an invisible black thread contained within the milk. The baby was given an all seeing eye, suspended so that nothing could enter or leave the mind that was not seen from all possible directions. The bird was also given a wing to act as a guardian that could filter and re-direct those experiences that needed to be stored in another place, away from consciousness. A tail-wing was attached to provide balance. The bird could then rest, knowing that it would create its own tree of knowledge, stand strong and tall and flourish. The many branches of knowledge would grow until finally there would be a wonderful place to sit under the tree. In this place, clarity, enlightenment and wisdom could be experienced allowing the imagination to soar, the mind to be free and a path of beauty to be created. Another tree also grew at the same time so the little bird would be able to experience all of the sensations in the universe, navigate their journey and know their place in the world.

With the first dawn, the sun awakened the mind bringing it to consciousness within the universe. The sunlight brought threads of knowledge into the mind to set the rhythms of life for eternity. The mind now bathed in a golden river that flowed throughout, connecting all places.

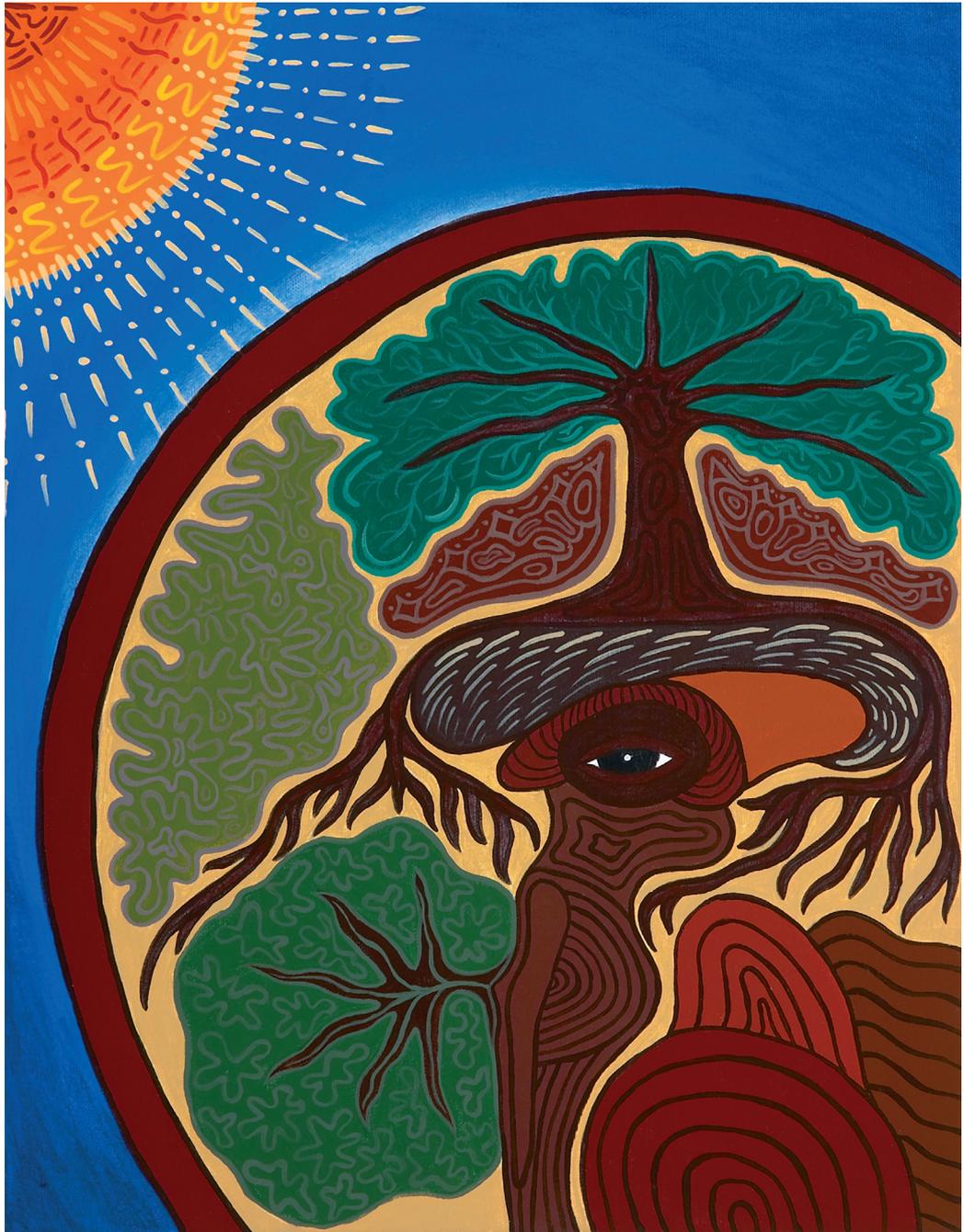
For the knowledge tree of the mind to grow well, the baby has to start off the right way, bathed and nurtured with the right knowledge and experience in the womb. Throughout development, the mind should be cultivated and protected until adulthood when the tree is well formed with a full spread of its branches. Then the elder will have a place to sit and ponder life for a very long time.



PREFACE

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Dean of the School of Indigenous Studies
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Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Medicine and Dentistry
The University of Western Australia



**THE DAWNING OF KNOWLEDGE:
WHITE MATTER; GREY MATTER; BLACK MATTER**



The oldest people on earth, in the oldest continent on earth have a lot to teach their children and to teach all Australian children.

INTRODUCTION

This third volume of findings from the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS) explores some of the key issues relevant to the education of Aboriginal children and young people. It focuses particularly on students' overall levels of academic achievement and the many factors that influence their attendance, behaviour and outcomes at school. In doing so it builds on the survey findings on physical and mental health already reported in Volumes One and Two.^{1,2} Reading both of these volumes in conjunction with this volume will assist the reader to gain a more complete view of the education, health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children. A further two volumes are due to be released later that report community health and justice outcomes. Each volume thus builds a progressively more layered and holistic perspective on the many factors which influence Aboriginal children's outcomes and opportunities.

