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CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH

## **An Indigenous school and learning community in the ACT? Opportunity, context and rationale**

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACFE	Adult Community and Further Education Board (Vic)
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AIICS	Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School
ANU	The Australian National University
ASSPA	Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRLRA	Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia
DETYA	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Cth)
DEYFS	Department of Education, Youth and Family Services (ACT)
DPM&C	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
ICCP	Indigenous Community Coordination Pilots
IESIP	Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program
LAEGC	Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
NAIDOC	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day of Celebration
NATSIEP	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
SRP	Strategic Results Project
VAEAI	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

## **Abstract**

In an effort to move towards a whole-of-government approach to service delivery to Indigenous communities, the Council Of Australian Governments has developed a Reconciliation Framework that is designed to advance the process of reconciliation and address Indigenous disadvantage. Incorporating the concept of shared responsibility, it formulates the basis for a new way of doing business in partnership with Indigenous communities. This initiative is being trialled in 10 Indigenous communities across Australia including the Indigenous community in the ACT, under the rubric of Indigenous Community Co-ordination Pilots.

This paper examines a number of reasons why an Indigenous school is a viable option for consideration in the context of the Indigenous Community Coordination Pilot in the ACT. The paper provides an overview of current policy formulation with a specific emphasis on the concept of social capital and how it might be used to facilitate both learning and the establishment of networks within and around the school that support the educational process. It reviews the principles underpinning recent initiatives in Indigenous education that have worked to encourage improved participation, engagement and outcomes. It advocates the development of an urban Indigenous educational philosophy based in the lived experience and culture of Indigenous people living in contemporary urban environments, and in their aspirations for the future.

The key points of the discussion are then synthesised in order to inform the development of a model that moves beyond the traditional parameters and concept of the school to bring together the school, parents, families and community in an Indigenous learning community.

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## Introduction

Classically, government service delivery has been one-dimensional and aligned with a particular, single sector such as education, health, employment or housing. A major premise underlying the current debate about service sector reform is the need for service agencies to work in a more collaborative manner in order to be able to respond more effectively to the needs of their client base in the context of the rapid change that is characteristic of contemporary society (Vimpani 1996). Much of this debate has taken place in the education sector, which now often sees children arriving at school with multi-faceted and complex problems that school personnel are ill-equipped to deal with. It is recognised that there is a growing need to provide more support for children and their families by offering access to other services within the school (Calfee, Wittwer & Meredith 1998; Dryfoos 1994; Jehl & Kirst 1993; Muirhead 1996; Thompson 1999; Vimpani 1996).

In an effort to break down the 'silo' mentality of current service delivery agencies and move towards a whole-of-government approach to service delivery to Indigenous communities, the Council Of Australian Governments (COAG) developed the Reconciliation Framework (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPM&C) 2000). The Framework formulates the basis for a new way of doing business, in partnership with Indigenous communities. It incorporates the concept of shared responsibility, in pursuit of advancing the process of reconciliation and addressing disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. The Framework outlines three priority areas for all governments:

- investing in community leadership and governance initiatives;
- reviewing and re-engineering programs and services to ensure they deliver practical measures that support families, children and young people; and
- forging greater links between the business sector and Indigenous communities to help promote economic independence (DPM&C 2000: 1).

COAG also agreed that governments should look to measures for tackling family violence, drug and alcohol dependency, and other symptoms of community dysfunction. The first step has been to trial a whole-of-government approach, termed the Indigenous Community Coordination Pilots (ICCP), in 10 Indigenous communities. The Indigenous community in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has been proposed as one of the trial communities (see Indigenous Communities Coordination Taskforce web-site <<http://www.icc.gov.au/>>). The work of overseeing the implementation of each pilot sits with a nominated Commonwealth government departmental secretary who acts as a Commonwealth sponsor, a State or Territory agency, ATSIC, and the nominated Indigenous community. Negotiations and consultations for the development of a Shared Responsibility Agreement in the ACT were undertaken in 2003 between the ACT Indigenous community, including the ATSIC Regional Council, the Chief

Minister's Department for the ACT government and the Department of the Environment and Heritage for the Commonwealth government.

The whole-of-government approach that underpins the ICCP trials resonates with aspects of the reform debate that is currently under way in the education and school sector. Moreover, since education is a priority issue for Indigenous people, the ICCP provides an opportunity to consider how to incorporate a whole-of-government approach in the delivery of services that support children, families and community in the school environment. In effect, the ICCP presents an opportunity for the development and establishment of an Indigenous school in the ACT. In thinking about a model for such a school, it is possible, in the context of the ICCP, to move beyond the traditional parameters and concept of a 'school' to a model that brings the school, parents, families and community together in an Indigenous learning community.

