

# ISSUE ANALYSIS

## Education and Learning in an Aboriginal Community

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Educational reforms are urgently needed if children in remote Aboriginal communities are to enjoy the opportunities open to other Australian children. Children in remote areas, such as the Tiwi Islands, leave primary school without the skills that would enable them to succeed in secondary education. This is the principal reason why so many Aboriginal people are unable to find jobs. Parents and communities must take responsibility for the education of their children. Tiwi people, and Aboriginal people generally, cannot afford to lose further generations of young people to educational deprivation.

Fundamental changes must include:

1. **Re-engaging parents as educators of their children**  
Because of the damage done by welfare dependence during the last 30 years, parents now need assistance to retake responsibility for their children's health and education. Parents and communities must resume responsibility for teaching local culture, customs and language during the vital first five years of a child's life.
2. **Providing comprehensive childcare and pre-school education**  
The majority of Aboriginal children in remote communities are totally unprepared to start school. A significant proportion of the current education funding in remote communities would be better directed to comprehensive early childhood education for parents and children.
3. **Linking child welfare benefits to education**  
Regular school attendance is a profound problem. Absenteeism is a result of both the loss of structure and purpose in the lives of the adults, and also the irrelevance of schooling to a future on welfare. Linking welfare payments to regular attendance in early childhood education and school programmes would assist families in regaining control of their lives by providing education content that opens up prospects for employment.
4. **Putting primary education first**  
Primary education must be emphasised. The curriculum must equip children with the literacy, numeracy and other skills necessary to continue successfully to secondary education, post-secondary education, and employment. More specialist and support staff are needed in remote schools to assist and protect classroom teachers. And school buildings and facilities in remote communities need major overhauls with priority given to ongoing hygiene and maintenance.
5. **Supporting teachers and students through 'twinning' relationships**  
To reduce teaching staff turnover in remote Aboriginal communities, mainstream Australian schools should develop 'twinning' arrangements with staff exchanges, mentoring support, assistance with curriculum development, and communications and exchanges between students. *[cont'd next page]*

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## **6. Offering structured scholarship programmes for secondary education**

Scholarship and support systems are urgently needed so that many more Aboriginal children from remote communities can attend mainstream boarding or day schools. Regional mainstream secondary schools need to offer appropriate boarding facilities or hostels where Aboriginal children can feel secure enough to make the most of their education opportunities and proceed to post-secondary training.

## **7. Mandating work experience and apprenticeship opportunities**

Community businesses should offer work experience, training, and apprenticeships for local people in remote communities. But many young Aborigines will have to undertake mainstream apprenticeships, traineeships and work experience to enter the skilled and professional work force. The only way to shift the current paradigm of dependency to one of responsibility and commitment is for policies to ensure that the onus is placed on residents to work and on employers to train.

Aboriginal people know that they are being consigned to a life on welfare by present education policies and systems but are unable to speak out because they lack English language skills. This must change. Parents, children, employers, community members and governments must accept their respective education responsibilities. Governments must not sideline Aboriginal communities by undertaking further reviews, community consultations, inquiries, or offering short-term programmes and soft options to support individual schools and communities. Education providers must no longer short-change schools in remote communities or ignore their need for modern facilities simply because they are out of sight and out of mind.

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## **EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN AN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY**

### **Prologue**

In December 2000, I retired as Deputy Principal and teacher at The Friends' School in Hobart, Tasmania after 30 years work as a professional teacher, administrator and parent of three children. The Friends' School with its enrolment of around 1200 students is a unique, remarkable and highly successful independent K-12 school based on values of the intrinsic worth of each person, simplicity, peace and justice.

Although my tertiary education at Manchester and Nottingham Universities in England in the 1960s had prepared me as a teacher of Chemistry and Mathematics from Year 7-12, employment opportunities took me through the Tasmanian secondary education system, the Tasmanian Teachers Federation (now the AEU), to science teaching in the private school sector and latterly into administration and management of a K-12 school.

My decision to 'retire' early was motivated by a long held desire by both my husband and I to travel and to seek employment or volunteer work in remote communities. My husband John, initially a successful pharmacist and businessman, had spent almost 20 years as a Member of the Tasmanian State Parliament with more than 10 years experience as a Minister in successive governments. After some 15 months as 'grey nomads' touring around Australia, the opportunity arose to work in the Tiwi Islands when John applied for and accepted the position of Chief Executive Officer of the Tiwi Islands Local Government in 2002. This position was originally created to develop a regional government, including the amalgamation of three community government councils and one Aboriginal corporation on Bathurst and Melville Islands (the Tiwi Islands) into a single local government body. I accompanied John to the Tiwi Islands in April 2002 and planned to work as a volunteer in some kind of community work. As events unfolded and of necessity, my main role became personal assistant/office administrator/trainer in the local government office and eventually as a salaried administration and training officer for Tiwi Islands Local Government from 2003-05.

Over the almost three years that we spent living in Nguiu, the largest community on the Tiwi Islands, I learnt much about human nature, as well as the often inhumane, second rate systems operating in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. We loved the friendly, funny, family oriented Tiwi people with their remarkable cultural history and we realised the importance of the values that still govern their lives including their strong spiritual, cultural and physical connection with the land. Then we began to understand how so much of their lives has been corrupted by barely 90 years of learning from other cultures and imposed government structures and what that intrinsically says about their education in that time.