Writing from the perspective of Aboriginal people and professionals in health and education, the term 'Aboriginal' has been used recognising that many of the issues and experiences discussed may also apply to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Whatever terms are used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they should be used with respect and instil a sense of pride, bearing in mind that these 'labels' are applied to identify our children on the basis of their unique cultural heritage.

EDUCATION AS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT

Education is the process by which a society transmits its knowledge, culture, values, experiences and wisdom to successive generations. It requires a community of educators and students willing to share the journey and responsibility for both teaching and learning from each other and the world around them. From an Aboriginal perspective, for a *whole* community to go forward into its future a *whole* community must be educated.

Education is a fundamental right of all people; without education people cannot fully exercise their rights or fulfil their responsibilities as citizens of a nation. Education is not just about creating a healthy, prosperous society. It is also about supporting each individual to develop to the fullest their physical, intellectual and emotional capacities. The denial of education condemns not just the individual but their families and communities to limited life choices. Education in Australia is compulsory precisely because it is so fundamental to the health and continued prosperity of the nation. In Western Australia, the age of compulsory education has recently been extended to 16 years of age commencing in 2006; and will be further extended to 17 years of age by 2008. This is intended to enable students to have the 'skills, qualifications and education to succeed in the modern world'.³ Will this make a difference for Aboriginal students who the system is already failing — many of whom have *effectively* stopped attending or achieving by 15 years of age?

For Aboriginal peoples, education is complex and multi-layered. Aboriginal children must gain the skills, values and knowledge that Aboriginal people hold as Indigenous cultures, nations, and custodians of country (collectively 'Australia') through education determined and delivered *by* Aboriginal people. Aboriginal students must also gain the necessary skills and knowledge from the dominant Australian education



system at all levels. In this context it is essentially education *for* Aboriginal people delivered and controlled *by* non-Aboriginal people. For both forms of learning to succeed, non-Aboriginal Australians must also be educated *about* Aboriginal peoples' rights and issues, *by* Aboriginal peoples, so they can properly value and respect our knowledge and culture. It is somewhat ironic that a non-Aboriginal person can gain a degree in a field such as cultural anthropology and expect to be paid well for their expertise on Aboriginal culture yet Aboriginal elders, as our custodians of knowledge and culture, typically receive little if any recognition in Australian society.

Indigenous education – The international context

The *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26* states:

- ◆ 'Everyone has the right to education.
- ◆ Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- ◆ Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children'.⁴

Furthermore, the unique status of Indigenous peoples is acknowledged in The *Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which asserts:

- ◆ 'Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' (Article 3)
- ◆ 'Indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples have this right and the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages.' (Article 15)
- ◆ 'Indigenous peoples have the right to have the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations appropriately reflected in all forms of education and public information.' (Article 16)⁵

In 2000 the United Nations established the *UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues* recognising that:

'Indigenous peoples are the inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to other people and to the environment. Indigenous peoples have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Indigenous people are arguably among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people in the world today'.⁶

Aboriginal peoples in the national context

In the Australian context, in addition to the rights that flow to all members of a socially just society, for Aboriginal peoples social justice:

'also means recognising the distinctive rights that Indigenous Australians hold as the original peoples of this land, including:

- ◆ *the right to a distinct status and culture, which helps maintain and strengthen the identity and spiritual and cultural practices of Indigenous communities*



- ◆ *the right to self-determination, which is a process where Indigenous communities take control of their future and decide how they will address the issues facing them*
- ◆ *the right to land, which provides the spiritual and cultural basis of Indigenous communities.*

“For Indigenous peoples to participate in Australian society as equals requires that we be able to live our lives free from assumptions by others about what is best for us. It requires recognition of our values, culture and traditions so that they can co-exist with those of mainstream society. It requires respecting our difference and celebrating it within the diversity of the nation.”

— Dr William Jonas⁷

In Australia, the education of Aboriginal peoples is inextricably linked with the education of non-Aboriginal peoples, about Aboriginal peoples, issues and rights. The lack of understanding by the broader Australian community of what it means to be Aboriginal is a major impediment to achieving equality and social justice for Aboriginal peoples.

Reconciliation and community education

In 1991, the Commonwealth of Australia established *The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation* which embarked on a nine-year education programme to

*‘promote a deeper understanding by all Australians of the history, cultures, past dispossession and continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and of the need to redress that disadvantage’.*⁸

At the end of its tenure in 2000, the Council identified significant unfinished business, and drew up two documents of reconciliation — the *Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation* and the *Roadmap for Reconciliation*, which were presented to the Prime Minister and the nation. Among the essential actions recommended by the Council was that

*‘schools, tertiary education institutions and employers require and support the culturally appropriate teaching of the truth of Australia’s history that includes Indigenous perspectives and addresses racism.’*⁸

Few schools and institutions have taken up the challenge, and Aboriginal students and staff in schools and tertiary institutions still routinely identify racism as a significant barrier to achievement.

Aboriginal education doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It is not just about Aboriginal people but what everyone learns about Aboriginal people from Australian education systems (at all levels). Aboriginal studies curricula, while now included in a number of schools in Western Australia, do not always include Aboriginal people in their formulation or delivery except perhaps as an occasional ‘guest speaker’. Aboriginal studies, done badly can be a greater problem for Aboriginal students than not having it at all. The key issue is not just about the incorporation of Aboriginal studies curricula, but the effect of the Australian education system as a whole. This involves interrogating and correcting the negative impact of hidden messages in the broader curriculum. For example, until very recently the teaching of Australian history has continued to perpetuate the myth of ‘peaceful settlement’. While the Aboriginal side of the story may sometimes be told in schools it is questionable whether it is done sufficiently to enable students to make



up their own minds. Aboriginal children often don't see themselves, their families, culture, history and experiences reflected in schools. Even if incorporated in curricula, Aboriginal views about the true history of Western Australia are often negated in other ways. For example, every year when Foundation Day is celebrated with a public holiday; or pioneer week occurs, Governor James Stirling is lauded as a 'founding father', remembered for his role in paving the way for European settlement rather than for the land theft and murder that characterised his governorship. At the same time Aboriginal 'heroes' such as Yagan and Jandamarra are accorded very different historical status. There is still a mismatch between what Aboriginal people hear (or don't hear) about themselves in schools and what is taught at home. A fundamental conflict exists between the lived experience of Aboriginal people and the dominant Australian education system.