Previous research has outlined ways in which Indigenous learning communities might be built around schools with the intent of encouraging and promoting inter-generational, particularly parental, support, participation and engagement in education (Schwab & Sutherland 2001, 2003). Schwab and Sutherland specifically defined an Indigenous learning community as:

a collection of ideas and strategies that promote life-long learning, build partnerships between families, schools, business and government and provide a means whereby communities can identify their most pressing needs and develop the skills and knowledge they need to enact solutions. In this sense, an Indigenous learning community would be a tool for individual and community empowerment and capacity development. Because they would take their shapes from the unique needs of the people who comprise them, Indigenous learning communities would vary in form from place to place. They would be recognisable in ways walls and fences, metaphorical and real, are dismantled between schools and communities and replaced by bridges. They might, for example, involve the delivery of well-baby health services in a vacant classroom, the provision of adult literacy or parenting classes, internet access after hours, opening the school library to the community on week-ends, the use of the staffroom for community meetings or virtually any other service or activity the community needs or desires. At their best, we imagine Indigenous learning communities as something transformative, involving the sharing of knowledge, the design of solutions and creation of the future (Schwab & Sutherland 2003: 52, 70).

The discussion which follows examines a number of reasons why an Indigenous school is a viable option for consideration in the context of an ICCP in the ACT. The paper provides an overview of current policy formulation, with a specific emphasis on the concept of social capital and how it might be used to facilitate both learning and the establishment of networks, within and around the school, that support the educational process. It reviews the principles underpinning recent initiatives in Indigenous education that have worked to encourage improved participation, engagement and outcomes. It advocates the development of an urban Indigenous educational philosophy, based in the lived experience and culture of Indigenous people living in contemporary urban environments, and in their aspirations for the future. Such a foundation is essential because it is that

lived experience that manifests itself and influences Indigenous participation in and engagement with institutional structures such as education and the schooling system (Sutherland 2001).

Finally, the key points of the discussion are synthesised to inform the development of a new, community based model of the school. Here is an opportunity for the Indigenous community in the ACT to build a future that is of their own design, that builds bridges for Indigenous people between members of the Indigenous community and with others outside the community.

One essential key to improving Indigenous educational participation and outcomes is the encouragement and facilitation of parental and family participation in and support for education.<sup>1</sup> In creating an Indigenous school it will be necessary to think beyond traditional methods of education delivery, and to tap into the discussion around school reform that looks towards a more holistic approach that can support students and families in an effort to improve educational participation and outcomes. Such an approach aligns itself quite well with the intent of the ICCP trials, while also building on the structures already in place in the ACT; the nature of existing government schooling in the ACT affords the potential to develop and establish an Indigenous school.

### **Talking about ‘capital’: is it useful?**

The rapid pace of change in contemporary society provides a major impetus for re-engineering government service delivery. Rapid change has resulted in a marked deterioration in communities that has been tied to a breakdown in relationships between people. The universal mistrust that is pervading communities as a result is helping to maintain that decline (Stone 2001). As a result, public policy that appeals to the concepts of capacity building and social capital is being developed across many policy sectors. Schwab and Sutherland (2001, 2003), in their discussion of building Indigenous learning communities, appealed to Putnam’s (1993) general definition of social capital as encompassing the development of trust, norms and networks that help facilitate coordinated action. Further, they suggested that Indigenous learning communities could provide not only a vehicle through which social capital could be developed but also an avenue for Indigenous people to build their capacity (Schwab & Sutherland 2001, 2003). The present discussion explores more fully the notion of social capital, particularly as it impacts upon educational engagement and success. But it also considers how such a concept might be used to support the establishment of an Indigenous school and learning community, and to more fully situate the latter within current social policy development.