In this story I want to distinguish clearly between education and school-based learning. Education is about social, physical, emotional and spiritual development as well as the acquisition of the skills and knowledge—all of which assist us in becoming contented, valued and productive community members. Becoming an educated person does not depend solely on attendance at schools or other educational institutions. It requires parents and immediate family members to take the major responsibility for the education of their young and for them to engage with a wide range of community resources including educational institutions, religious bodies, sports, arts and culture groups. It also requires us to understand that education is a lifelong journey in which role models—whether teachers, parents, peers or media identities—are paramount. I believe it is vitally important to understand this concept before launching into the reasons why school-based learning in many communities is a cause for concern. It also explains the stark contrast between education in mainstream Australian communities and remote Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal education has been a focus of the Federal Government for more than 30 years and billions of dollars have been poured into providing schools, teachers and financial support to Indigenous students in a vain attempt to provide them with equal educational and employment outcomes. Sadly, this has largely failed to address the inequities. Most significantly, it seems that the great majority of financial support (Abstudy, living allowances, scholarships, and so on) has gone to Aboriginal people in urban and regional towns and cities where they already have access to mainstream education. It is a fact that of the current crop of the highly educated, articulate Aboriginal people who now speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians, there are few, if any, who have reached that position from an upbringing and schooling in remote communities. Some have grown up as members of the 'stolen generation', others have benefited from mixed parenting in the Western tradition, some have been educated away from remote communities and many more are second or third generations from urban communities who have re-discovered their Indigenous roots and are now committed to improving the situation of their neglected extended families in remote areas. Whatever their origin, it is enormously encouraging in the current debate to hear so many Indigenous people speaking out about the need for radical change in remote Aboriginal communities.

### **Some historical background**

The history of the Tiwi people has given them a great sense of identity, a common language and until the early part of the 20th century, protection from Western 'civilisation'. Thanks to abundant fresh water, seafood and wildlife, approximately 1,000 Tiwi lived relatively well in isolation for many thousands of years, warding off unwanted invaders and traders with well-trained warriors. Adults had total responsibility for the education of their children through long established, well understood, strong, skin group and family structures. Children learned progressively of their roles and responsibilities as members of Tiwi society. They learned their language from their family members, their oral history and spiritual connections through songs, stories and dance and their geography through seasonal travel around their islands. Essential skills such as foraging and hunting for food, building shelters for protection against the extremes of weather and treating sickness and injury became the focus of each day as a means of survival. Their polygamous society

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also protected every female from birth by the assignation of a husband according to skin group and marriage line and it was the responsibility of the patriarch to make sure that all his wives and the children borne to that family were fed and educated.

Like all societies, the reality of what some have promoted as an idyllic Aboriginal existence before the intrusion of white society into the islands, was less than ideal. Physical violence was the weapon of choice to resolve disputes, women and children were subject to abuse as chattels, death through childbirth, accident and illness was commonplace and the vagaries of food supplies made every day a struggle.

Not surprisingly, the Tiwi people soon saw the benefits of trading with the buffalo hunters and the missionaries who had arrived early in the 1900s. Tiwi elders quickly learned that the buffalo hunters had guns and horses, which made hunting easier, and the missionaries had axes, building materials, medicines and food supplies which they were happy to trade for labour and attendance at their religious ceremonies. One unhappy, abused young Tiwi girl committed to an old leper husband also sought shelter with the priest who was allowed to keep her in exchange for axes, tea and flour. This young woman became the first of the priest's almost 150 'wives' as more Tiwi elders realised the benefits of relinquishing responsibility for their family members. The mission in turn was able to take over the education of these young women and subsequently, children of both sexes as they were brought in for food, clothing and medical treatment. The mission taught the children to read and write in English so they could learn the history and geography of the world, the values of Christianity and monogamy, the benefits of clothing and cleanliness, housing construction skills and the cultivation of crops as part of a different but continuing work ethic.

In the 1970s, this new form of patriarchal society that had been of some mutual benefit was seen by the wider Australian society as demeaning, disadvantageous and detrimental to the independence and preservation of traditional Aboriginal society. Soon Aboriginal people were given recognition through the right to vote and through Land Rights legislation, which once more gave them control of their lands. The state took responsibility for health, schooling and housing and provided untied money so that food (and other things) could be purchased without having to labour for it. The mission continued to provide part of the educational whole through the teachings of the church, the management of some local schools and the presence of members of the religious orders in communities. However, there was no longer an expectation of mutual responsibilities, a work ethic and trade. Neither was there any kind of unified education system. Parents confined themselves to procreation and early nurturing of infants, schools confined themselves to a defined—largely rote—curriculum and the church confined itself to its Christian history and spiritual teachings. The teaching of skills relating to food cultivation and preparation, shelter building, physical and mental health have been largely lost from the community as older educated Tiwi people die and recent generations of Tiwi people have lacked parental guidance, leadership by their elders, a work ethic and social or community responsibilities.

**Observations of current Tiwi society**

There are countless anecdotal, research and media reports of the disastrous living conditions in the approximately 1,200 remote Australian communities where around 120,000 Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous administrators are trying to survive. I want to add my own anecdotal observations of current Tiwi society after almost three years living in the Nguuu Community on Bathurst Island. I also want to make some suggestions about the education of Indigenous Australians who continue to live in such remote communities.

Housing, education and health issues are at the fore of concerns about the dysfunctional remote communities in Australia and to date, most attempts to alleviate the misery have been in the form of government programmes designed by bureaucrats with the ensuing projects managed by short-term contract staff who arrive enthusiastically, work hard and

leave two or three years later, disappointed and cynical. Each cycle brings short-term benefits and puts systems in place that usually fall over when the manager departs, only for another programme to be put in place by another manager who re-invents the wheel. There is little or no sustained change to the underlying issues and rarely do the Indigenous residents gain any kind of responsibility or autonomy from these expensive patches on a system that is not working. Indigenous people have learned from this system to take what they can while they can and that when things fall in a heap, then another project will soon be put in place to rescue them. Time and again, we, as outsiders, heard Tiwi leaders say 'It's your job to fix it' or 'You're paid to do the work for us'.

