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Having it 'both ways': the continuing complexities of community-controlled Indigenous education

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ABSTRACT

The recent National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1995) called for research and analysis of the immediate and long-term complexities of building community-controlled education for Indigenous Australians. As noted in that Review, too little is known about this potential avenue for Indigenous education. This paper explores some of the issues in Indigenous self-determination in education through a focus on independent community-controlled Indigenous schools. After establishing the historical and policy context for the emergence of community control in education, the paper provides an overview of data related to location, enrolment, staffing and curricula in 20 independent Aboriginal schools and explores the philosophical movement that underpins many independent schools: 'both ways' education. The paper addresses specific and general policy issues related to community-controlled education in the light of recent research suggesting limited support among Indigenous people for independent schools.

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In 1988 the Ministers for Employment, Education and Training and Aboriginal Affairs appointed members of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force. This body was charged with preparing recommendations that would shape the body of the government's future Indigenous education policy.

In the preface to the final report, Paul Hughes, the Chair of the Task Force, foreshadowed what was to remain one of the most significant issues in Indigenous education:

> Perhaps the most challenging issue of all is to ensure education is available to all Aboriginal people in a manner that reinforces rather than suppresses their unique cultural identity. The imposition on Aboriginal people of an education system developed to meet the needs of the majority cultural group does not achieve this. Therefore the government must commit itself to providing education opportunities to Aboriginal people regardless of where they live, and in a manner that is appropriate to the diverse cultural and social situations in which they live (Hughes 1988: 2).

The provision of education 'in a manner that is appropriate to the diverse cultural and social situations' in which Indigenous Australians live remains one of the crucial challenges in Commonwealth education policy.

Looking back over nearly 25 years, it is possible to see a clear evolution of Commonwealth policy that has promoted educational equity, access, participation and involvement by Indigenous Australians (Schwab 1995). Self-determination has been the foundation of that policy. Responsibility has been devolved, parental and community involvement encouraged and organisational structures reconfigured to accommodate the needs of Indigenous people. Yet, in terms of educational policy at the national level, it is fair to ask to what degree self-determination has been a priority and where and how it has taken root.

One of the logical solutions to the problem of meeting the diverse needs of Indigenous Australians through appropriate education would be to ensure that the policy of self-determination is manifest in allowing Indigenous communities to develop and control their own education. In this light, self-determination would imply the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to create and run schools that serve their particular needs but, as will be explored below, this is not a simple issue.

The recent National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples calls for 'research and analysis of the immediate and long-term complexities of building community-controlled education' (Yunupingu 1995: 26). As the Review notes, not enough is known about this potential avenue for Indigenous education. This paper is intended to contribute to that endeavour and sets out to explore the issue of self-determination in Indigenous education through a focus on one stronghold

of self-determination, the independent community-controlled Indigenous school. Beginning with a brief examination of the historical and current policy context for these independent schools, the paper provides an overview of Australia's independent community-controlled Indigenous schools and provides some data related to their locations, enrolments, staffing and curricula. Next, it examines the practical and philosophical movement that underpins many of these schools – 'two-way' education. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of recent research indicating limited support for community-controlled education among Indigenous Australians and makes a series of recommendations for future policy.

Aboriginal education policy

Until the early 1970s, there were few discussions of Indigenous education policy at the national level. Aboriginal welfare was a matter for the States and there was little consideration of the notion that Indigenous people might want to shape, influence or control education for their children or themselves. In many places, 'Native schools', run either by the States or missionaries, focused on bringing Indigenous children into the dominant society. In an otherwise sympathetic and earnest survey of Aboriginal education in the late 1940s, Beckenham identifies some of the structural problems in the educational system and reflects in his own attitude the perceptions of the period:

> Curricula and teacher-training reveal little real effort to consider the Black as a person fundamentally different than the White. They make equality of educational opportunity identical with equal educational pablum.... The Black child's education is jeopardised by a colour consciousness that is unworthy of any democracy, and that frustrates the best intentioned efforts of enlightened teachers, missionaries and government departments in their efforts to educate the Black child for useful living in a White continent (Beckenham 1948: 46).

