Building Indigenous learning communities

R.G. Schwab and D. Sutherland

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Jerry Schwab is a Fellow and Deputy Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University. Dale Sutherland is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and in 2001 was an Indigenous Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AFEC	Aboriginal Family Education Centre
AGPS	Australain Government Publishing Service
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
ANU	The Australian National University
ASSPA	Aboriginal Students Support and Parent Awareness Program
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CAS	Children's Aid Society (USA)
CRLRA	Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia
DETYA	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DFACS	Department of Family and Community Services
FSS	Full Service Schools
OERI	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (USA)
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Summary

This paper proposes the building of Indigenous learning communities as an avenue to address the limited engagement of Indigenous Australians with education. Against the backdrop of current discussions of social capital and community capacity building, the paper explores educational policy and program options for linking families, schools and communities (including business and government) to identify and address local needs through drawing upon local resources.

Five program models, from both Australia and overseas, are sketched to illustrate a range of approaches to encouraging and fostering positive engagement of families, schools and communities. Although the programs differ in focus, schools and community education are central to each, and all involve degrees of capacity building and the development of social capital. The experience derived from these programs suggests there is value in attempting to position the school at the centre of Indigenous communities. Further, in extending the traditional role of the school to incorporate other initiatives such as adult education and the coordination and integration of various child and family services, these programs necessarily bring more members of the wider community into contact with the school.

Many of these programs also deliver increased parental and student participation and retention, and community involvement in the school. Indeed, the underlying philosophies of these approaches foster parental and community ownership of, and involvement in, not only the school, but also the education process in general. This is the foundation for building learning communities, where education is a life-long affair, where families and schools are strong and healthy, and where individuals in communities feel empowered to identify their most pressing needs and develop mechanisms to build capacity and secure resources to address those needs.

The paper suggests a cluster of key features derived from the models that could be used in the formulation of a policy and program framework that addresses the needs of Indigenous families, schools and communities through a federally funded initiative to build Indigenous learning communities. Specific recommendations related to funding, evaluation and essential program components are provided.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

The limited engagement of Indigenous Australians with education remains one of this country's most perplexing and intractable problems. Nationally, Indigenous educational participation levels are low, retention rates, though climbing, remain stubbornly at about half that of other Australians, literacy and numeracy gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children are alarmingly persistent, and absenteeism among Indigenous children is seen by many to have reached crisis levels.

At various times we have tried to address these individual problems by targeting them and focusing efforts to fix what is broken. VET-in-Schools programs are flourishing across the country as educators look for ways to re-engage Indigenous teenagers who are bored and leaving high school.[1] The literature is filled with descriptions of approaches to intensive one-on-one tutoring of Indigenous children whose literacy skills are lagging. We have seen community buses organised to collect children from home to reduce truancy and increase attendance at primary school, and breakfast programs are increasingly common. In many of these cases, some gains are achieved but there is the nagging sense for many concerned with Indigenous education that these approaches are often just fingers in the dike. There is the need, we feel, for more pervasive change and room for more radical approaches. The building of Indigenous learning communities is one such approach and the one we want to promote in this paper. Before we move to a discussion of what we mean by Indigenous learning communities, and before we detail how such communities might be built, we want to place our discussion against the backdrop of broader debates about social capital.

Social capital

In recent years public policy discussions of 'social capital' in Australia and overseas have expanded exponentially. Growing out of social theory advanced by Bourdieu in France and Coleman and Putnam in the United States, social capital is a concept with a range of political, sociological and economic dimensions. It can be defined in a variety of ways, and used to support a range of political orientations.[2] Nevertheless, for our purposes we use Putnam's relatively generic definition of social capital as 'trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions' (1993: 167). In this sense, social capital can be both possessed by individuals and resident in social relationships. It is a resource, 'produced by, and invested in, social interactions and relationships by social actors for their individual and mutual benefit' (Hogan & Owen 2000: 81).

As Ian Winter points out, an international database search revealed no occurrences of the phrase before 1981, but over 1,000 in the period 1996–99 (Winter 2000: 17). The concept gained currency and momentum in Australia in

the late 1980s with the Social Security Review and now threads its way through Australian debates around health (Baum et al. 2000), welfare (Lyons 2000), employment (Hunter 2000), economic development (Murphy & Thomas 2000) and a host of other public policy areas. Discussions of capacity building—a concept that is theoretically and practically closely linked with notions of social capital— emerge out of current Australian welfare reform efforts (McClure 2000). Internationally, there are also closely related debates around contemporary discussions of 'third way' political agendas (Giddens 2001, Latham 2000, 2001a, 2001b) and inequality and development (Sen 2000).[3]

While important theoretical and conceptual work on the concept of social capital is being carried out (Falk & Harrison 2000; Fine 2001; Stone & Hughes 2001), we will not attempt to engage with such work here. We do wish to note, however, that the concept has captured the imagination of politicians, academics and non-government organisations around the world and provides an important departure point for a range of significant social policy explorations and actions. It is not just a concept being debated, it is having an impact, on the ground, around Australia and the world.