The total population of the Tiwi Islands is 2,500, comprising the main community of Nguiu on Bathurst Island where about 1,500 reside, a small community of around 30 people about 50km west of Nguiu, and two communities on Melville Island (a stone's throw from Bathurst Island across Apsley Strait) of approximately 400–500 people each. There are no longer any Tiwi who choose to live the traditional nomadic lifestyle with only one couple still living on one of several expensively constructed outstations on a full-time basis. Tiwi people now prefer to live in one of the four main communities where housing, store, club, education and health services are provided.

Tiwi families still love the opportunity to go bush, especially in the dry season 'bush holiday', where they camp out, enjoying family time just as many other Australian families do on their holidays. Each Sunday, those with access to vehicles and boats will be out hunting and gathering wallaby, fish, turtle, shellfish, mangrove worms and those without vehicles will be waiting on the beaches and in communities to share the bounty on their return. There is still a strong sense of obligation for the old people, nursing mothers and small children to be provided with the tastiest morsels, but as with the rest of modern Australian society, young people are increasingly rejecting traditional pleasures in favour of media entertainment, travel, and the now entrenched culture of gambling, drug and alcohol abuse.

The main Tiwi community of Nguiu has approximately 400 children under the age of 16; this imbalance arises from an astonishingly high birth rate. Although up to 30% of the women are infertile, most young women begin childbearing in their teens and families of five or more children are not uncommon. Babies are thoroughly loved by everyone and are mostly carried around without the need for pushers and prams. All are breast-fed for the first year or so of their lives and then toddle off in their disposable nappy to join the other children in their extended family. Older siblings look after the little ones until it is time to go to school. There are no family meal times as such so finding food when hungry occupies a fair amount of their time. No one can keep food stocks in their home because there are family obligations to share and word soon gets out about who has supplies. Children are well aware of welfare pay days and look forward to the weekly visit to the local store to stock up on soft drinks, canned and packaged foods as well as chips and other delights from the takeaway. This feast is then countered by a famine for the rest of the week in those households that have not learned how to manage a family budget. In an effort to assist the many malnourished and starving children found in remote communities, there has been an increasing tendency in the last decade for schools to provide breakfast and lunch programmes, for health clinics to provide healthy food for mothers and children and community councils to organise barbeques and food vouchers for those no longer willing or able to feed themselves. Tiwi people employed in Council offices, schools, clinics and stores mostly have access to additional food and drink in the course of their employment. In Nguiu, the Aged Care facility for a time (when managed by someone who enjoyed catering) also provided cheap hot meals to the community as well as catering for its residents. All these worthy and worthwhile short-term measures to alleviate hunger have a very big downside. There is now an increasing expectation that the provision of food is not a family or individual responsibility and that when the money runs out or has been spent elsewhere, the community (usually the local council) should provide an alternative food source. A recent example of this has been publicised in

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a Cape York community where local residents have committed all their welfare cheques to paying off vehicles and the council has had to resort to food vouchers to prevent starvation. As a Tiwi example, Jirani Childcare Centre in Nguiu is feeding 55 children every day but during its month-long closure over Christmas, staff have noted that many children lose significant weight.

### **Education systems on Bathurst and Melville Islands**

There are two schools in the Nguiu community and an outreach teacher for a small number of children at Wurankuwu on Bathurst Island, managed by the Catholic Education Office in Darwin. On Melville Island, there are another two primary schools managed by the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training.

Until 2001, Murrupurtiyanuwi Catholic School (MCS) in Nguiu was the girls' school; it is now a co-educational primary school for children from Kindergarten to Year 7. About 240 children are actually enrolled each year but fewer than 80 attend regularly, and few individuals would achieve better than 70% attendance over the year. MCS provides a bi-lingual programme with children learning to read and write firstly in Tiwi and then increasingly in English from Year 4. The effectiveness of this bi-lingual education, especially in a community with no inherent written language, has been a source of considerable debate for some years with many Tiwi wanting their children to have a sufficient command of English to enter secondary education successfully and ultimately to function in mainstream Australian communities. However, whenever the local community are surveyed, they also show strong support for the school to teach traditional Tiwi culture and language, presumably in the knowledge that it is no longer being taught in the home or by the elders or other traditional means. MCS has strongly defended its programme and the Catholic Education Office is working hard to improve both literacy and numeracy standards amidst a number of other much more significant constraints including the low attendance, high teacher turnover, lack of resources, decaying infrastructure and so on. My own view is that the issue is not about the effectiveness of bi-lingual education as such, but quite specifically about whether by the end of Year 7 children can successfully transfer into mainstream secondary education programmes in English. It seems very clear that this is not so, and this is supported by the similar outcomes from those primary schools on Melville Island and elsewhere that do not operate a bi-lingual programme but still cannot achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy by Year 7 for students to progress to secondary education. Certainly the teachers, including the then Indigenous and non-Indigenous Co-Principals of the local Xavier Catholic Education Centre in Nguiu, were very outspoken about the fact the children transferring from MCS could not adequately read or write on entry. Children transferring to secondary schools in Darwin were invariably placed in intensive ESL classes that added to their general lack of self-esteem and often to a subsequent disengagement from education. There is very little chance that Indigenous students following the current pathways can ever catch up to the rest of their cohort by the end of Year 10.