A critical problem in educating non-Indigenous Australians, and certainly one also identified by Aboriginal peoples in relation to reconciliation, has been the disproportionate contribution Aboriginal people, particularly students, are expected to make to the education process. Aboriginal students in schools and universities are often expected to 'teach' the rest of the class about Aboriginal culture or issues, to take too great a responsibility for other students', and often the teacher's or lecturer's, learning. Aboriginal students in university report being asked to comment on any Aboriginal issue in the media, to identify racism or inappropriate remarks made by other students when teachers fail to do so, to challenge misinformation presented by lecturers. Aboriginal students also often have their own identity questioned. All of this places an enormous burden on Aboriginal students at all levels of education.

ABORIGINAL WAYS OF KNOWING

Since time immemorial Indigenous nations around the globe have had their own knowledge systems, and Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal knowledge systems in Australia are part of this global network. The Indigenous knowledge systems developed and maintained by Indigenous peoples concern past, present and future and continue to grow as they face new challenges and changing historical circumstances. In reality, Indigenous communities promote lifetime learning and sustainability; they are relationship-based societies where people are considered the greatest asset, and knowledge a treasured possession.

Within this global system, the hundreds of 'nations' or language groups that collectively make up the Aboriginal peoples of Australia are the oldest continuous cultures on earth. Aboriginal knowledge systems are the oldest knowledge systems in existence, hundreds of thousands of years older than their western counterparts. Collectively Aboriginal knowledge systems form the first knowledge systems of this continent, a vital part of the knowledge capital of Australia and the key to understanding the continent. To ignore the value systems, traditions, beliefs, knowledge and skills inherent in Aboriginal communities is to jeopardise any long term sustainable future for Australia.

Aboriginal worldviews

Aboriginal knowledge systems have ways of sensing the world, worldviews that differ in significant ways from the dominant 'western' or 'European' knowledge system in Australia. Aboriginal knowledge systems are based on intimate relationships not focused on *what* things are as much as *who* they are and how they are related.



Everything has spirit, feeling and law. This applies equally to all things — rocks, wind, land, plants, animals or people. Trees, animals, rocks are related to us as brothers, sisters, aunties. In contrast, western knowledge systems appear to have limited definitions of what is ‘living’, classify a broad set of objects as inanimate and place living ‘things’ in a hierarchy of complexity and therefore, ‘value’. For Aboriginal people, spiritual and physical worlds are continuous and interactive, our ancestors still speak to us in daily life. In western knowledge and education systems spiritual and physical worlds are separate, consigned to their respective realms of secular and religious (or occasionally perhaps paranormal). For Aboriginal people, time is fluid; past, present and future are all in the one place/space/time, more circular than linear. In western knowledge time is generally learnt as linear and upwardly progressive, time and society advancing from past to present and into a brighter future, particularly in technological and material wealth. From an Aboriginal worldview the most important events have already happened and each day is a living celebration and renewal of the ‘Dreaming’.⁹

Transfer of knowledge and learning

In Aboriginal Australia, the transfer of knowledge and learning occurs through stories that can also be expressed in various different modalities — art, song, dance, ceremony. Aboriginal stories tell us fundamental truths about the world, but are often dismissed as merely metaphor or myth, relegated to the realm of children’s story, lacking the documentary evidence or proof required of the scientific method.

ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE LIGHTS THE WORLD

Before time, large beautiful white birds were the messengers between the heavens and the earth. Carrying the knowledge from the creator and inscribing it onto the earth, so all would have the secret of knowledge. The beautiful birds were spaced across the continent as the writings covered the land. Each bird inscribed the land they lived on with their knowledge from the creator. All knowledge was not the same. Each area had its own special writings, guarded by the sacred birds the people loved and respected. One day when food became scarce throughout the land the hunters were tired from hunting all day and returning empty handed. When they saw one of the beautiful white birds sitting on its nest, they thought no one would know if we killed the bird for food, as long as we hide the white feathers. The white feathers contained the knowledge of all time, which is why they never lost any feathers; they were part of the knowledge. Everything they knew was also inscribed on their feathers. The men killed the sacred bird then stuck the white feathers into a large flock of black swans, till none were left. The black swans flew to the farthest side of the continent carrying with them the secrets of the killing and the sacred knowledge inscribed on the white feathers. When the creator saw what had happened, he recalled all the sacred birds who rose in their thousands creating a great whirlwind that covered up the land and the sacred knowledge inscribed there, away from the eyes of man. If a black swan is ever born without a white feather, then the last chance for humankind is lost. Indigenous knowledge is inscribed over all things, the land, the waters, the sky, the sun, if we only have the insight to see, the wisdom to listen and the compassion to embrace these ancient patterns of life.

— Gladys Milroy



The story Aboriginal knowledge lights the world holds no surprises for Aboriginal people, land is read as text and the ‘proof’ is all around us written in the landscape. Learning to ‘read’ land, people, sky, sea, to express knowledge through song, dance, ceremony are all intrinsic to Aboriginal knowledge and education systems.

For knowledge systems to have been sustained over a hundred thousand years, it follows that Aboriginal peoples also have the oldest and arguably the most successful education system in the world; education systems that did not just enable people to physically survive but to live culturally and spiritually rich lives, and pass this on to successive generations.

Stories such as this enabled Aboriginal peoples to maintain a healthy and bountiful country and a strong healthy society. For Aboriginal people the land is alive, central to health and survival. Aboriginal knowledge systems value the knowledge and understanding passed down through oral traditions over many generations. These provide insight into how the health of the land and the people are interconnected and can be managed and improved over the coming generations. Being part of the landscape and intimately connected to ‘country’ suggests a different view of life, purpose and meaning and in some respects raises the notion of ‘eternity’ with no beginning or end but a continuous cycle of life.