Although public policy tends toward uniformity, developing social capital and building community capacity are localised activities. In this way, there is, as Stewart-Weeks has said, 'a subversive logic' in social capital. Public policy, if it is to promote the development of social capital, needs to be 'place- and people-specific and deeply grounded in local needs and circumstances' (Stewart-Weeks 2000: 291). Uniform, one-size-fits-all policy will not work because social circumstances are local and not uniform. Yet an enabling national policy context—providing funding, for example—can greatly facilitate local developments. This is an enormous challenge to policy makers. As Mark Latham has written in the context of 'third way' debates, what is required is nothing short of the 'devolution of public governance to the institutions of civil society (Latham 2000: 193). In this sense, the development of social capital requires a 'radical realignment of power and authority within the policy process' (Stewart-Weeks 2000: 286).

Social capital and Indigenous learning communities

In a recent paper on notions of 'community and school', Bushnell identifies three common themes in the educational 'school-community' literature (Bushnell 2001: 140). The first emphasises the development of a sense of community within schools. Initiatives focused on creating or strengthening the internal school community often involve approaches to 'moral education' and strive to build trust, respect and a sense of engagement among students and staff. The second theme addresses a perceived link between a sense of community and functional democracy. Initiatives emerging out of this frame emphasise the importance of teaching children about social rights and responsibilities, and promoting active involvement in the wider community. The third theme emphasises the development of connections between families, schools and the wider community,

and the benefits to all parties of improved communication, cooperation and sharing of resources that result from these connections. It is this theme that engages with the notion of learning communities.

The phrase 'learning community' is used to describe a wide range of different phenomena in the educational literature. It may refer to tertiary-level curriculum innovations that attempt to build a sense of group identity among first-year students through team teaching, interdisciplinary courses and small group work (Collison 1993; Smith 1993). The concept of learning communities also appears in the context of emerging 'cyber-communities' and information systems involving networks of individuals linked by the internet (Lee 1998; Paloff & Pratt 2001). Recently, analyses of linkages between learning, social capital and community development began to emerge in Australia (Falk 2001a, 2001b; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk 2001). Most significant for our purposes, the notion of learning community has recently appeared in discussions of learning as a life-long process linking families, schools and communities (including business and government) working together to identify and deploy resources to address community needs (Johns et al. 2000; Moore & Brooks 2000). Indeed, business–community partnerships aimed at promoting full social engagement are at the heart of the Federal government's new policy framework for the Australian welfare system laid out in *Australians Working Together* (Commonwealth of Australia 2001).

Indigenous learning communities, as we conceive them, would take these ideas into the context of Indigenous communities. They would be vehicles for the local development of social capital and tools for the construction of local capacity. Importantly, Indigenous learning communities would aim to unite families, schools and communities to identify and address local needs through drawing upon local resources. In this way they would be powerful structures for community development. In the next section we present some examples of programs and approaches that could be adapted to address such local needs.

'The little red schoolhouse'

> The little red schoolhouse of the past was a multipurpose building. Socials, musicals, spelling bees, games, bazaars, festivals, meetings, and other activities drew people of all ages to the school. Residents viewed the schoolhouse as their own, a comfortable and convenient place to gather. Urbanization, superhighways, school consolidations, and a more transient society have changed both our communities and our schools … The schoolhouse, no longer the heart of the community, has lost its place in the hearts of community residents (Decker & Richardson Boo 1996:1).

Over the past decade, educational reform agendas have arisen, both nationally and internationally that focus on reuniting schools with families and communities: in this way they attempt to recapture the ideal of 'the little red schoolhouse'. Fundamental to these agendas is recognition that parents and families are their children's first teachers, and as such, are critical players in supporting their children's formal education. This has been the impetus not only for individual programs, but for whole-school reform initiatives. Many of these call

for the development of learning communities, reflecting concepts of education that encompass lifelong learning through opportunities that extend the traditional role of schools. Programs incorporate an array of approaches: before- and after-school programs; learning activities for parents and families; the allocation of specific spaces in the school environs for parent or family centres; and schools as community centres. Many initiatives focus on providing extended learning opportunities for entire families and communities, while also incorporating access to other family and children's services from within the school through co-location and/or the development of linkages.

Here the discussion focuses on specific examples that fit into the school-linked and school-based models (Muirhead 1996). We provide a range of examples that have as their fundamental ideology the reinstatement of the school as the hub of the community, as an institution able to be more responsive to community needs and, as such, more able to effectively support the lives of children and families.

The political context of Indigenous education

There are a number of factors that affect Indigenous engagement with education.[4] Alienation from educational processes and institutions arises for many Indigenous adults out of powerful negative associations and experiences in their own schooling. In addition, and partly as a result of unsuccessful past engagements with education, many Indigenous parents are ill-equipped to provide assistance and direction in their children's education. They have, in general, relatively low levels of formal education and poor literacy and numeracy skills, but also and perhaps most significantly, little experience with and knowledge of the processes that underpin formal education. These factors combine to produce debilitating, low levels of self-esteem and little confidence in their ability to effect change. The situation is compounded by cultural notions of shame that can, for instance, result in negative parental reactions and a lack of support for educational engagement by their children (Schwab 2001). Further, there are other influencing factors that find their origins here, such as levelling or 'cultural expectations' that have evolved out of school failure, cultural solidarity and choice through resistance; all of which have the same results. However, there are implications not only for formal education, but also for other aspects of lifelong learning.