Xavier Catholic Education Centre (XEC) was originally the boys' school in Nguiu; it is now co-educational with only about 25 students of a possible 160 students from Years 8-10 attending on an average day. Observation leads me to believe that many fewer boys than girls attend school at this age. In 2002, XEC even set up pin-ball machines in an effort to attract the boys to school, without any noticeable improvement in attendance. Much of the teaching day is focussed on keeping the students in school, so there is a great emphasis on sport, special events and food. The curriculum at XEC extends only to Year 8 standard with special courses created by dedicated teachers for the one or two students who are endeavouring to reach Year 10 or beyond. There are no specialist teachers of English, mathematics, social science, science, arts, physical education etc. and no teacher spends more than two or three years working at the school. In fact, it is Catholic Education policy to limit teachers to short-term stays in Aboriginal communities. In 2004, a small number of young men and women who had not previously completed their schooling

were re-enrolled in a Year 11 programme, but lack of continuity and support once again prevented any significant outcome from this initiative. VET (vocational employment training courses) or similar work training programmes are attempted each year, but the lack of continuity of teaching and/or sustainable employment and work experience components have precluded any ongoing outcomes in terms of employment and further training of individuals.

On adjacent Melville Island, there are two more community schools: Pularumpi School in the Pirlangimpi community to the west and Milikapiti School at Milikapiti in the north. Each is managed by the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training and caters for small groups of children from Kindergarten to Year 7. As with the Nguiu schools, the biggest issues are maintaining student enrolments and attendance, infrastructure, resources and experienced teachers.

The huge turnover of often young, inexperienced and sometimes incompetent teachers in remote community schools prevents any kind of ongoing development of ethos and values, curriculum initiatives and continuity for children. At MCS in Nguiu, it was reported in 2004 that one group of students had had 11 different teachers (Tiwi and non-Tiwi) and five different teacher assistants in their six years of schooling. In 2005, only one current non-Tiwi teacher returned to work at MCS. On a positive note, MCS still has strong support in the active presence of Sr Anne Gardiner, a nun and former head teacher who has lived in the community off and on for more than 50 years.

Apart from the key issue of staff turnover and teaching skills, attention must be drawn to the actual teaching and learning time provided in Aboriginal schools. The school timetable indicates that each school day is between three and five hours (9am–2pm) with four school terms of less than ten weeks each. The Christmas break lasts seven weeks and the mid year ‘bush holiday’ break lasts four weeks. In addition, there are two other breaks of one and two weeks, as well as all the public holidays. There is an increasing allocation of time for enrolments, school camps and excursions, staff professional development days, preparation and student reporting all of which are steadily reducing class time. This problem is not confined to Aboriginal schools but Aboriginal schools are probably at the extreme end of its consequences. However, the frequent absenteeism of teachers and students in remote schools also means that the early part of each morning requires some ‘wait’ time before things start, frequent breaks for outdoor activities, visitors and whole day breaks for funerals, special community events and so on which all impinge on actual learning time.

Children from all Tiwi communities who want to complete secondary education are encouraged to board at either Kormilda or St John’s College in Darwin, but very few survive the separation from family and/or the less desirable influences of city living. Several seem to be sent home each year for disciplinary reasons, which, for the students concerned, seems to be the preferred outcome. Even a wonderful scholarship programme which allows two Tiwi boys with football prowess to attend Scotch College in Melbourne each year has not been altogether successful, as students find it hard to adapt to the very short-term nature of their scholarship in a strange, cold environment. The net result is that in recent years, there have been no students schooled on the Tiwi Islands who have completed their secondary education to Year 12 or even a properly evaluated Year 10 curriculum. Questioning of young employees in the local government office gave clear indications that to graduate successfully at Year 10 from XEC required only reasonable school attendance rather than actual academic achievement.

In addition to the schools, education is provided by three other facilities in Nguiu. There is a juvenile diversionary programme (Youth Development Unit) run by the local council and funded by the Federal Government through NT Police. This has now run for three years and has had some success in providing youth at risk of offending with an alternative community focus as well education of sorts. Its success has been primarily due to the commitment shown by its non-Tiwi manager. There is the Jirnani Child Care Centre which caters for 55 pre-school children and a Health Clinic which monitors the health

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of expectant mothers and newborns. Mothers-to-be are flown to Darwin approximately two weeks prior to the due date in readiness for a hospital delivery. This allows for some immediate parenting education in relation to the health of themselves and their newborns as well as a baseline from which the on-island clinics can monitor the development of each child. The childcare centre concentrates on good nutrition, social and parenting skills with a strong demand for places as well as for after school meals for older children. In the five years of its existence, Jirnani has become a highly regarded model for Aboriginal pre-school education. In 2005, a JET crèche was also funded to commence childcare and pre-school education in Pirlangimpi on Melville Island.