Aboriginal education systems required children and adults to hold multiple schemata in mind simultaneously in order, for example, to know and understand complex kinship systems and skin groupings, and navigate traditional lands. The use of story systems in developing these cognitive skills enabled Aboriginal children to be multi-tasked and multi-focused. Oral history traditions ensured an enriched environment for healthy brain development throughout life, due to the necessity to develop extensive systems of memory. Growing the ‘knowledge tree’ of the mind remains as important today for the resilience and wellbeing of Aboriginal children as it has been for hundreds of generations.

Knowledge and respect for relationships

Aboriginal children’s learning occurs in families and communities, from and with adults and children with whom they have significant relationships. Learning about kinship systems is an important aspect of children’s development as it gives a place and role in society. When Aboriginal people meet each other, the most important information is not what you do or where you work but how you might be related – where’s your country, who’s your family – establishing what relationships you share, so you will know how to behave in the proper way. Aboriginal society is based on relationships between people, country, animals, trees; everything and everyone is in this relationship. The focus of society is the wellbeing of the group. Within this each person is valuable to the group and the group is strong and healthy when everyone is included. Aboriginal children learn in families and communities, from and with adults and children they have relationships with. Education includes sharing and reciprocity, designed to maintain and strengthen kinship ties to ensure the wellbeing of the group. This is often at odds with the competitive nature of Western education systems that reserve the greatest value and biggest rewards for individual achievement.

From a traditional perspective, knowledge was wealth and Aboriginal society was seen as affluent and prosperous. There was a commitment to lifelong learning, an obligation to teach, share and use knowledge for the benefit of the community. Knowledge was essential to survival as it ensured the sustainability of food sources, a healthy genetic



pool, and a civil society. Knowledge was based on generations of observation and understanding the laws of nature. There was time to think and consider things in detail, and important decisions were given considerable time to discuss. Considering that Aboriginal peoples were well educated and healthy prior to colonisation, applying Aboriginal knowledge systems alongside current Western knowledge and research for education, health, wellbeing is critical. If education is not understood from a cultural context and 'remedies' applied in isolation from the rest of life, they are unlikely to produce positive outcomes.

HISTORY AND ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Aboriginal Australia comprises some 250 distinct Aboriginal languages and some 600 separate Aboriginal groups or 'nations', with about 60 Aboriginal languages, each with numerous dialects, in what is now Western Australia. The diversity, richness and uniqueness of language groups and nations in Western Australia were ignored when a single term 'aboriginal' was applied to all peoples and languages. The Western Australian education system has always been premised on the suppression of history as Aboriginal people know and understand it.

Colonisation of Australia's west coast began in 1829, with the British invasion of Noongar lands followed throughout the 19th and early 20th century by successive invasions of Aboriginal peoples' countries, Yamatji, Yinjibarndi, Nyamal, Palyku, Nyiyapali, Bardi, Bunuba, Wongkutha and many, many more. The dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their lands was a bloody and violent process as the frontier moved north and east from Perth. Massacres were common and continued into the 1920s in the Kimberley. Aboriginal men not killed were frequently incarcerated thus leaving Aboriginal women and children more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. Aboriginal people call this genocide, and while colonists at the time did not use the same term, they were fully aware of the ultimate consequences of their actions. Western Australia's first Governor, James Stirling, declared in 1835 that the Aboriginal race 'must gradually disappear as the Country is occupied', and he believed that nothing would save Aboriginal people from extinction.¹⁰

Aboriginal education and mission education

For Aboriginal people who survived the initial onslaught of colonisation, under British Imperial policy the duty of colonisers was to 'civilise and Christianise' and missions were seen as capable of achieving both aims, through the education of Aboriginal children. Inherent in colonisation and colonial society, however, was an unshakeable belief in the superiority of the colonisers and the inferiority of the colonised, a belief reinforced by its education system.

Education for Aboriginal children was limited to the training of a labour force useful to the colonists. Racist assumptions about the primitive nature of Aboriginal society underpinned ideas that Aboriginal children could only be educated to a basic level because of their limited intelligence. From 1840, Anglican and Methodist missions opened Aboriginal schools, but despite government financial support, most soon closed. Aboriginal parents were resistant, colonists disinterested and convict labour, introduced in 1850, alleviated labour shortages.

More 'successful' and enduring was the Benedictine Mission established in 1846 at New Norcia under Father (later Bishop) Salvado, and later Catholic missions in the Kimberley in the 1870s. The *Elementary Education Act* (1871) did not specifically exclude



Aboriginal children from local schools, but the Education Department would not take responsibility for Aboriginal education due to specific legislation enacted for Aboriginal people.¹¹ *The Aborigines Protection Act 1886* established the *Aborigines Protection Board*, who could recommend to the Governor steps for the care and education of Aboriginal children. The 1886 *Act* also set up an apprenticeship system, whereby Resident Magistrates could apprentice any Aboriginal child of a 'suitable age' provided that reasonable provision was made for 'maintenance, clothing and proper and humane treatment'. This was rarely checked or enforced. Many Magistrates had vested interests in the supply of Aboriginal labour, a suitable age for apprenticeship was sometimes seen as low as 6 years of age and children were traded or sold by their employers.

Aboriginal education in the period of 'protection'

In the 1880s Aboriginal people were believed to be dying out, a natural process in the face of a greater civilisation, and a convenient way of abrogating responsibility for the colonists' active participation in the process through frontier violence. Under the guise of 'protection', Aboriginal people were subjected to special race-based legislation that became increasingly restrictive amounting to a system of apartheid that excluded Aboriginal people from health and education systems, and society as a whole for the greater part of the 20th century. The *Aborigines Act 1905* made the Chief Protector responsible for the education of all Aboriginal children, but the most devastating consequence of the *Act* was to make the Chief Protector (from 1936, Commissioner of Native Affairs) the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children under the age of 16 years (extended to 21 years in 1936) over and above the rights of Aboriginal parents. This enabled Aboriginal children to be removed from their families and incarcerated in missions, settlements and children's homes or adopted. In some cases institutions differed little from prisons, with barred windows, dormitories locked up from sunset to sunrise, severe punishment regimes including isolation, for absconding. Education was still limited to training girls for domestic service and boys for manual labour, and nutrition, health and housing were extremely poor. The restrictive provisions of the various acts were not fully repealed until the *Native Welfare Act 1963 (WA)*. In July 1995, The Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (ALS) launched its *Telling Our Story* report which documented the ongoing trauma of child removal practices in Western Australia.¹²