Parental involvement and support in the home for educational processes is well acknowledged as being fundamental to successful educational engagement and outcomes (Eccles & Harold 1996). Emotional and intellectual encouragement and support may be provided through a number of mechanisms: modelling, as in parents' and other family members' involvement in educational opportunities; high family expectations for educational participation and outcomes; family involvement in both school and classroom activities; positive discourse by parents and family members about the value of education; and assistance with homework. Similarly, structural and material accommodations in the home can support and promote learning: the provision of reading and writing materials, the

creation of an appropriate and dedicated study and homework space, and the establishment of a regular study routine. In considering the tenor of this involvement and support, much of which falls into the category of implicit expectations, the history of past engagement of Indigenous people with the institution of formal education can be identified as a primary counter to such mechanisms becoming embedded in the Indigenous psyche. This is further complicated by a range of cultural considerations including family and other kinship expectations, cultural responsibilities and obligations, and issues of mobility and autonomy (Schwab 2001).

Developing policy options to integrate schools, families and communities and to thereby build social capital, requires an understanding of the political context of Indigenous education. In examining this political context, we suggest that all policy makers need to look closely at the historical legacy of Indigenous education, the impact of systemic inertia on education, the hidden assumptions of policy rhetoric, and the problem of empowerment.

The historical legacy

Few Indigenous people have experienced 'the little red schoolhouse'. Rather, for many Indigenous Australians, schools have not been open and welcoming of Indigenous participation. Indeed, for many, schools have been the agents of disempowerment, and dismantlers of cultures and traditions. Indigenous participation is marred by experiences of alienation and exclusion that have been propagated by systemic and institutional bias. Recent studies suggest that education and training in Australia continues to be characterised by a cultural environment that inhibits access for those who do not conform to, or understand, its often implicit expectations (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) 2000). For example, consistent attendance is often said to be a critical requirement for educational success and much current discussion focuses on the need for, and responsibility of, Indigenous parents to ensure that their children attend school. However, there are a number of underlying factors that will continue to impede improvement in this area—most recognisably, factors such as poverty, health, and mobility, but most significant in the context of this discussion, the prevailing effects of past engagement. The historical legacy of Indigenous education will have a powerful effect on all policy outcomes.

Systemic inertia

Educational engagement will also be affected by formal education's often alien and unbending nature (DETYA 2000: 2). For example, as Schwab showed in his study of Maningrida, the structure of the school year in this Arnhem Land school is a legacy of schedules that have nothing to do with the rhythm of life in that community (Schwab 2001). Moreover, there is a systemic assumption that the school year as it stands is the norm, and therefore community life should conform to it. But, as the study shows, this does not fit with seasonal variations such as the wet and dry seasons, or cultural obligations and responsibilities. Notably, the population of Maningrida increases perceptibly during the wet season (at a time

when school is closed for Christmas holidays) and decreases rapidly during the dry (a time when people's mobility increases but when school is in). Restructuring the school year in a more creative and flexible manner would be more responsive to individual community needs and might have a significant effect on school attendance.

The hidden assumptions of policy rhetoric

Educational rhetoric that underlies policy and program formulation is, more often than not, situated in particular constructions—for example, the construction that has currency at the moment can be found in the term 'at risk'. The utilisation of such terms in effect establishes a norm, and in so doing designates 'difference' to some, and the categorisation of those who do not conform to the norm, as 'the Other'. Necessarily, because such systems and institutions are accepted as being the norm they advantage the dominant culture to the disadvantage of those who are located outside of it. The impact that such terms have in constructing 'the Other' is the continual development of alternative and 'special' separate programs that focus on those categorised as 'different', rather than on the institutional and social processes that maintain such categories. Inherent to such programs is the philosophy of doing what 'must be done to and for individuals, families and cultures, obliterating and working against those things that individuals, families and cultures might do for themselves' (Thomson 1999: 7). This is a philosophy that continues to underwrite many areas of Indigenous policy. Such constructions and their consequence have been central to the provision of education in Australia for Indigenous people. The development of initiatives can no longer be manifested only in compensatory education: these types of programs are not sustainable and inevitably fail to bring about substantial social change.

The problem of 'empowerment'

Policy makers need to look critically at educational programs designed to empower parents and communities. We, like many policy makers, would argue that the key to alleviating the alienation from education that Indigenous people experience is to engage and empower parents and communities. Yet even programs designed to increase engagement can in some places and contexts achieve the opposite. An example of this is the Aboriginal Students Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA), part of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Department of Education, Employment and Training 1989). The committees that form the heart of this program were established to engage Indigenous parents in a decision-making process within the school in relation to activities designed to enhance educational participation and outcomes for Indigenous students: 'It was believed that involving parents of Indigenous children in their child's education would improve participation rates and outcomes for the children as the educational experience would become more appropriate and welcoming and barriers would be overcome' (DETYA 2000: 32).