Social capital as a component of social theory has primarily emerged from the work of Bourdieu (1993), Putnam (1993) and Coleman (1988). It is seen as being embedded in relationships between people and created through changes in those relationships which lead to collaborative action (Coleman 1988: 100). The networks of relationships that result are characterised by shared norms, trust,

and reciprocity (Putnam 1993). In an Australian context, Falk (2001c: 1) describes social capital as being embedded in the behaviour of a collective that facilitates action. The elements of social capital, when combined, allow people to work together for the benefit of all; thus social capital is the glue that holds civil society together (Stone 2001: 4). Falk (2001a, 2001b) has also investigated the applicability of the concept to literacy learning. He argues that we have been too caught up with a learning ideology that is primarily centred around the concept of individual human capital and the belief that basic skills will set a person up for life, all the while ignoring the importance of social capital:

The all-pervasiveness of human capital theory has, in the view argued here, taken our attention away from the underpinning and critical importance of social capital that facilitates effective learning of any kind, including literacy learning. Part of the significance of bringing human and social capital together lies in their joint capacity to enhance people's learning and response to change (Falk 2001b: 2).

Coleman (1988: 109) also emphasised that the effects of social capital, both in the family and in the community, are essential to the creation of human capital in the subsequent generation. Parental participation in and support for a child's education are critical elements in the level of success that a child will experience in the schooling system. The level of parental participation and the type of support given can largely be determined by the background of the family. Analytically, this can be distinguished as being made up of three capital components: financial capital, human capital and social capital (Coleman 1988: 109). Financial capital determines a family's socioeconomic status and thus their ability to provide physical capital, such as a home, a place in which to study, learning materials, opportunities, and so on. Human capital is determined by the level of education of family members and, subsequently their ability to provide an enabling cognitive environment that can aid a child's learning. However:

The social capital of the family is the relations between children and parents (and, when families include other members, relationships with them as well). That is, if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a small amount, of human capital (Coleman 1988: 110)

In this analysis the level of human capital possessed by parents can become negligible to a child's learning if social capital is lacking. Important elements in the creation of social capital are parents being physically present, parents and child having a strong relationship and, significantly, parents actively participating in their child's learning process. Lack of social capital can result in a range of educational outcomes, from limited engagement in the educational process through to ceasing engagement with the process altogether at a relatively early stage (Coleman 1988: 111).

The creation of social capital is not restricted to the domain of the family. The tenure of relationships with individuals in the wider community, such as those with neighbours, friends and colleagues, and those between parents, and with institutions such as schools, also play a major role in influencing a child's

educational outcomes. To illustrate this point, Coleman (1988: 116) provides the example of a family that is continually mobile. As a result, the child is forced to change schools regularly. With every move, the social capital developed through relationships (networks) in that community are broken, and so it continues with each move.

Coleman (1988: 114) also discusses the divergence in social capital creation between public schools, religious private schools and independent private schools. The religious private schools are bounded by a community founded on religious organisation. The families who were a part of one such school and its community had 'inter-generational closure' based on multifaceted relationships. That is, the adults involved were members of the same religion and the parents of children who attended the same school. Inter-generational closure is created when children know each other and parents of children know each other, and there are norms (or sanctions) regulating behaviour which all parents are able to refer to and, in a sense, are able to enforce. In such a way parents are able to access a degree of social capital in bringing up their child, not only in relation to their school life but in other things as well (Coleman 1988: 107). By contrast, independent private schools are the least bounded by a community in that most of the families of students at these schools have no connections with one another. One of the interesting factors emerging from this study is that the drop-out rate for both public schools and independent private schools was three times higher, or more, than the drop-out rate for Catholic schools (Coleman 1988: 114). Coleman concludes that the levels of social capital available within the family and within the wider community are both critical in the creation of human capital in the individual.

In essence, the skills that are seen to be intrinsic in the creation of human capital are not adequate, in and of themselves, to achieve good outcomes. For learning outcomes to be effective and sustainable, the skills associated with human capital need to be combined with the elements and processes involved in the creation of social capital. This increases the capacity of individuals to both learn and respond to change (Falk 2001b: 1). Falk (2001b: 10) also argues that the capacity of human capital (individual skills and knowledge) is only released by means of the processes that create and utilise social capital. For instance, the creation of trust between an educator and a learner will ultimately lead to the development of self-confidence in the learner, and such self-confidence can only emerge from a trusting relationship. Such processes are essential in encouraging and sustaining participation in educational processes.

It is worthwhile to discuss here an example of the development of social capital within an Indigenous educational context. The project in question was part of a larger exploration carried out by the Victorian Adult Community and Further Education Board (ACFE Board) in 1999. The research project had the aim of exploring whether or not Adult and Community Education (ACE) contributes to the development of social capital in communities and to socioeconomic wellbeing. The project resulted in an anthology of ten case studies which demonstrated that ACE 'generates social capital; builds lifelong learning; channels the work of

volunteers; augments social cohesion, citizenship and democratic participation; and, improves the health of individuals and communities' (Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000: vii).