For Aboriginal children who managed to stay with their families, **health and hygiene** provided the key mechanisms of expelling or excluding Aboriginal children from state schools. Low morals and poor housing were also used as a pretext for exclusion. Aboriginal parents were subject to the prejudices, goodwill and whims of local parents in relation to their children's education. Aboriginal parents fought extremely hard to have their children attend local state schools, to be met with frustration and disappointment. Aboriginal children were sometimes enrolled to boost numbers in a particular town or district, enabling a school to be established or saved from closure, then excluded once the aim was achieved. Situating Aboriginal reserves considerable distances from country towns served to discourage Aboriginal parents from sending their children to school. The Education Department was firmly committed to the policy that Aboriginal students must be excluded if non-Aboriginal parents objected to their admission and under the Education Act the Minister retained the right to 'expel Aboriginal children whose presence might be considered injurious to the health, welfare and morality of other children'.¹¹ Regulations also gave teachers the right to suspend Aboriginal children temporarily if other parents objected and in



practice a single complaint by one parent was sufficient. In the 1940s the admittance of Aboriginal children to Government schools was still predicated on meeting required standards of health and hygiene.¹¹

Assimilation

The *Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities*, held in Canberra in 1937 concluded that

*‘the destiny of natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full-blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth’.*¹³

Education was seen as the means by which the objective could be achieved and the Conference recommended that the:

*‘efforts of all State authorities should be directed to the education of children of mixed aboriginal blood at white standards and their subsequent employment under the same conditions as whites with a view to taking their place in the white community on an equal footing with whites’.*¹³

For those Aboriginal people the Conference considered as ‘full-blood natives’, the agreed position was

*‘to educate to white standard, children of the detribalised living near centres of white population and subsequently place them in lucrative occupations, which will not bring them into economic or social conflict with the white community’.*¹³

This created a tiered system of education, which in Western Australia effectively meant a north–south divide between Aboriginal people as well. Those Aboriginal people not deemed eligible for assimilation would be ‘preserved’ or benevolently supervised in ‘their natural state’.

Western Australia’s delegate to the *Conference* was A.O. Neville, Commissioner of Native Affairs (formerly Chief Protector) who had controlled the Aborigines Department since 1915. Aboriginal people commonly referred to him as ‘Mr Devil’. Neville held an extreme view advocating not just ‘cultural’ assimilation through education but allied to it, the total biological ‘absorption’ of Aboriginal people, through control of marriage and relationships so that eventually no trace of the Aboriginal people would remain. Sister Kate’s Home, established in 1933, took only fairer skinned Aboriginal children who could be readily assimilated into ‘white society’.¹⁴ The Bateman Report (1948) advocated special colleges as a means to transform Aboriginal people ‘from a nomadic, idle and discontented race to a settled, industrious, contented section of the community’.¹¹ In the 1950s, education was firmly aimed at assimilation but still mostly restricted to primary level. Aboriginal children were not generally perceived as having the ability for secondary studies, which in any case were considered unnecessary. Education was also designed to eliminate ‘laziness’, a trait attributed to Aboriginal people that was at odds with the reality of the widespread exploitation of Aboriginal labour, including child labour, particularly in the north of the state. Some separate hostels for Aboriginal boys and girls were established to enable a limited number of Aboriginal students to undertake secondary studies. By the end of the 1950s, the Education Department no longer banned Aboriginal students from enrolling in its schools.



At the 1961 Native Welfare Conference, a formal definition of assimilation was agreed on:

‘The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs as other Australians.’¹⁵

Citizenship, integration and self-determination

Education was predicated on Aboriginal people giving up their own culture and values to adopt those of non-Aboriginal Australia, taught through the education system. As policy began to shift to integration, the definition was modified to enable Aboriginal people to ‘choose’ to follow the path above. The 1967 Federal Referendum amended s51 and s127 of the Australian Constitution enabling the Commonwealth to legislate for Aboriginal people in all states and making it mandatory for Aboriginal people to be counted in the Census. The 1967 Referendum was seen as the turning point in Aboriginal people gaining full citizenship rights, and education was one of the rights for which Aboriginal people had long fought. Though schools were a state responsibility, the Commonwealth was now able to develop national education policy for Aboriginal people. As policy shifted from assimilation and integration to self-determination, the Commonwealth established the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) in 1978, comprising Aboriginal community representatives and educators from around the country, to advise on policy and programme development to redress the critically low achievement levels in education for Aboriginal people. The Commonwealth has maintained its national policy role, allied programme funding for Aboriginal education and a national reporting framework across all levels and sectors.

Recognition of Aboriginal ways of learning

In the 1980s, in attempting to increase the achievement of Aboriginal children in schools, much of the work of researchers and educators focused on the classroom itself and the nature of Aboriginal students as learners. ‘Aboriginal learning styles’ gained prominence as a large measure due to the work of Stephen Harris based on his teaching experiences in North-East Arnhem land. Harris listed a number of characteristics of Aboriginal learning that included: learning by observation and imitation rather than verbal instruction; learning by personal trial and error; real life, rather than by practice in artificial setting; learning ‘wholes’, not sequenced parts, or learning by successive approximations of the efficient product.¹⁶ The NAEC’s Aboriginal Pedagogy project,¹⁷ and work by teachers and researchers led to various approaches designed around two way learning, both ways learning and bicultural education, domain separation, code switching, all of which appeared to offer a practical and relatively simple way to address Aboriginal students needs, though they haven’t proved to be the hoped for panacea for Aboriginal education. Aboriginal learning styles, teaching methods and associated research have often been taken too prescriptively and applied to all Aboriginal students without regard to individual student’s and local community cultural diversity, historical experiences and the political, socioeconomic context.