ASSPA committees have been in operation for over a decade, but they continue to represent an initiative that remains embedded in power relations that favour the

school over the parents, because schools control and direct ASSPA committees and control their funds. Also, being a supplementary program, ASSPA is often conceived of as outside the core business of the school (DETYA 2000: 34). For example, it is a regular occurrence for the bulk of ASSPA funds to be directed towards NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee) Week activities and this often equals the sum of Indigenous parental involvement in the school. Such circumstances operate, in effect, to maintain Indigenous parents' marginal participation in educational decision-making. In such ways the disempowerment of Indigenous people is being continually reinforced, rather than providing the means for Indigenous parents to respond in positive and meaningful ways.

Indigenous parental engagement programs have a history of inviting parents to consult with teachers and schools, negotiate with bureaucrats, attend meetings, and to offer advice and expertise in the development of Indigenous activities and programs. And, there has been a long history of Indigenous parental participation in some degree, by some parents, who represent themselves and often take on the responsibility also to represent others. Many have had a long involvement at local, regional, State and national levels. There are, no doubt, committed parents who engage with schools and education with an initial enthusiasm and willingness to contribute. As with anything, in the beginning there is always a feeling that progress is being made—but, eventually, many begin to question whether or not it is all worth it. Ultimately, the power and decision-making lies with the State or Territory education department, despite the rhetoric of community consultation and negotiation. This is often compounded by changes in departmental and school personnel, and the consequent need to adjust to different styles of communication and leadership; this requires the continual re-establishment of working relationships. Thus Indigenous parents and family members find themselves having to continually re-educate teachers, administrators and education department officers. They see their advice being ignored, falling like water off a duck's back, an experience that is both frustrating and disheartening.

Programs and policies that look towards supporting Indigenous students in schools through the engagement of Indigenous parents do not necessarily need to be refocused in intent, but rather, in their import. A focus on the meaningful occurrences in daily life, the qualitative, needs to replace the obsession with the quantitative. To see an improvement in the latter, serious consideration must be given to the former. In no respects is this easy—like the development and success of any relationship it requires work and effort. There needs to be development of meaningful relationships that are highly valued: the work and effort must be apparent. This speaks directly to the quality of relationships, the type of social capital created. It is one thing to establish the relationships as the ASSPA committees attempt to do, but, it is quite another thing to develop a sense of empowerment by which participants feel valued and equal—feel that they are being heard and can make a difference. This is the most central and critical aspect to engaging Indigenous people with education.

Shifting the political context

Historical legacy, systemic inertia, the hidden assumptions of policy rhetoric, and complexities of empowerment combine to perpetuate the continuing disadvantage of Indigenous people in relation to educational participation and outcomes. One of the aims of this exploratory paper is to shift the political and policy context so as to encourage and foster positive engagement between schools, families and communities. Explicit in our discussion is the desire to identify models or approaches that re-empower Indigenous people and communities. It is only through empowerment that ownership and responsibility for one's own education and the education of one's children in all contexts can be restored. Communities are changing, and this applies no less to Indigenous communities. As we enter a new era, there is little doubt that Indigenous people need to embrace Western education. Indeed, increasing numbers of Indigenous parents are adamant that their children become not only competent but successful in their education (Collins 1999; Hughes 2000). This is progressively more necessary in an era where the social role of education is increasingly aligned with the economy. Education and certification have become strategic gatekeepers to the labour market, which obviously has had, and will continue to have, not only serious economic, but also serious social implications for Indigenous people (Connel 1993: 25–6). The question this paper addresses is how that engagement might most positively occur.

Schools as community education centres

In our exploration of existing models and approaches to uniting families, schools and communities, a number of programs have been investigated. These range from the initiation of whole new approaches, to school-wide reforms, to small-scale projects. We have chosen five examples of programs and approaches, some from Australia and some from overseas, that, we believe, provide valuable insights and potential strategies for developing options to create Indigenous learning communities. Reflecting the points made earlier in reference to the construction of particular terms, and how they become embedded in educational language, most of the programs investigated are explicitly described as having been developed for, and undertaken in, communities that are considered to be 'disadvantaged'. They are communities in areas of high need, providing services to children who are deemed to be 'at risk', for example Indigenous people, various ethnic minorities and groups from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many individuals in such communities have experienced histories of low academic achievement and less productive engagement with the education system. However, the programs substantially focus on positive systemic responses.

Importantly, the programs and projects investigated have evolved in response to the changing relationships between schools and families. Central to their philosophies is the premise that education begins with the family, and that therefore parents need to be full partners in their children's education. The

programs not only offer extended learning opportunities, but also incorporate programs of social development and personal growth for individuals, families and the wider community. Programs can, therefore, also encapsulate issues of identity, empowerment and ownership of the education process.

Aboriginal Family Education Centres

In 1969 the van Leer Foundation, in conjunction with State and Federal governments, funded an innovative educational initiative for Aboriginal people in New South Wales. The project was developed and delivered by the Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney and based on the Maori play-centre model developed under the direction of Lex Grey in New Zealand (Teasedale & Whitelaw 1981: 46). The initiative resulted in the setting up of 12 Aboriginal Family Education Centres (AFECs), primarily in northern New South Wales in locations such as Toomelah, Boggabilla, Woodenbong and Tabulum. Initially, the centres were directed by non-Indigenous people; however, by 1974, Indigenous people assumed sole responsibility for the administration and direction of each centre. From these 12 centres, the New South Wales Aboriginal Family Education Centres Federation was established (Teasedale & Whitelaw 1981: 140).