### **Case study I: Connecting young Koories to their community**

'Connecting Young Koories to their Community' was one of Falk, Golding and Balatti's ACE case studies. The authors illustrate how an Indigenous ACE organisation and the wider Indigenous community in Robinvale, New South Wales worked together to form a learning community with the common purpose of building trust in alienated Indigenous young people. They specifically examined how Indigenous cultural practice and wellbeing was improved and the development of social capital was encouraged when an Indigenous education provider worked towards addressing the needs of early school leavers (Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000: 24). They noted that nearly all young Indigenous people in the Robinvale area leave school well before Year 12. In acknowledging that secondary provision in the area was 'far from culturally inclusive', it was agreed that the Indigenous community had to be part of the solution. In an effort to reverse the trend the local community developed a Koorie education strategic plan and decided to build their own 'school'. At that point the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG) and Coorong Tongala (the centre that the LAECG coordinates), with ACE funding, began to offer the Coorong Tongala Course, nationally accredited as a Certificate I in Koorie Education. The overall objective of the course is to provide accredited training for participants who can then move on to access further education, training and employment opportunities. Participants have to complete a study program made up of five core modules and one of two possible electives. The modules offered are as follows (Egan 1998):

- Stand up you fellas! Individual management skills
- Where are you goin'? Career pathways
- Talk up, listen up! Koorie cultural studies 1 and oral communication skills
- What's the story? Koorie cultural studies 2 and reading and writing skills
- What's your number? Life skills numeracy
- So what's doin'? Focus activity selected and developed according to community needs (elective)
- Who's the boss? Leadership, politics and land rights (elective)

Significantly, Coorong Tongala shares a site with other Indigenous programs and organisations including a mentoring program run by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), an Aboriginal Parent Support Group, the Aboriginal Community Justice Program and a 'Living in Harmony' program. Observable outcomes of the program have been changes—not only for participants but also for the LAECG. For students, significant change has occurred in their outlook on life. There have been positive changes in how young people interact and relate to adults in the community and student attendance has

improved. Positive outcomes for the local community include the development of capacity which can be related to an increase in self-esteem, confidence and pride. All of these changes can be attributed to the local ownership and development of the program and to the establishment of an Indigenous-specific educational space.

### **Indigenous education: what works?**

It is useful, at this point, to review some recent initiatives in Indigenous education that examine successful practice to identify key indicators underpinning that success. It will then be possible to consider where and how those key indicators might also inform the development of an Indigenous school and an urban Indigenous educational philosophy. In early 2000, the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) delivered its report, *What Works? Explorations in Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Students* (McRae et al. 2000). The report outlines results achieved through the Commonwealth's non-capital Strategic Results Projects (SRPs) which are a component of the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). A total of 84 projects were funded across the country and the overall aim of the initiative was to explore ways in which improvements in outcomes for Indigenous students, across sectors, could be accomplished relatively quickly by committing resources and effort. The content of projects closely reflected the national targets for Indigenous education and, interestingly, successful outcomes were evenly distributed across the topics, which included:

- improving attendance;
- improving progression;
- improving rates of completion—particularly as it applies to secondary education;
- improving rates of articulation into higher education and further training;
- improving participation and rates of completion in vocational education and training; and
- improving English literacy and numeracy skills.

In the final breakdown the analysis encompassed performance data received from 60 projects. But, nevertheless, it was found that the overall objective of the SRP—demonstrating that improvement in outcomes for Indigenous students can be accomplished relatively quickly if a concentrated effort is made—was achieved (McRae et al. 2000: 5). It is also relevant to note that in general terms the work undertaken in the SRPs supported much of the import of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP). In particular, the projects demonstrated that educational outcomes for Indigenous students can be improved if Indigenous people are involved in decision-making and if there is equity in access and participation. The analysis also highlights that, across projects, three key indicators were consistently present: the recognition, acknowledgment and support of culture; the development of requisite skills; and

adequate levels of participation (McRae et al. 2000: 7–8). It was also found that it is essential to have a holistic approach that incorporates all three indicators; with the absence of any one indicator success is likely to be ‘seriously impaired’. Further:

Success is genuinely derived from a partnership of these parties to the educational process. Cultural support, recognition and acknowledgment can only be achieved by active and effective relationships between Indigenous communities and those who work in schools and training institutions. Both parties have a role to play. The development of requisite skills will evolve from teachers’ high expectations of students and the skill and, especially, the sensitivity with which they approach their work. Support, even in limited forms from home, will aid this process. Adequate levels of participation will only be achieved by active encouragement from home and the provision of a welcoming and accepting climate in the institution (McRae et al. 2000: 8).