Continuing educational disadvantage

The *House of Representatives Report 1985* concluded that Aboriginal education was characterized by lower levels of access, lower levels of achievement, lower retention rates, particularly at secondary school, and often inadequate or inappropriate curricula.¹⁸ Some twenty years on, despite Aboriginal education policy having been reviewed, revised, evaluated, new policies being formulated, further parliamentary inquiries undertaken, and Aboriginal education is still characterised by the above, despite some gains in some areas.

In 1989 the Commonwealth launched the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (AEP) with 21 Goals for Aboriginal Education across all sectors from early childhood to higher education. These sought to improve access, participation and outcomes for Aboriginal students in early childhood, schooling, the involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision-making, and Aboriginal studies for all Australians. The AEP was reviewed in 1994, the 21 goals endorsed, though most hadn't been fully implemented and despite the fact that many Aboriginal people argued that the AEP represented assimilation, rather than self-determination for Aboriginal people.

The *Report of MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education (2000)* identified the following impediments to the achievement of educational equality:

- ◆ *'lingering perceptions and mindsets in some quarters of the Australian community that the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students is "normal" and that educational equality for Indigenous Australians is either not achievable, or if possible, only achievable over a long period of time (i.e. decades or generations)*
- ◆ *a systemic lack of optimism and belief in educational success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*
- ◆ *education of Indigenous students is often not regarded as an area of core business in education systems.'*¹⁹

Such attitudes and mind sets differ little from a century ago; 2005 marks the 100 years 'anniversary' of the *Aborigines Act 1905*, the tragic consequences of which are still being dealt with by Aboriginal families and communities, and which, in relation to education, saw Aboriginal children as only capable of (or deserving of) education to grade 3 and Aboriginal education as the responsibility of the Aborigines department rather than the Education department.

The *Report of MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education (2000)* acknowledged the close relationship between education and health, housing and other factors, and the urgent need for cross-sector approaches if educational equality is to be achieved.¹⁹

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

In 2005, on average, Aboriginal Australians are less likely to get a pre-school education; are well behind mainstream rates in literacy and numeracy skills development before they leave primary school; have less access to secondary school in the communities in which they live; are likely to be absent from school up to two to three times more often than other students; leave school much younger; are less than half as likely to go through to Year 12; are far more likely to be doing bridging and basic entry programmes in universities and vocational education and training institutions; and obtain fewer and lower-level education qualifications.²⁰



Literacy and Numeracy

In 2000, The Commonwealth's launched its *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (NIELNS), declaring that 'school must be a place where all Indigenous Australian children want to be, and want to learn' and for this to be achieved six key elements had to be addressed: attendance, hearing health and nutrition, pre-schooling, good teachers, best teaching methods, and accountability.²¹ However, in national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, improvement has been marginal and in some areas indicators for Year 3 and Year 5 actually went down from 2000–2003. In national benchmark tests, in Western Australia in 2004, Year 5 Aboriginal students were 20–30 percentage points lower than non-Aboriginal students and by Year 7 this has increased to 40 percentage points lower.²²

Secondary school education

For Aboriginal students in secondary schooling in Western Australia, retention is poor and achievement is in crisis. In 2003, the apparent rate of retention from Year 10 to Year 12 for Aboriginal students nationally was 45.7 per cent some 31.2 percentage points lower than the rate for all students. For Western Australia, the situation was even more alarming with Aboriginal retention from Year 10 to Year 12 only 25.5 per cent, which is significantly below the national average.²⁰

According to the *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003*,²³ Secondary graduation and a University Admissions Index (UAI), referred to as the Tertiary Entrance Rank in Western Australia, is the key pathway to higher education for most students, but this is not happening for Aboriginal secondary students, and Western Australia appears to be performing lower than a number of other states.

Less than 20 per cent of Aboriginal students who commenced in Year 11 in 2002 achieved secondary graduation in 2003 compared with 57.2 per cent of non-Aboriginal students; and 7.3 per cent achieved at or above the Tertiary Entrance Rank required for entry to a Western Australian public university, about one-fifth the rate for non-Aboriginal students.²⁴ The number of Aboriginal students doing Tertiary Entrance Exams has dropped alarmingly in the past three years.

There is some concern that the growth of Vocation Education and Training (VET) programmes in schools is contributing to the diversion of Aboriginal students away from university study. *The National Research Strategy 2003–2006*, found that 'there are real concerns that some programs are streaming Indigenous students into "second-rate" education.'²⁵ Anecdotal evidence from Aboriginal secondary students also suggests that schools often give them information for VET courses rather than information about university study. This may reflect lower teacher expectations for Aboriginal students.

Higher education

The poor rates of Aboriginal high school retention and graduation do not necessarily reflect the abilities or aspirations of Aboriginal students or their families. This is borne out by the fact that an increasing proportion of Aboriginal students, who have not achieved the requisite TER for university entrance, or indeed have left school before Year 12, go on to access higher education at a later stage through alternative entry provisions and preparatory courses available to Aboriginal students at Western Australian universities. Such students are highly successful in their chosen study and career paths including Law, Medicine, Engineering, Social Work, Education, Science



and Arts. A factor that may be significant in explaining this educational turnaround is the existence of Aboriginal led centres and programmes within universities that provide cultural affirmation and security in addition to targeted student support services and courses for Aboriginal students.

According to the *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2003*, 33.9 per cent of Aboriginal students had no formal qualifications for entry compared with 5.4 per cent of non-Aboriginal students; 70.2 per cent of Aboriginal students came through special entry for admission compared with 22.8 per cent for non-Aboriginal students.²³

The ongoing legacy of colonisation

The history and legacy of colonisation is characterised by two critical and interdependent issues: stolen land and stolen children, which resulted in separation from country, family, culture, knowledge and education. The legacy of trauma affects the ability of Aboriginal families, particularly parents and grandparents, to interact positively with education and health systems. Australian history and education has remained culpably silent about what happened to Aboriginal peoples and despite increased publications, Aboriginal stories of what happened is still challenged as unreliable because it is based on oral traditions. The issues of stolen land and stolen children are still unresolved in Australia today and continue to involve Aboriginal families and communities in lengthy legal battles to regain their rights.