The primary aim of the centres was to foster Aboriginal identity through a program focused on the individual, the family and the community, and this involved initiating and fostering educational experiences for parents and their children. The founding philosophy was that education begins with the family: if the focus was on the education of the young child and, consequently, through the child, on the education of parents and communities, the result would be an improvement 'in the lot of Aboriginal people' (Teasdale & Whitelaw 1981: x). The expectation was that if early educational disadvantage could be overcome, improved educational outcomes would result. Specifically, the AFEC program provided opportunities for parental and wider family participation in learning activities with children, and community capacity-building through participation in the development and administration of the centres.

Children appeared to benefit significantly from their participation in AFEC. Particular reported outcomes included increased attendance, more rapid social development and adjustment to the mainstream school environment, better academic progress in comparison with non-attenders, enhanced self-confidence, improvements in speech, health and nutrition, and behavioural improvements, particularly noted in the home. For parents, better understanding of educational process and purpose was developed and this was reflected in more support in the home for (Western) education, and increased parental involvement and improved communication between parents and teachers. Communities also benefited from this process of community capacity-building which contributed to self-determination through Aboriginal people having full responsibility for the direction and administration of centres (Teasedale & Whitelaw 1981).

Parent/Family Centres

The Parent/Family Centre initiative was originally developed in the USA in the early 1990s and was funded by a number of partners including National and State education departments and the United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The example we provide here focuses on a collaborative effort between the California State University and the Murchison Street School, an urban elementary school in East Los Angeles. The school is located in a predominantly Spanish speaking, low socio-economic area, where many live below the poverty line, have inadequate health care, and suffer poor nutrition and an unsafe living environment. This is compounded by relative isolation, with the community surrounded on all sides by a railway track, a freeway, a park and county maintenance facilities and an industrial area. In addition there are very few commercial enterprises, and access to primary services and agencies is all the more problematic because of transport difficulties. Parent participation and involvement in the school had been relegated to the dropping off and picking up of children before and after school, and interaction and discussion between parents and school personnel was rare. In order to bridge this gap and develop meaningful relationships with parents, and to foster empowerment within the larger community, the school, with backing from the university faculty, established the centre (Zetlin et al.1994: 11).

The Parent/Family Centre not only focused on opening the school doors and encouraging participation, but also had a philosophy based on empowering parents. Much activity centred around what parents could teach staff, and the development of relationships within which this could occur. The implementation of the project was carried out over two years and participating parents elected a parent coordinator to assist with the organisation of the centre. Activities implemented in the first year focused on providing a welcoming and non-threatening environment within which informal gatherings and meetings between parents and staff could take place, regular parent meetings, the provision of resources and materials, and referrals to other services. To empower parents so that they could participate in the whole range of school activities a mentoring program was established. This looked to lead parents and other family members through a developmental process that began with the identification of community needs and available resources to meet those needs.

In the second year previous activities continued, but a number of themes also emerged that were used to inform the second year of the program, with social isolation being identified as a major issue of concern. A parent mentoring program was implemented with the specific objective of training a cohort of parents to be involved in school activities, but also as a link between the school and other families not actively participating in these initiatives. The program was designed to be self-perpetuating, with a continual cycle of mentor parents undertaking the training of new cohorts. Interestingly, one condition for participation that parents decided upon was regular attendance: this was deemed to be essential in developing trusting and unified relationships.

For the participating parents in the community outcomes were incremental, and three stages in perceptual growth were identified. Initially there were changes in self-perception, apparent in appearance and presentation. Stage two saw a focus on improving relationships, and participants also began to evaluate differently what before had appeared to be a hopeless situation. Stage three saw the development of understanding in parents of the critical value of creating conditions in the home that were conducive to improving learning.

Initial evaluations of the impact of the program on student achievement revealed an improvement of a few percentile points in literacy. However, the most overt improvement was in attendance. Over the first two years of the program average absences per student decreased from an average of 1.4 days per month to an average of 0.95 days per month. Increased attendance was especially noticeable in the months of November and December, a time in which students had previously regularly left the community on family visits to Mexico (Zetlin et al. 1994: 15).

Community Learning Centres

The 21st Century Community Learning Centres Program is an enormous grants program established by the US Congress in 1998. It has provided 1,587 grants supporting 6,800 Centres, 1.2 million children, and 400,000 adults across 47 States and the Marshall Islands. It is a program particularly targeted at rural and inner-city public schools in order to implement or expand services that benefit the needs of the community and which encompass education, social services, health, and cultural and recreational needs (US Department of Education 2000: 7). A key aspect of the program is to keep children 'safe and smart', with a particular focus on after-school hours, offering access to programs encompassing homework centres, tutors, cultural enrichment, recreation and nutrition. Lifelong learning activities based within the school are also available to the wider community. A central feature of the program is that it enables the school to stay open longer, and while there is a focus on core subject areas and basic skills in literacy and numeracy, enrichment activities are also available. Priority is given to programs with activities that focus on expanding learning opportunities and which contribute to reduced substance misuse and violence. Examples include, but are not limited to, substance misuse counselling, recreational activities, choir, band, arts, technology and services for children and youth with disabilities.