These conclusions, in effect, reinforce the premise that the building of social capital is necessary to success in educational provision for Indigenous students. The insights provided by McRae et al.’s report (2000) relate specifically to rapid change and short-term outcomes. We can ask now whether they have relevance in the long term, in the context of the opportunity provided by a whole-of-government approach, in the ICCP. Any model for an Indigenous school must be based in an underlying philosophy for urban Indigenous education. The next section of the paper explores the concept of an urban Indigenous educational philosophy and examines the relevance to such a philosophy of the concept of social capital, and of the principles set out in McRae et al. (2000).

### **Bringing it all together: an urban Indigenous educational philosophy**

The historical legacy of this country and the unresolved issues and inherent misconceptions that flow from it are embedded in our society and its institutions, and continue to heavily influence relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 2000; DEYFS 2002; Schwab & Sutherland 2001: 4–8; Sutherland 2000). Further, Indigenous people living in contemporary urban environments inhabit an often contested domain within which the intangible notions of Aboriginal self and identity are continually diminished (Groome & Hamilton 1995; Purdle et al. 2000; Sutherland 2001). The amount of influence that these factors have in determining an Indigenous person’s response to and participation in mainstream institutions should not be underestimated. For instance, these very complex issues continue to inhibit Indigenous people’s participation in, engagement with, outcomes from, and retention in education (Schwab & Sutherland 2001, 2003). In response to these circumstances, Aboriginal people generally prefer to inhabit their own cultural and social domain, as this provides them with a safe environment within which they do not have to continually withstand the diminution of self and identity. Indigenous people are thus more likely to access services and participate in activities if they are provided within an Indigenous-specific domain (Sutherland

2001). An Indigenous school, the core business of which is the educational needs of Indigenous people, can provide such a domain. But if an Indigenous school is to 'work' its design and implementation must be underpinned by a vision—by a philosophy that provides its direction. Such a philosophy has to privilege Indigenous lived experience and culture and Indigenous aspirations for the future, with a primary focus on strengthening the spirits, minds and bodies of Indigenous children, in the context of their families and communities.

Bearing this in mind, it is also useful to synthesise the key indicators that are fundamental in the development of social capital and those factors that have led to success for Indigenous people in education, and consider how these can also inform the creation of an urban Indigenous educational philosophy or vision. Taking account of the preceding discussion we can isolate some of the key factors and their interrelationships:

- trust—the key to developing social capital;
- relationships and networks—the key to the quality of the community's social structure;
- trust—the key to developing genuine relationships;
- relationships—the key to learning;
- learning—the key to empowerment;
- empowerment—the key to the future.

Policy makers look to the concept of social capital because it unpacks the need to develop trust and common and agreed understandings, particularly in terms of relationships and networks between people that then in turn operate to facilitate coordinated action. The notion of social capital is thus a useful tool for conceptualising the issues that concern Indigenous communities, and also their relationship to the wider community, in terms of trust and the development of relationships and networks between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Simply put, there is a continuing mistrust between these two groups. As has already been noted, Indigenous people in urban communities generally prefer to access Indigenous-specific services and this relates directly to the issue of trust. The development of trust is a key element, and this is only possible within the context of genuine relationships. In an educational context, the social capital literature has also shown that the establishment of trusting relationships is central. Learning is facilitated within a trusting environment and once such an environment is established the capacities of Indigenous people can begin to be fully realised.

The concept of empowerment is also a fundamental component in the development of an urban Indigenous education philosophy. Empowerment means participation, ownership and control, and with empowerment comes not only responsibility, but, the ability to make one's own future. Such things can only result from nurturing self-esteem and confidence in a person's own identity, which allows them to be and know who they are in the world. If these elements can be developed as central components of an urban Indigenous education

philosophy then learning will occur. An Indigenous school has the potential to provide a space where trusting relationships that work to facilitate learning can be nurtured, for children and young people especially, but also for the wider community. The following case study provides an example of an urban Indigenous education philosophy that in its own way incorporates many of the principles and elements just discussed.