In 1995, the Commonwealth Government established the *National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* to be undertaken by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). In 1997, HREOC submitted the *Bringing Them Home Report*, concluding that the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was a gross violation of human rights, racially discriminatory and an act of genocide. In relation to education, the Inquiry found that for Aboriginal children in institutions, education was 'often very basic' and 'essentially a preparation for menial labour'. Poor quality and insufficient food, clothing and shelter were common. The Inquiry also found that Aboriginal people forcibly removed in childhood were not better educated, rated their health as poorer and were more likely to have been arrested, than Aboriginal people who had not been removed from their communities.²⁶

The refusal of the Prime Minister John Howard to apologise to the stolen generations on behalf of the nation, the lack of compensation and reparation, and adverse decisions in stolen generations cases add fresh despair and continuing trauma to Aboriginal families. With the intense interaction between Aboriginal children and grandparents this can't be discounted as impacting on Aboriginal children seemingly distant from actions two decades or more ago.

For Aboriginal people, the land is our mother and people are literally born of and from the land, and education is in many ways learning about our mother. It is an intensely intimate and loving relationship. Aboriginal cultural identity is 'land' based, it is a relationship with a particular 'country' as part of a community that has custodianship and responsibility for that country. At one level it is not dissimilar from a sense of 'national identity', a place of belonging, of coming home to. 'Country' is a source of strength and renewal at a physical, emotional and spiritual level. Loss of country, not knowing one's country, not being recognised and respected in your country, is a source of grief and loss.



Some 13 years after the Mabo decision overturned the application of the doctrine of *terra nullius* to Australia, Aboriginal rights to land are still not settled. In Australia, 95 per cent of the land potentially claimable under Native Title is in Western Australia, a state where the economy is heavily dependent on resource development. Aboriginal people in Western Australia face ongoing legal challenges to claim and retain their land and, because of this, there is no certainty in the future. *What does it mean to face a protracted legal battle to reclaim your mother? How do such battles affect Aboriginal children?*

The language of racism

Colonisation has also meant the imposition of a single foreign language, English, and the suppression of Aboriginal languages. Most Aboriginal people were multi-lingual, some speaking as many as seven or eight languages, and children often grew up learning a number of Aboriginal languages. Few colonists saw the necessity to learn Aboriginal languages, which in any case were labelled as ‘primitive’ or ‘rubbish’ languages. In missions and institutions, Aboriginal children and adults were forbidden their language, which was labelled the ‘devil’s tongue’, and they were punished if caught speaking language. Aboriginal attempts at speaking ‘English’ were also often ridiculed and became fodder for racist cartoons in the popular press, usually allied to images that depicted Aboriginal people as ape-like, ugly, dirty and of limited intelligence.

Aboriginal people applying for citizenship (and therefore no longer subject to the legal restrictions of the *Native Administrations Act 1936*) under the *Native (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944* had to prove they had adopted a civilised life. Being able to speak and understand English was one of the required conditions.

Aboriginal children learnt and used ‘Aboriginal English’ in their families and communities, but in schools it was treated as ‘bad English’ that needed to be corrected. Aboriginal children were made to feel ashamed of how they and their families spoke. They were forced to use Standard Australian English and then marked poorly when they did so. In Western Australia, Aboriginal people have fought a long battle to have Aboriginal English, and the worldview that accompanies it, accepted and valued by the Education Department. Aboriginal English speakers can now be recognised as bi-dialectical with linguistic competencies in different but not inferior forms of English. Many Aboriginal students currently speak one or more Aboriginal languages, and come to school with English as a Second Language, or what is still not fully acknowledged, English as a third or fourth language.

English is also the language which historically has been used to describe Aboriginal people in racist and derogatory terms. Consider the following quote from 1906, in *The Golden West*, a popular annual journal:

‘The West Australian aborigine stands right at the bottom of the class to which we belong ... The native black has no intelligence, though his powers of imitation carry him up to the border line. He is as a general rule, to which there are few exceptions, brutish, faithless, vicious, the animal being given the fullest loose, a natural born liar and thief, and only approached by his next of kin, the monkey, for mischief. The Australian black may have a soul, but if he has, then the horse and the dog, infinitely superior in every way of the black human, cannot be denied the vital spark of heavenly flame.’²⁷

This was written a year after the *Aborigines Act 1905* and while in the media rather than an education textbook, what would it mean to an Aboriginal child to read this



about themselves? One might also wonder what Aboriginal children would have thought in 1997, when a Western Australian senator made comments in Federal Parliament that 'Aboriginal people in their native state are the lowest colour in the civilisation spectrum'. More disturbing is the fact that this Senator proceeded to defend the remark on the basis that it was 'not racist but a matter of historical fact' and received no censure from the Parliament²⁸

CHILD HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION

The World Health Organisation in its *Ottawa Charter*²⁹ recognised education as one of the fundamental prerequisites for health and wellbeing. This is not surprising given the important role education plays in informing individuals, families and communities about the choices they make throughout life and development. Clearly knowing how to live and age well, how to make the most of the opportunities on offer throughout life and how to access health care as required, assists in ensuring healthy futures for successive generations. Health and education, however, do not exist in isolation as so many other factors contribute to both health and education outcomes. As suggested by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy's³⁰ notion of health, 'life is health is life', health itself is a very broad holistic concept with many factors inter-related. Education can be viewed in much the same way. Improving education alone is not going to be enough to improve the devastating health outcomes Aboriginal peoples currently experience and vice versa. If one considers the other prerequisites for health and wellbeing discussed in both the *Ottawa Charter* and the *Jakarta Declaration*³¹, then social justice, equity, shelter, a sustainable ecosystem, etc., are of equal importance with poverty highlighted as one of the greatest threats to health. The *Jakarta Declaration* also went on to state that for health promotion to be successful the evidence suggests that among other factors:

- ◆ *'participation is essential to sustain efforts. People have to be at the centre of health promotion action and decision-making processes for them to be effective.*
- ◆ *health learning fosters participation. Access to education and information is essential to achieving effective participation and the empowerment of people and communities.'*³¹

Hence health and education are intimately linked with many of the social determinants underlying the outcomes for Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Access to good health, wellbeing and education are fundamental to child development, yet Aboriginal children continue to suffer a level of disadvantage that is likely to adversely affect their prospects in life. There are numerous risk and protective factors that influence development as well as the ability to learn. From the available health and morbidity data it is clear that Aboriginal children carry a greater risk for poor physical health throughout development. Of specific concern to learning and education is the increased risk of ear infections resulting in hearing and language problems early in life. Added to this is a host of other poor health indicators such as chronic infection, anaemia and failure to thrive to name a few. If children are not thriving early in life, then attending school may seem an additional burden.