Any single 21st Century Community Learning Centre provides at least four of the following activities:

- literacy programs;
- senior citizen programs;
- day-care services;
- integrated education, health, social service, recreational or cultural programs;
- holiday and weekend programs (in conjunction with recreational programs);

- health and nutrition programs;
- extended library services;
- telecommunications/technology programs for all ages;
- parent skills programs;
- child day-care training;
- employment counselling/training/placement;
- services for early school leavers; and
- services for those with disabilities (US Department of Education 2000: 9).

Outcomes from these programs are impressive. An evaluation carried out for April 2000 funded projects reported a 25 per cent reduction in violence; a substantial reduction in substance misuse; a 40 per cent reduction in juvenile crime; the implementation of an abstinence program which resulted in no pregnancies in a graduating class; the prevention of 120 students from repeating their grade; improved school attendance; improvement in numeracy, literacy and inter-personal management; and a substantial participation rate of children attending after-school programs (US Department of Education 2000).

Full service schools

Full service schools have been developed in both the USA and Australia. In the USA, the full service school is essentially a 'one-stop shop', a seamless institution that incorporates the best of school reform with other services that children and families need (Dryfoos 1994: 13). In full service schools, the onus is on the school to be innovative and reorganise accordingly, and on other agencies to bring their services into the school. In effect the school becomes more community-oriented; there is allowance for maximum responsiveness, and accessibility and continuity in service delivery, operating under the umbrella of joint governance. In analysing a variety of program experiences and results from preventative programs from a range of fields, Dryfoos conceptualised the ideal model of the full-service school:

> The model reflects the belief that no single component, no magic bullet, can significantly change the lives of disadvantaged children, youth and families. Rather, it is a cumulative impact of a package of interventions that will result in measurable changes in life scripts (1994: 12–13).

An example of a full service school in the USA is middle school PS 218, in Washington Heights, New York. It is an example of the establishment of a partnership between a community organisation, the Children's Aid Society (CAS) and the education system, that identified in 1988 that the community of Washington Heights was in need of more services. What eventuated were plans for a new school, with specifications that included zoned areas within the building to allow for different sections to be closed off for security, safety and partial access. Lighting was increased for night programs and extra air-conditioning was provided for summer use. What was developed, in effect, was a new kind of institution:

> The building has been designed specifically to get rid of the institutional, prison-like quality found in many of the neighbourhood buildings and to incorporate an open plan with no straight halls and lots of curves, light and colour. As one enters the building ... one finds a family resource centre and a medical suite, accessible to the community (Dryfoos 1994: 102).

However, the building of the new school was not the only part of the process. The CAS began to develop relationships within the community before any bricks were laid. A number of initial programs included summer camps, a mobile medical and dental van, a special program for disabled children, and a training program for community members to qualify them to staff after-school programs. The relationship between the school and the community was well established before the doors of the school were open.

A working group was set up to determine how the new institution would work and the education program that would operate from 7.00 am to 10.00 pm every day. The planning process took four years to complete and the school was opened in 1992. It became known as the Salome Urena Middle Academies (SUMA).

Four academies are housed on the upper floors. Their programs include maths, science and technology, business, expressive arts and community service. The academies are made up of independent units with five classes and a team of five teachers who also advise students in their unit. A regular daily program includes opening at 7.00 am with a 'zero period' which includes certain activities such as dance, band, recreation and breakfast, and there is an after-school program which operates from 3.00 pm to 6.00 pm, which is designed in collaboration with teachers.

The family resource centre is open from 8.30 am to 8.30 pm and provides assistance with immigration, citizenship, social service, employment, housing, crisis intervention, counselling and adult education. The centre is staffed by social workers, para-professionals, parents, and other volunteers. This group designed a uniform which identifies and provides them with status within the school. The clinic encompasses both medical and dental services. When the centre is fully staffed it will also include a part-time psychiatrist and psychologist, a senior social worker, family services, and other outreach workers.

The school is jointly managed and staffed by the CAS and the education department. The principal has full responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the school, assisted by the CAS director for community schools. Because of the complexity of the partnership, mechanisms such as regular management meetings have also been established.

Early evaluations of the project have indicated very good results that can be associated with the project. For children attending the school there have been noted improvements in attitudes, reflected in higher attendance and higher levels of participation, less mobility, no truancy, and no graffiti or damage to school property. There has been an increase in interest in academic achievement as a result of curriculum and activities that are experiential and grounded, and more

dedicated teaching staff also contributed to excellent attendance. Feedback provided by parents indicates that there has been an impact on children's social, emotional and academic development. Positive changes have also occurred in relation to the school-wide culture (Volpe et al. 1999: 15).

The aim of the Full Service Schools (FSS) program in Australia is slightly different to that of the US programs. The aim of the FSS program in Australia is to:

> encourage young people to return to or remain at school until the end of Year 12 and to allow them to achieve quality learning outcomes and work-related skills. The Program was designed to contribute to the pool of knowledge and innovation in education programs and activities for at risk young people (DETYA 2001: 1).