### **Case study II: The Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School and Kulkathil Community Skills Centre**

Better known as the Murri School, the Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School (AIICS) first opened its doors in 1986 and subsequently relocated in 1998 to its present location at Acacia Ridge, an outer Brisbane suburb. The school has expanded from its initial focus on primary schooling. It now incorporates secondary schooling to Year 12 and the Kulkathil Community Skills Centre (see <<http://www.kulkathil.com.au>>). Much of the success of the centre, promoted as being unique, is attributed to its co-location with the Murri School. The school had already developed strong community links and the transition to the establishment of the skills centre was a natural progression. One of Kulkathil's primary focuses is to provide opportunities for learners to develop digital literacy. Training provision is based around needs, and outcomes are targeted to the context of the real-world experiences of Indigenous people and communities. The centre prepares people for those areas of the employment market with relatively high employment opportunities for Indigenous people, such as government and community services; but expansion into such sectors as communications and technology and private enterprise is also envisaged. The vision which provides the philosophical foundation for the operation of the Kulkathil Community Skills Centre is 'reclaiming our past so we can reclaim our future'. The vision statement goes on to explain the underlying philosophy:

'Kulkathil'—which can also be spelt 'galgathil'—means 'with spear', armed or having the propensity to become armed with spear ... We are arming people with knowledge, skills, and tools. Spear making is both a communal as well as individual expression of custodianship, personality and intent to hunt and gather. One can make a spear or spears for others too but inherently it is your personality, your spirit that will be teleported with the spear. To be a master spear maker your character must be very sound. You must have integrity. Spear making styles and authorship in spear style is easily detectable by those who know. Material culture for Aboriginal people is both a means of survival and a philosophy for life. Computers are nothing but another means to making a good spear, they are not a spear in themselves (<http://www.kulkthil.com.au>).

Central to the Kulkathil vision is that learning and the development and management of knowledge cannot be isolated from the everyday lives of Indigenous people. A primary aim for the centre is thus to gain and provide access to cultural and archival material relating to land, history, kinship and so on. This allows participants to be involved in activities such as researching and writing their own stories, cultural revival, and contributing to the mapping of the

future. Indigenous knowledge, values and life experience are privileged as being central to the learning process. The Kulkathil Community Skills Centre's focus on providing education and training is underpinned by core philosophical understandings. These include:

- the need to build community from the ground up through education and training;
- recognition that cultural survival and renewal need to be central to learning and development;
- the need to hold, protect and nurture knowledge;
- the potential of old and new technologies in the revival and production of new and old knowledge systems; and
- the understanding that the use of new technologies must be placed within the context of existing cultural and economic understandings.

### **A model for an Indigenous school and learning community**

In the light of the previous discussion, what could an Indigenous school and learning community look like? As a first principle, its shape and form would be determined by the Indigenous community itself. That community, particularly parents and families, school personnel and other stakeholder agencies would be involved in its development and establishment. It would be an Indigenous educational space that operated out of a public school building. It would be open to the whole community—children, parents, families and community members—before, during and after school. Dryfoos and Maguire (2002) propose a number of factors that can be incorporated into developing the concept of a full-service community school. There follows a short analysis of such factors and how they can inform the discussion and development of a model for an Indigenous school and learning community. There is also mention of some current programs that can be brought to bear in the building of an Indigenous school and learning community in the ACT. This is particularly timely in terms of the ICCP and its focus on re-engineering and reviewing current programs and services within the context of a whole-of-government approach to service delivery to Indigenous communities.

### **Quality educational programs and practitioners**

Indigenous children can learn whatever they want to—we need to seriously consider what the blockages are that continue to inhibit Indigenous children's learning, outcomes and limited participation in education. An Indigenous school and learning community would be concerned with removing as many of those barriers as possible, creating a learning environment that is based around trusting relationships, Indigenous culture and identity, high expectations for students and families, and quality educational programs and practitioners. By developing partnerships and facilitating collaboration between government

agencies in their service delivery for programs to Indigenous people in the ACT, an Indigenous learning community, and the school which would make up a significant component of it, could concentrate on its core business of providing quality education.