**Aptitude for learning**

The natural aptitude for learning shown by many young Tiwi people is evident to even the casual observer. Good eye contact, the confidence to ask for things (called humbugging when it develops into begging and harassment), quick responses and a great sense of humour make for fascinating conversations. Many Tiwi have excellent hand-eye coordination, motor skills, spatial and observational skills as well as great memories (when not affected by drugs), creativity and tactical abilities. Evidence can be found in their football where almost half the population (men, women and children) played in Aussie Rules rosters in 2004 and the cream are picked off at an early age to play in VFL and AFL teams. Evidence can be found in their 'casinos' where vast number of Tiwi daily play and gamble on their own card game called 'Thirty One' which involves memory and strategy skills similar to bridge. Evidence can be found in conversation with Tiwi people who seem to have their entire genealogical history embedded in their brains, knowing in detail their relationship to almost every other Tiwi person past and present, their skin group, country and spiritual connections. Evidence can be seen when families go hunting (a favourite weekend activity) and have to track the subtle signs of their quarry with sustained concentration and strategy over long periods. Evidence can be seen in the complex designs of their artworks and the hours devoted to the creation of woven baskets, paintings and carvings for personal, ceremonial or commercial purposes. Evidence can be seen in their skills as 'Bush Mechanics' when faced with a car or ute that breaks down far from home or chosen destination. Evidence can be seen in their understanding of the ever-changing legislation in relation to maximising welfare payments and legal aid services to claim such things as victim of crime compensation. Evidence can even be seen in the manipulative way some source the funds to fuel gambling, alcohol or drug addictions. In fact, in the 90 years of occupation by buffalo hunters, missionaries, bureaucrats, teachers, doctors, nurses and tradesmen, the Tiwi people have learned a great deal. The sad part is that they have also learned so much that is undesirable and detrimental to their future survival from the government systems put in place, ostensibly to give them independence from mainstream society.

Some of the attributes that Tiwi people (as a generalisation) seem to have lost or never gained from Western culture are those relating to a Western work ethic which requires reliability, time-management, a commitment to complete set tasks and an understanding of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. By contrast, those Aboriginal people educated in the mainstream communities have shown that they have few difficulties in acquiring these skills, so we cannot blame cultural differences for this gap.

In the Tiwi Islands, one learned belief is about the right to be paid sitting fees or otherwise funded for every function of their lives including taking part in ceremonies, attending social occasions, meetings or joining community councils or committees, all of which has destroyed any sense of community commitment. The Tiwi Land Council has a long established tradition that Land Councillors invited to meet visiting dignitaries and politicians at any kind of social occasion including lunches, opening of community facilities, local community meetings all receive sitting fees of \$100 or more on each occasion regardless of whether it is five minutes or five hours. Any travel and clothing costs are met separately. Formal meetings of any organisation require both sitting fees



and substantial meals to make attendance worthwhile. A decline in the motivation to conduct traditional ceremonies such as Kurlama or 'yam' ceremony at which the elders pass on stories and history to the young men meant that in 2004 (if not previously) the elders who arranged the ceremony were paid handsomely for their efforts. When a Coordinated Development Forum was organised by the Land Council in March 2004 to bring together all the organisations, business interests and community members for a day-long talk fest, there was an outcry when Land Councillors lined up at the end of the day to be paid \$150 for their attendance. At least another 100 Tiwi people from a wide range of other organisations attended without being eligible for financial reward. This expectation was further demonstrated when the Nguiu schools were keen to establish a School Council but could not attract members because there was no pay attached. To the great credit of one young leader, Gawain Tipiloura, a Nguiu School Board was finally established late in 2004 with members who were not paid. However an Education Board for the Tiwi Islands has been subsequently established by the Tiwi Land Council which provides payments for its members (mostly the same elite group that are paid for all the other committees and meetings they attend) which undermined this success. All this makes it very hard for any group or organisation in the communities, including the local football league, to establish an understanding of voluntary community service and commitment.

It seems to me that in the last 100 years, Tiwi people have learned an enormous amount, shown their extraordinary adaptability to circumstances and made the best of a bad situation. Older Tiwi talk fondly of the mission days when they had to go to school if they wanted to be fed or helped, how they learned to read and write in English, how they were sent away to boarding schools and trade apprenticeships and how there was direction and leadership from Tiwi families, elders and church leaders. These same Tiwi now speak despairingly about the lack of respect that children have for their elders, the lack of willingness to attend community meetings, the lack of leadership by the traditional elders and the pervasive use of gambling, drugs and alcohol to occupy the vacuum. They want 'someone' to take charge and make it all better. That 'someone' should be one of themselves but there is such a dependence on external direction, that even hereditary elders do not have the self-confidence or the confidence of their communities to make any impression. The Schools in Nguiu were constantly asking the Community Council to make children go to school, the Community Council was constantly organising community meetings to tell the parents to send their children to school and the parents were constantly demanding that someone else should collect their children each morning, provide breakfast and lunch and provide school uniforms. The frequent community meetings often ended in chaos as the leaders who had been so keen for them to be arranged could not be found to speak and if they were, immediately handed over to the non-Indigenous executives of their organisations to speak about the issue.

### **Current education and employment strategies**

In 2004, the Tiwi Land Councillors decided that they had a role in tackling some of the education issues. There was widespread concern from Tiwi people in all communities about the reasons why the children were not becoming sufficiently educated or motivated to work and why all the well-paid jobs were always in the hands of non-Tiwi contractors and managers. Following the successful establishment of a vast forestry plantation on Melville Island, Tiwi landowners would be receiving a share of the profits from future timber sales and they determined that these funds should be directed to education. (This was separate from the annual lease payments for the land which would be invested in Tiwi Land Trusts and used as desired by the Land Trustees)

Both the Federal and Territory Governments had already invested large sums of money in developing the necessary infrastructure and business environment for the forestry project, always on the premise that this would provide significant employment for Tiwi people and ultimately lead to an 'independent Tiwi economy'. The initial promises of up

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**A 2004 report indicated that although an independent school in the Tiwi Islands was feasible, it would be neither viable nor sustainable unless it formed part or a broader, strategic approach.**

to 400 jobs for Tiwi people eventually were scaled down to 100 jobs and the reality has turned out to be about 10 jobs that have required another heavy investment of government funding for training and mentoring. The commercial imperatives of the forestry business have meant that all the associated support structures including accommodation, catering, mechanical workshops, transport, harvesting, freight, shipping and so on have been contracted out with the transient workforce flown in and out of the community on a roster basis. Between 2001 and 2004, increasing numbers of Tiwi people, especially those in the Melville Island communities, quite rightly became indignant about the apparent lack of any employment, financial return or benefit of any kind for their communities as they progressively saw their country stripped of its woodland and hunting grounds and the development of vast plantations which will ultimately take over one fifth of their island. The main reasons mooted for the lack of Tiwi jobs was the lack of education, skills and work ethic and so it is commendable that the Land Council has decided to return its share of the profits from the timber sales to the foundations of education to remedy the situation.