In 1999, the FSS program provided funding in 65 school clusters for the development of a range of activities including case management, curriculum initiatives, alternative classrooms and activities, community- and work-based learning, school organisational change, and community-oriented change directed at the regional and/or State-wide level.

In the Northern Territory the FSS program funded a number of projects which were coordinated by a central project officer. One project was implemented at Port Keats as a result of community requests. The Christian Brothers were invited to live in the community to assist in the development and implementation of the project, which focused on the needs of young men. A comprehensive community consultation and planning process was carried out, ensuring that the community provided direction for and maintained control of the project. The community renovated an old church, and a learning and activity centre was established. Activities included literacy and numeracy and computer literacy for a group of boys aged 15 to 16 who had not been involved in school. The project centred around the organisation of a school visit to Brisbane and a return visit by that school to Port Keats.

Both visits were extremely successful and benefits were reflected in attitude and skill development in the boys, as well as gains in community pride. The most important aspect of the project was community ownership apparent in the identification of community and individual needs and a program designed from them:

> The initiative was developed out of the community's concern, and was designed to meet the long term needs of both the community and individual students. It engages students by meeting their immediate needs and progresses to meeting their long term needs once the students experience the satisfaction of those immediate needs (DETYA 2001: 74).

FSS projects undertaken in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, particularly those projects that take a community development approach, illustrate how community leaders and schools can work collaboratively in the development of initiatives that increase the options for young people (DETYA 2001: 75).

Community schools

Community schools are defined by their focus on current community needs: they are not limited by the traditional school role. Within this philosophy the concept of public education is extended to the use of all available resources—both the school's and the community's—to meet the needs of all community members regardless of their age. Community schools support the development of partnerships between the school, families and other community members, local businesses, other agencies, and public and private organisations in order to develop a holistic community approach to addressing the needs of the community (Decker & Richardson Boo 1996). Even though communities vary, all have resources that can be utilised to meet the needs of the community.

Community schools provide learning and enrichment opportunities for a whole range of community members. For example, beyond delivering the traditional curriculum, community schools can provide extra-curricular and recreational activities, access to health and social services, employment counselling, and training.

The community school example used here is from Birmingham, Alabama, USA. The community education program there includes adult education, activities aimed at preventing students from dropping out, and family education and support. Funding is received from the City Council and the Board of Education, with collaborative partnerships with private sector businesses, colleges, non-government organisations and churches, and other groups. The discussion of issues and shared decision-making are central to the program. Classes and activities are provided for community members of all ages and these reflect identified community needs, such as homelessness, literacy and numeracy, academic failure, crime prevention, teen pregnancy, substance misuse and unemployment. Linkages have also been developed between the school and other social service agencies in order to provide access to services such as counselling, other health services, and employment training. The governance of the community school is a representative advisory council that is linked with the city council and facilitates the identification of needs and resource development, sets goals, and initiates evaluations (Decker & Richardson Boo 1996).

Implications for building Indigenous learning communities

The approaches and programs we have described above provide a range of examples of how parents and schools can unite with the larger community to meet specific local needs. All of them have significant implications for Indigenous communities. Although the five programs differ in focus, schools are central to each, and all involve degrees of capacity-building and the development of social capital. The experience derived from these programs suggests there is value in attempting to position the school at the centre of the community. Further, in extending the traditional role of the school to incorporate other initiatives such as adult education, and the coordination and integration of various child and family

services, these programs necessarily bring more members of the wider community into contact with the school. Many of these programs deliver increased parental and student participation and retention, and community involvement in the school.

Indeed, the underlying philosophies of these approaches foster parental and community ownership of, and involvement in, not only the school, but the education process in general. This is the foundation for building learning communities—communities where education is a lifelong affair, where families and schools are strong and healthy, and where individuals in communities feel empowered to identify their most pressing needs and develop mechanisms to build capacity and secure resources to address those needs. Perhaps this is one of the most significant potential outcomes of this approach: it results in a partnership where individuals feel valued and equal, where they can be heard, and where they can make a difference. Indigenous learning communities hold the potential to embody in symbol and practice the meaningful relationships, networks and trust that enable community development and capacity building.

Indigenous learning communities and policy: which way forward?

We strongly urge a concerted effort by government to focus on developing policy and programs that will promote and support the building of Indigenous learning communities. As we have shown, there are effective approaches that have been tried in Australia that can contribute to this end: the Aboriginal Family Education Centres of the 1960s and the Full Service Schools models currently being funded and evaluated by DETYA. Yet the AFECs focused almost exclusively on young children and families, while the Australian FSS program aims to address the needs of at-risk late secondary students. We propose, as a next step, the formulation of a policy and program framework that more broadly addresses the needs of families and schools through a federally-funded initiative to build Indigenous learning communities.

Specifically, we would recommend that the Commonwealth fund a series of national demonstration projects, under competitive bids, to explore and evaluate various approaches to building Indigenous learning communities. Such bids might be developed by State or Territory education departments, regional consortia, or local communities.