### **A positive and culturally safe school environment**

Reports and statistics continually show us that an overwhelming number of Indigenous children leave school as soon as they are able. They also tell us that Indigenous children are not achieving as well as they should be and are well behind non-Indigenous children in relation to attendance, participation and outcomes (see DEFYS 2003). An Indigenous school and learning community would allow the opportunity to provide not only Indigenous children but also their families and the wider community with a learning environment that is culturally 'safe', where they could focus on their educational needs (see Dryfoos & Maguire 2002). Such an environment would be an Indigenous space that operated from an Indigenous perspective and philosophy. Indigenous issues and concerns would be privileged and a part of core business rather than being the 'extras' that schools are obliged to deal with.

### **Being ready to learn**

An Indigenous school and learning community would not only have an early childhood program but would also offer other programs to parents and families that focus on early childhood issues, such as parenting classes for young mothers and fathers. In the ACT there is a program called Koorie Pre-school which primarily operates under Commonwealth Government funding. The Koorie Pre-school could be located within the Indigenous school and learning community. This would assist in making the transition to school easier as children would be moving with a familiar cohort of Indigenous friends and family. Transition to an Indigenous school would maintain the Indigenous community environment and paradigm, within which Koorie Pre-school currently operates, in that crucial transitional period when pre-schoolers move into primary school. At present the Indigenous cohort moves into different schools and into schooling environments that do not depend upon an Indigenous environment or educational paradigm.

### **Extended learning**

An Indigenous school and learning community would open the school doors for longer hours, offering activities and programs after school such as a homework centre and access to tutors (both of which can be provided by Commonwealth Government programs). However, such programs would build upon and be linked directly to the classroom curriculum and school activities. There could also be after-school access to other programs developed around cultural activities—dance, music, art, sport and so on. Partnerships could be developed with government and community agencies to facilitate tutoring, homework centres, sport and recreation activities.

**Parent and family participation**

A primary focus for an Indigenous school and learning community would be to foster parental and community participation and support for children's education (see Schwab & Sutherland 2001, 2003). Participation could be encouraged through Indigenous family and community involvement, from the outset, in building the school and learning community and in the design and development of programs and activities, and by ensuring that there is Indigenous ownership through to ongoing involvement in decision-making and governance. An Indigenous school and learning community would also offer specific activities and programs that encourage and support family and community involvement in children's education, such as parents-as-tutors and parents-in-classrooms programs. Importantly, an Indigenous school and learning community would also offer an extended family and community support mechanism and outreach for uninvolved and new families, in particular supporting culture and identity in an urban context.

**Life-long learning**

An Indigenous school and learning community would also be a context for life-long learning, opening the doors to other family and community members and providing access to learning opportunities such as returning to complete schooling qualifications and access to computer and interactive technology through the establishment of a community connectivity centre. Adult and community education courses could also be provided, for example through an outreach program provided by the Yurauna Centre of the Canberra Institute of Technology. In addition, there are many well-qualified Indigenous people living and working in the ACT who could be encouraged to facilitate and participate in the development of programs and activities.

**Integration of services**

An Indigenous school and learning community would also act as a catalyst for integrating service delivery by government and other service delivery agencies. It could be a site for the whole-of-government approach that is being advocated as the way forward for service delivery. It could be a site where disparate programs are drawn together into a single package. Such access to other government services and information could be provided via a family and community resource centre which would act as a 'one stop shop' for housing services, social security needs, employment referral and so on.

**Catering for basic needs**

There has been much discussion in Indigenous education over the years in relation to those issues which impact upon educational participation, such as not having breakfast and lunch, not having a school uniform or other materials for school, or not having the money for the bus or the excursion. An Indigenous

school and learning community would be well placed to develop partnerships with government agencies, community agencies and local business to provide a breakfast, recess, lunch and a dinner program if needed. A family and community resource program could be established to recycle uniforms and warm clothing and other necessities. Importantly, such activities and programs would operate in a way that is appropriate for Indigenous people. ‘Shame’, which has so often been the experience for many families, would not be attached to children and their families in such an environment.

### **Access to health care**

Children cannot perform well in school if they have health problems. These can range from having a cold or influenza, a middle ear infection or dental problems, through to issues affecting social and emotional wellbeing. An Indigenous school and learning community could provide access, on site, to primary and mental health services. Collaborative partnerships could be established with local community agencies, such as Winnunga Nimmityjah, the local Aboriginal Medical Service, to provide services and a regular health clinic. For instance, partnership agreements could lead to annual health screening at the beginning of each year for each child, and where needed, a health management plan could be developed to facilitate access to other services. Such community partnerships could also be established to provide health education and promotion activities both for the school (freeing up time for teachers) and for family and community groups. Having access to health care and other health related activities could also bring parents, other family and community members into the school.