It was forecast that more than \$1 million could be provided annually from the forestry profits to fund educational improvement. The Land Councillors thought that the best way of improving the educational outcomes of Tiwi Islanders would be to set up their own private K-12 school where children would be taught in English and have the best of facilities, resources and teachers. There would not be a community in any hamlet, town or city anywhere in the world that would not like the same for its children. However, this commendable idealism brings out the cynic in me, not least in the notion that \$1 million or even \$3 million a year, even when combined with a generous share of the government support available for private schools, could sustain such a school on a remote island with a maximum enrolment of no more than 700 children assuming all children from 4-18 years would travel hundreds of kilometres daily across land and water from all communities to such a school. From my own experience I know that to provide a curriculum of sufficient depth and breadth for a successful secondary education requires enrolments from Years 7-12 to be at least 500 and for Years 7-10 to be at least 300 (around 75 students per year group). Add to this the lack of a parent base that would contribute financially in the form of fees or expertise to support a standard curriculum (these are at the foundation of other successful private schools) and the doubts start to sink in. Many Tiwi people also have their heart set on a boarding school that would be established away from the main communities to protect the children from undesirable influences (shades of the stolen generation) and with that would come the need for a whole new community with associated infrastructure including roads, water, sewerage, power and extensive housing for staff and students. Wow! A few million will not go far. However my own main concern comes from the point of view of how such a school can be sustained without a team of extraordinarily talented educators who would need to commit to living remotely for at least five year periods at a time, not flying in and out as so many staff do, working on two or three years contracts, but actually becoming part of the community. Such a team is absolutely vital to the success of any school and a study of schools around the world would show that without exception, where there is an outstanding school, there is such an outstanding team of teachers. Amidst a growing teacher shortage around the country and the difficulties that even Darwin, the nearest city, has in attracting qualified teachers to its secondary schools, I have grave doubts that this Tiwi dream can be realised.

As it turned out, the sensible decision was made by the Tiwi Land Council to employ consultants to carry out an initial feasibility study for the establishment of an independent school on the Tiwi Islands. An excellent report was presented to the Land Council in September 2004 indicating that although such a school was feasible, it would be neither viable nor sustainable unless its establishment forms part or a broader, strategic approach to educational provision in the islands. The consultants note the wide recognition by all the agencies and parties of the need to develop new educational arrangements but that

some very substantial work would be needed for agreement to be reached and that it was not the role of the Land Council to do this. The report covers with great perspicacity the many factors impinging on effective education on the islands and it has been widely circulated to all the interested parties. Sadly, we saw the insular characteristics of all the parties once again emerge. Maybe neither NT Department of Employment, Education and Training nor the Catholic Education Office wanted anyone to upset their applegarts, but more likely they have lacked the will, time and resources to enter into the wider discussion. Other Tiwi organisations, including local government authorities and local school staff, were discouraged from any challenge or interference in Land Council business and so rather than pursue the advice in the report, the Tiwi Land Council proceeded to a decision to set up its own secondary boarding school for Years 7–9 at another location on Melville Island (Pickataramor) with a starting date for Year 7 enrolments in 2006. To do so requires the NT Block Grant Authority to redirect some resources to support the new school and at this juncture, it is understood that this will not be agreed until the matter of primary education standards have been addressed.

### **The future of Tiwi education**

My own strong recommendation to the Tiwi Land Councillors is that they keep the dream alive by committing their hard-won profits from the sacrifice of their land to improvements in primary education on the islands and that support for secondary education be in the form of an education endowment fund that will offer Tiwi students at secondary level the chance to attend established, reputable boarding and day schools elsewhere in Australia. Many high-profile private schools continue to explore options for providing scholarships to Indigenous students who bring a better cultural perspective to their own students and which in turn would provide Indigenous students with a high standard of education without taking the risks and time that would be required to build up a local secondary school to an equivalent standard. It is encouraging to note that the Cape York Institute has already agreed that students must be sent to mainstream secondary schools and become mobile to gain training and work experience.

For those Tiwi not inclined to travel far from home, there is still the opportunity to attend the Darwin secondary schools and continue on to TAFE, vocational programmes and apprenticeships in association with the various contractors on Tiwi projects back on their homelands. The undesirable influences of city living and the lack of Tiwi support in Darwin could be very effectively addressed by the injection of the forestry profits into a Tiwi boarding facility there. There is already the beginning of a Tiwi student support service funded by the Polly Farmer Foundation for students based in Darwin and with increased funding from the Tiwi Land Council, it should be possible to provide a specific Tiwi boarding house where Tiwi houseparents according to skin group take responsibility for student welfare. Many parents would also value a Tiwi base for their own frequent visits to the city.

Finally, there must be better provision for those many students from Years 8–12 who opt out of the education system altogether and who are dependent on the welfare system. These students, 14–18 years old, must be provided with compulsory education, employment and training which focuses on successful parenting (for the many young mothers and fathers in remote communities), literacy, numeracy, computer and job ready skills and encourages them to pursue education and training rather than welfare. Any financial support for themselves or their parents from Centrelink must be firmly tied to their attendance in either the workplace or education institution during these years. Note that these students may not be at 'school' as such but being educated in workplaces as trainees in childcare centres, offices, stores, community maintenance and withdrawn to either the local school or employment and training centres (as already exist in Nguuiu on Bathurst Island) for individually paced study.