The program we envisage would be flexible so as to ensure that funded projects are built around the specific needs of particular communities. In this way, we would encourage a grants program that details a menu of components, similar to the USA's 21st Century Learning Centres model, from which a number of aims would be drawn. These could include activities and services such as literacy programs, health services, day care, parent skill development, recreation, community access to libraries and Internet, and the like. In addition, a program mechanism based on applications for grants would identify how the school would

engage business and government and how community needs would be determined and capacity developed and deployed. In this sense, programs would be instrumental in identifying and developing social capital in Indigenous communities.

In summary, we recommend:

Demonstration project funding

Any new initiative requires both enthusiasm and financial support. The programs we studied often required radical re-orientations and restructuring of approaches that simply cannot be undertaken without new and earmarked funding. Competitive application for project funding for planning and establishment phases would ensure that the groundwork had been laid and potential projects carefully considered.

Third party evaluation and mandatory dissemination

Ongoing formative evaluations would ensure the projects were on track and end of grant summative evaluations of programs and their outcomes would measure the degree to which the projects achieved their stated aims and goals. Requiring those evaluations be conducted by third parties would ensure objectivity. A plan for dissemination of results should also be required so as to ensure that full value can be gained from the experience of such initiatives and shared appropriately.

The empowerment of participants

It is clear that participant empowerment is both an outcome and a strategy that is critically important to the success of various approaches. While there is certainly value in simple program participation, what appears to most significantly engage participants is a sense of ownership and control. Building in ways for participants to steer and shape programs can lead to a strong sense of empowerment and ownership, and an associated recognition of responsibility.

Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity

The building of learning communities will not be an apolitical or acultural process. As we have seen, programs such as those we have described are often profoundly political, and programs that acknowledge and address political tensions and are sensitive to cultural difference appear most able to achieve success.

Structural and infrastructural changes to encourage parent and family comfort

A learning community is more than an abstraction. In a model such as we are proposing the school stands at the centre of the community. Experience has shown that in addition to changes of individual and institutional attitude or philosophy, physical changes to buildings and other physical structures are often required to enhance levels of physical access, and social or cultural comfort for community members.

Parents in classrooms

For many members of disenfranchised groups, educational facilities are foreign and uncomfortable places. Yet research shows clearly that parents in classrooms can have a dramatic effect on children's learning. Ensuring parents feel comfortable, welcome and productive in classrooms can result in important gains in ownership and participation in all levels of learning communities.

Programs derived from local needs based on local consultation

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, there is a tendency for educational policy to steer toward uniformity. Yet experience has shown that the most successful approaches to building community capacity are derived from meeting local needs identified in local consultations. The examples we have cited certainly support this view.

A dedicated community liaison position

Whatever the shape of programs that attempt to build learning communities, it seems there is a need for a designated community liaison person. Engaging members of communities, whether they be parents and families, business, agencies, or educational organisations, is a complex and ongoing task. Experience indicates that at the very least, one individual needs to assume the role of building bridges and alliances within the larger learning community.

Skill transfer and skill development

It is tempting to see the development of learning communities as a process whereby parents and families develop new skills and capacities from teachers or agency officers. The cases we have studied suggest, however, that skill transfer is not unidirectional and that approaches that invite the transfer of skills and knowledge among all members of the larger learning community are most successful in building both capacity and a sense of ownership and respect. This is particularly important where cross-cultural issues are a factor.

Outreach to uninvolved parents

In programs involving parents and schools, there is usually a core group of parents willing to participate and engage with the challenge of building a learning community. Yet as some of our examples have shown, these parents can themselves provide avenues to reach others who are hesitant or intimidated, but have much to offer. Using parents to reach out to uninvolved members of their community can greatly expand the base of community involvement.

A focus on the home as well as the school

It is easy to envisage the school building as the base for building a learning community, and in many places that is a highly desirable and appropriate step. Experience shows, however, that much can be gained by developing approaches that focus efforts and energies on the home as well as the school. For example, literacy is seldom a capacity that can be developed in isolation. We know well that

children's literacy skills are dramatically linked to home access to literacy materials. Having adults involved who are themselves engaged in literacy activities and programs that build upon that knowledge increases the likelihood of developing literacy skills among their children.

The dismantling of boundaries between school and community

In many communities there is a perception that what goes on inside the school building is the responsibility of teachers and education departments. Boundaries, either real or imagined, must be dismantled. The wider community must be invited in, and the pool of skills and opportunities in schools must be made accessible to the wider community. The experience of many programs suggests that learning communities would grow where community members come to the realisation that learning is a community activity as well as a community responsibility.

Notes

1. 'VET in Schools' is shorthand for a range of different programs that provide vocational education and training opportunities for students while they are still in school. These programs are intended to provide career education and to enable the development of work skills for future employment.

2. As Hunter points out, 'the diversity of usage does not imply a consensus of opinion; rather it indicates a lack of precision' (Hunter 2000: 4).

3. The 'Third Way' refers to a new wave of social democratic political reforms driven by left of centre governments in the West. It emerges as a third alternative after the collapse of the core doctrines of socialism and market fundamentalism (Giddens 2001).

4. The 'Collins Review' of education in the Northern Territory has relevance far beyond the Northern Territory and provides an extremely useful overview of some of these factors (Collins 1999).

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