If one considers the mental health concerns Aboriginal children also carry then it becomes easy to understand why education suffers. Volume Two of the WAACHS provides some valuable insights into the lives of Aboriginal children and their families.² According to the survey results, 24 per cent of Aboriginal children were



at high risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. The contributing factors included developmental problems such as hearing, language and visual problems; family factors such as poor quality of parenting and family functioning, the burden of carer illness and the transgenerational impact of the 'Stolen Generations' and experiences such as those captured in the stressful life events scale.

Of note is that 22 per cent of Aboriginal children were living in families where 7 or more life stress events had occurred over the preceding 12 months placing these children at 5.5 times the risk of children in families with 2 or less life stress events. From a clinical perspective, many of the life stories and experiences of Aboriginal children reveal many losses and high levels of trauma but also the ability to survive and recover if given the opportunity. If children are already suffering from post-traumatic stress or mental health problems by the time they enter school, they are unlikely to be able to fully concentrate, regulate their behaviour or participate well socially. Unfortunately this may result in the child being further disadvantaged through poor understanding of their behaviour and mislabelling resulting in exclusion from school. This, of course, only reinforces the world as a negative experience, fails to buffer the child's development and contributes to further educational disadvantage. If this cycle continues through primary school, the child is far less likely to make a successful transition into high school and at some stage will lose their potential for success in education.

Given that physical health and mental health are intimately connected, it is easy to see the cumulative impact on child development and wellbeing and hence the risk to learning and the ability to fully participate in education. Not only is there the double disadvantage of poor physical and mental health but the additional socio-economic disadvantage that pervades Aboriginal communities. Poverty, impoverished social environments, poor living conditions and the experience of racism and social exclusion completes the triad of disadvantage locking children into an almost unbreakable cycle of developmental risk. Instead of being able to grow and develop as other Australian children do in a landscape of opportunity, wealth, good health and security, Aboriginal children grow in a landscape of risk. The current system of education is set up for an essentially healthy population within a well-buffered society with a relatively small proportion of children and families requiring significant assistance. The Aboriginal population structure however, is indicative of third-world populations with high risk, little buffering, few elders and lots of children. There is no 'normal' distribution of risk as the whole population sits under the high end of the risk spectrum. Hence the need for appropriate resources, services and programmes is going to be disproportionately higher. This also suggests that some factors usually identified as beneficial can be easily cancelled out under the enormity of disadvantage and may not become evident until the whole population is shifted forward.

Unless the additional burden is addressed, then there is no equity in education and the children most at risk will be further disadvantaged. As in all other systems, the approach to Aboriginal education needs to be holistic, appreciating the physical, psychological, social, spiritual and cultural aspects of child development, strengthen identity and be inclusive of family and community. The triad of disadvantage should be addressed in all systems children come into contact with in order to promote healthy development, wellbeing and restore the population. The education system is in a prime position for providing positive intervention due to the potential for contact with Aboriginal children, families and the community over many years. Education can contribute to the health of the people, the country, the nation and the future.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

In concluding this preface, it is worth reflecting on what knowledge and education are. In one view, knowledge can be seen as ‘the entire body of information, facts, truths and principles learned throughout time’.³² Education, however, is the ‘imparting and acquiring of knowledge through teaching and learning’.³² Australia thus finds itself in a unique position with the world’s oldest living culture providing access to knowledge as ancient and continuous as the universe with new knowledge of science and technology as advanced as anywhere else in the world. By valuing and incorporating Aboriginal knowledge alongside western knowledge, Australia can benefit from a complete knowledge system that actually has been learned throughout time.

Australians must accept that this is an Aboriginal country, that the land is alive and speaks to us all, that Australia is a black mother. To deny this is not just to deprive Aboriginal children of their birthright, to be born into the right ‘story’, but to deprive all Australian children of their right to know and understand their true ‘country’. To retain the knowledge system, new solutions will need to be formulated. Aboriginal peoples no longer have the resources to maintain, grow and transmit their knowledge at the levels required for the sustainable future for all Australians.

In keeping with oral traditions, libraries are held within people and not buildings. Children are born into stories given by elders, to be taught throughout life and development. It is through stories that the children are embedded in nature, connected spiritually to the land and sustained throughout life into old age to become custodians of stories they pass on to their children. A child first learns from its mother, father, family and then from society. Australia needs to learn first from its mother, the land. Elders hold these teachings and Aboriginal society has much to contribute. This knowledge must be valued and given equal respect first within Australia and then internationally.

What might the oldest people on earth, in the oldest continent on earth have to teach others? The opportunity to contribute to the most complete knowledge system in the universe and be connected for eternity through the landscape.

Western education moves the individual forward rather than the group, this is what we see in the education system, that some Aboriginal children have been able to ‘succeed’, and there will always be some who make it. Aboriginal people want everyone to move forward *at the same time* and this is the real challenge for education. Aboriginal individuals, families and communities don’t want to leave anyone behind. They will look back to those that are trailing, wait until they catch up, go back if they can’t make it, it’s better to be together. The very thing that sustained Aboriginal people through the darkest times, the core value of Aboriginal society, relationships, doesn’t sit as easily in the education system.

Many Aboriginal children feel they have to sacrifice or compromise their own culture in order to survive or be successful in western education. Embedding Indigenous knowledge into education and resourcing Aboriginal peoples to live and provide its teachings, Aboriginal children will be supported to retain their unique identity and culture and develop to their full potential.



ENDNOTES

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