Tiwi people, and Aboriginal people generally, cannot afford to lose further generations of young people to educational experiments especially those that include the establishment

**Tiwi people, and Aboriginal people generally, cannot afford to lose further generations of young people to educational experiments.**

of more new schools regardless of whether these are managed by the state, private or systemic education providers. The problems of school attendance, curriculum standards, finding experienced teachers and resources will be the same if the underlying issues are not addressed.

### **Getting it right**

There are many, many professional educators in many, many Aboriginal communities working with exceptional dedication and creativity to get the best results they can but it is time for some fundamental changes.

#### *1. Re-engaging parents as educators of their children*

Parental education is a must. During pregnancy, health clinics are in a prime position to provide both expectant mothers and fathers with ante-natal education classes to establish routines for the new baby. Many Aboriginal parents have lost their traditional child rearing support structures and although health professionals and Aboriginal health workers are now teaching parents about the importance of good nutrition, immunisation, health checks and so on, no one seems to have noticed that parents need even more support to ensure that children receive an education at home that will develop social skills, fine motor skills and basic language and number skills before reaching school age. Being a parent means taking responsibility for your child's health *and* education. The demand for bi-lingual and cultural education in primary schools in the NT has arisen because parents and elders no longer accept that it is their responsibility to teach their children about their language, culture and history. Parents and communities now need assistance to take responsibility during the vital first five years of a child's life. If they choose not to do so, it cannot be expected that schools will make up for the lost time in the limited and precious time available for compulsory school programmes.

#### *2. Providing comprehensive childcare and pre-school education*

The majority of Aboriginal children in remote communities are totally unprepared to start school. Unlike children in mainstream communities, they most probably have not had the benefit of English conversation, childcare services, playgroups, books, educational toys or simple excursions. More importantly, they have not been prepared for the routine of a school day which has regular start and finish times and expects children to have had a good night's sleep and breakfast so they are in a condition to learn. Instead, children may have learned more about domestic violence, gambling, sleepless nights, scavenging for food where they can and the traumas of alcohol and drug abuse. Although many children have acquired local language skills and a cultural context for their lives, the daily routines of their traditional lives which were structured about food gathering and survival strategies have disappeared. A significant proportion of the current education funding in remote communities would be better directed to comprehensive early childhood education for parents and children. The Jirmani Child Care Centre on Bathurst Island has been a beacon of light in this regard and it is a model that should be expanded to ensure that every Aboriginal child has access to a very early childhood education.

#### *3. Linking child welfare benefits to education*

There may be valid concerns about the quality of teaching in some Aboriginal communities but there is a profound problem with the number of students attending school regularly. As put forward by Noel Pearson, Warren Mundine, Helen Hughes, Peter Costello, John Cleary and many others, welfare payments should be linked to school attendance. Whether this is done as an opt-in arrangement for specific regions (Cape York is going this way) or as a universal expectation for all Australian families (my preference) is not so important as how quickly something is done. The child welfare payments that would no longer go to those parents who are failing their children should instead be made available to the local school and/or health clinic to be used specifically to support that

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child with such things as food, clothing, education resources and health services. Time is of the essence and while there is value in local community consultation on many issues, some Federal Government leadership would bring instant results and save the lives and futures of children now.

In the context of the recommendations above about pre-school health and education, this provision could very easily be extended to a requirement for parents to attend health clinic and early education programmes in the vital early years.

For the last three decades, parents in remote communities and low socio-economic neighbourhoods elsewhere have not always been convinced about the necessity of making sure that their children attend school all day every day of the school year. Incentives like 'no school, no pool' programmes in remote communities have had short-term responses but the reality in the Tiwi Islands was that after the first few months, the students had had enough of the pool and in the dry season, considered it too cold to swim anyway, preferring instead to be 'out bush' on school days. The schools also found it hard to administer the tokens effectively at the end of each day, particularly when the kids soon learnt (quick learners as they are) to trade and exchange tokens. Increasing funding for breakfast programmes is short-sighted when the same funds could be used in the pre-school years to teach parents about feeding the family on a budget. Employing truancy officers is a costly waste of funds that could be better used to employ more specialist literacy and numeracy teachers in remote schools. We need to get away from all these short-term incentives and solutions and make some fundamental changes to the system that created the problems in the first place.

#### *4. Putting primary education first*

One of the current major failings in funding Aboriginal education is that so much of the available funding is being devoted to putting things right at the wrong end of the education system. The bulk of the funding must go to pre-school and primary education.

The curriculum must equip children with the literacy, numeracy and other skills necessary to continue successfully to secondary education, post-secondary education, and employment.

All the primary schools on the Tiwi Islands are in a shocking state with inadequate, aged, asbestos-ridden classrooms, disgusting washing and toilet facilities (often not working at all) and few modern resources, let alone the properly maintained canteens, computer networks, libraries and transport expected in mainstream Australian primary schools. Teachers are stressed by the violence in the communities and in their classrooms, isolated and ignored by their education providers, and lacking community support in relation to student attendance. The introduction of MAP testing across all schools in Australia is a useful tool in identifying those schools and students that are not up to scratch, but much more effort is needed to ensure that teachers have the chance to teach in remote communities. Students must be required to attend school on a regular basis and more specialist support staff must be recruited to assist and protect the classroom teachers. School buildings and facilities in remote communities need major upgrading to the standard expected in mainstream towns but more importantly, there must be regular cleaning and maintenance programmes. For example, much of the school cleaning in the Tiwi Island communities is supplied by Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP) participants without training, supervision or standards to ensure that the job is actually done. Schools elsewhere have properly funded contract cleaners or fulltime caretakers and grounds staff. Even where a particular local resident has the ability to work independently, there is rarely an opportunity to progress into fully funded employment with the education provider in Aboriginal communities. There are numerous employment opportunities in remote communities but because of the lack of a work ethic, very few residents have access to the available jobs. The solution to this dilemma requires urgent changes in CDEP, Centrelink and Job Network policies so that these organisations also take a greater responsibility for educating and training their clients.