### **Childcare**

An Indigenous school and learning community could also be a space in which to provide access to childcare for Indigenous families, for example, by being open from early in the morning to early evening to provide before and after school care, and perhaps through to the establishment of a day-care centre. In the ACT, ‘Little Burraa’ has had a great deal of success in getting Indigenous carers involved with the Family Day-Care system. This has filled a niche by providing an avenue for Indigenous carers and has been well supported by Indigenous families.

### **Governance and leadership**

One of the key components of the ICCP is its focus on ‘investing in community leadership and governance initiatives’. In an Indigenous school and learning community, governance and leadership would be assumed by an Indigenous Board. Mechanisms would be developed that focus on supporting and building the capacity of Indigenous people to participate in this process, for example through school board training and leadership programs. The Board would be supported by internal structures, such as the management team. It would also be supported by other structures such as the school Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness program (ASSPA) committee. The development of partnerships with key stakeholders and advocates across sectors would be a fundamental aim.

This would encompass the education sector, government, and the public sector at both Commonwealth and Territory levels, as well as the community sector.

### **Management**

The management of the Indigenous school and learning community would have to expand upon the traditional nature of school management. The development of a working management model would have two parts. It would include specific school personnel lead by the principal, and a community coordinator. The principal and the community coordinator would work in partnership to lead the management team. The community coordinator would be responsible for facilitating and administering government and community programs and services that were brought into the school environment.

### **Conclusion**

In the context of an ICCP proceeding in the ACT we have the opportunity to apply the concept of a whole-of-government approach within an Indigenous school. We can begin to conceptualise an institution that moves beyond the traditional parameters of a school to encompass wider community needs and aspirations. This means thinking about educational delivery in a way that considers the needs of Indigenous children, families and community to be central to the method of delivery. The aim would be to bring together children, families, the community, and the school to work towards common goals, by:

[integrating] activities in several areas to achieve the desired results: quality education, positive youth development, family support, family and community engagement in decision-making, and community development ... In this process the school emerges as the hub, a one-stop centre to meet diverse needs and to achieve the best possible outcomes for each child (Dryfoos & Maguire 2002).

Indigenous children and families face a number of significant barriers that inhibit learning. Conventional schools do not have the capacity to engage and deal with many of these issues. We have the opportunity to situate an Indigenous school and learning community as central to a whole-of-government approach to service delivery to the ACT Indigenous community—to integrate the whole range of government services and programs that already exist and provide access to them on one site. Some programs will be integral to the school and learning community, and others will operate in partnership with the school to support children, families and the community thereby also support the learning process while allowing the ‘school’ to focus on its core business—education.

Thus an Indigenous school and learning community can act as a vehicle that brings together community and family support for education in an environment that specifically focuses on Indigenous children, families and community. In urban contexts, Indigenous activities and concerns are often marginal to general school activity and usually confined to ASSPA committees and NAIDOC celebrations. Such limited engagement between a school and Indigenous parents and families works against the development of any meaningful relationship

between the two, and therefore no bridge between them is ever built. In a specific educational domain, the building of meaningful relationships between the institution (the school and learning community) and Indigenous parents, families and the wider community would be a central component of the total institution's core business.

In conclusion, the context within which we need to consider such possibilities is not just 'better service delivery'. Dryfoos (2000) has written of the importance of the mind-body-building equation and the interrelationship between strong minds and healthy bodies. The spaces provided by the buildings would be vital to the success of the venture. The school would become the hub of community activity with buildings designed to capture the essence and spirit of a community school by providing such facilities as a family and community resource centre within the school environment (see also Schwab & Sutherland 2001, 2003). The mind is supported by quality education programs and carefully planned supplementary activities, while the body is supported through the coordination of other services and programs such as health care and breakfast programs (Dryfoos 2000: 2). Improved and coordinated service delivery will contribute significantly to the mind-body-building equation, but another dimension—that of the spirit—is central to everything. Success in bringing together all of the necessary components for supporting the mind-body-building equation in an urban Indigenous education philosophy and in its practical manifestation—an Indigenous school and learning community—hinges on the extent to which the strengthening of the spirit and identity of Indigenous people is incorporated.

## Note

1. See Schwab and Sutherland (2001, 2003) for an explication of issues and case studies supporting the development of Indigenous learning communities as ways to improve educational access, participation and attendance and the reasons underpinning such development.

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