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A final word of caution about those Federal/State/Territory education providers who enter into discussions with local communities about education and offer desperate communities the chance to run their own schools using words such as community-controlled or charter school. This is a great way of actually abrogating responsibility and limiting funds in a way that would not happen in a mainstream town or community. There is little chance that the community members would have the administration or educational skills to manage the complexities of a modern school without the support of a mainstream education provider and little chance that in a competitive education market that they would be able to attract the quality teachers they desire.

*5. Supporting teachers and students through 'twinning' relationships*

Staff turnover in remote Aboriginal communities must be reduced. Teachers themselves will say that better housing, better salaries and other financial incentives would be a good start but even these will not keep teachers in small, isolated communities if there is no professional or personal support. Pre-service and in-service programmes, external courses and additional support and specialist staff are all strategies worthy of extension and funding. One other strategy should be considered: mainstream schools in all states of Australia, and particularly in the private sector, are showing an increasing commitment to Aboriginal studies and reconciliation. A significant number offer scholarships for Indigenous students but there would be even greater benefits if schools could be encouraged to develop 'twinning' relationships in remote communities where staff can offer exchanges and mentoring support to the often young but certainly isolated teachers in the community and assist with curriculum developments, resources and communications between students. Although most of the partnerships would be with primary schools, the greatest benefit would be gained from links with K-10 or K-12 schools so that student exchanges and mentoring in the high school years could develop into continuing personal links for individual students. For this strategy to be successful, there would need to be a commitment from education providers to encourage every school to have an identified 'twin'. My experience in trying to set up something with one of the Tiwi schools with my former school in Hobart showed me that it will not work if it is dependent on just one enthusiastic teacher on the ground in the community. For remote schools to benefit, the provider needs to ensure that the 'twinning' relationship is a recognised part of the school structure so that when the enthusiast inevitably leaves the community, the mentoring and exchange system endures.

*6. Offering structured scholarship programmes for secondary education*

The reality for all children living in remote, rural and regional Australian communities is that it is not possible to provide effective secondary education if there is no access to an extensive curriculum, quality facilities and specialist staff. Most remote Aboriginal communities simply do not have the numbers of secondary-school aged children to warrant their own secondary school. Those highly educated Aboriginal leaders speaking out now about the changes needed have almost all acquired their education in mainstream schools and towns. What is now needed is a scholarship and support system to allow many more Aboriginal children from remote communities to attend larger boarding or day schools in regional centres. Just as previously suggested, the isolation from family and community that causes much distress to Aboriginal children can be addressed by more culturally appropriate boarding facilities in towns. Similarly, a 'twinning' relationship with another school will lend itself to ensuring there are ongoing links to support scholarship students who might opt for fulltime education in a 'twin' school that offers K-12 education.

*7. Mandating work experience and apprenticeship opportunities*

It should be compulsory for all community business enterprises that receive government funding of any kind to offer short-term work experience as well as longer-term training

and apprenticeships for local people in remote communities. There is a lot of talk in the media and public forums about the lack of employment opportunities in remote communities, but this is simply not so. There are dozens of jobs at all skill levels in even the smallest community. The real problem at present is that they are nearly always occupied by better-educated non-Indigenous staff brought in on contracts. In this context, better educated means having a better work ethic so that there is some guarantee that the work (whether managing a local office, providing healthcare, building houses, project work or simply community maintenance) is actually done. Any parent will understand the tendency to think that it is easier to do the job yourself than to teach your children to do it, but unfortunately this has become the prevailing paradigm for remote communities. The only way to shift the current paradigm of dependency to one of responsibility and commitment is to implement policies that put the onus on residents to work and on employers to train.

Private enterprises have to negotiate leases with Land Councils to operate their businesses on Aboriginal lands, and it is up to Land Councils to be much stronger about demanding training and employment opportunities from those gaining access to their lands. More specifically, it is surprising that Tiwi leaders have not demanded that the administrators of the Tiwi Land Council and Tiwi Islands Training and Employment Board, both comfortably based in offices in Darwin, employ a number of Tiwi trainees in their own offices in addition to the requirement for forestry and aquaculture training in the private enterprises on their lands.

### **Conclusion**

Aboriginal people know that they are being disadvantaged and consigned to a life on welfare by present education policies and systems but are often powerless to speak out because they simply cannot communicate effectively with the English-speaking world. This must change. Education is everything. Education is everyone's responsibility. Education is a lifelong commitment. Parents, children, employers, community members and governments must accept their respective responsibilities and not simply expect teachers to perform miracles in remote communities and elsewhere. Federal, State and Territory governments can no longer sideline Aboriginal communities by undertaking reviews, community consultations, inquiries, or offering short-term programmes and soft options to support individual schools and communities. Education providers can no longer short-change schools in remote communities or ignore their need for modern facilities simply because they are out of sight and out of mind. All the other issues—including improvements to infrastructure, teaching standards and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people—would follow.

**Education is everything. Education is everyone's responsibility. Education is a lifelong commitment.**

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