Just what 'useful living' might involve is left to the reader, but Beckenham's words reflect the assumptions of the day in recognising difference yet conceiving of education as a tool for overcoming its handicap. Quite clearly, education was perceived as a mechanism for assisting in the inevitable assimilation of Indigenous people into 'White' society.

With the election of the Labor Government in 1972, the assimilation policy of the previous generation was displaced by the Commonwealth government policy of Aboriginal self-determination. This policy was a conscious attempt by the Labor Government to move beyond the assimilationist policies of the past and foreshadowed tremendous change. At the heart of the policy was the proposition that Indigenous Australians have a right to make their own decisions about their future. The implications of this policy for education were soon apparent.

In the first major Indigenous education policy exercise of this period, a national review of Aboriginal education was conducted for the Schools Commission. Comprising Indigenous Australians from around the country, the Aboriginal Consultative Group (ACG) responsible for the review wrote that they saw education 'as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination' (ACG 1975: 3). One of their most significant recommendations was for the establishment of independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary and secondary schools, and a handful of such schools were created.

Thirteen years later, another group was formed to review the state of Indigenous education and advise the Commonwealth on future policy. The Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force was clear in its message to the government that self-determination in education is essential if Indigenous people are to overcome social disadvantage:

> ... a new approach to Aboriginal education can only succeed if the Aboriginal community is fully involved in determining the policies and programs that are intended to provide appropriate education for their community. This means that government will need to establish a framework which enables Aboriginal people to effectively exercise their right to self-determination in education (Hughes 1988: 2).

Among its recommendations was continued government support for Aboriginal independent schools.

The report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force laid the foundation for a comprehensive policy on Indigenous education, and in 1989, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) was endorsed jointly by all State and Territory governments; it came into effect on 1 January 1990.

While the AEP strongly emphasised Indigenous access, participation and equity in the mainstream educational system, it was strangely silent about alternative and Indigenous community-controlled education initiatives. It appeared that the policy trajectory toward self-determination, so prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, veered suddenly and silently off course.

When a National Review of the AEP was instituted in 1993, the Reference Group for the Review called for submissions and commissioned an independent review of literature related to the policy. The review of literature identified a series of important criticisms of the policy. Prominent among them was the view that the AEP heralded a shift from an emphasis on self-determination in Indigenous education, as recommended since the early 1970s, to a much weaker promotion of self-management, participation and involvement (Bin-Sallik et al. 1994). The distinction between these two emphases is important. While the first promotes independence and self-direction, the second suggests accommodation by

Indigenous people to the mainstream system. This contrast between self-determination and self-management is particularly important in discussions of equity.[1]

Equity and self-determination

The achievement of educational equity for Indigenous Australians was a prominent theme in the AEP Review. While there was no question that improvements in education had occurred as a result of the AEP, the Reference Group agreed that there was still a long way to go. Interestingly, the submissions to the Review suggested that equity in education held a variety of meanings for people, and the variations in interpretation illustrated contrasting understandings of the problem and suggested fundamentally different solutions. The AEP Review (Yunupingu 1995: 14-16) highlights three disparate views of how to increase the equity of educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians, each with particular assumptions about who might design and implement changes. These views are held not only by politicians and educational bureaucrats but represent views held more broadly in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

According to the first view, equity for Indigenous students can best be achieved through their own adaptation to the 'mainstream'. Equity is ultimately the responsibility of individuals and will only result from individual effort. Underlying this view is the belief that Indigenous students must lift their performance to the level of other Australians. While most proponents of this view realise the need to address structural disadvantage and historical legacy in order to 'level the playing field' the onus is on the individual to take advantage of equal opportunities and – to continue the metaphor – 'lift their game'. Critics of this view claim the mainstream approach is simply assimilationist.

The second perspective holds that lower levels of educational performance are not simply an outcome of inadequate individual effort but are related to cultural factors that need to be taken into account in addressing inequity. For example, it may be that differences in Indigenous 'learning styles' affect performance and teachers need to develop appropriate teaching strategies for varied learning styles. Yet this perspective assumes that Indigenous students can and should attain the same educational outcomes as other Australians. According to this view, the existing educational system should promote increases in cultural awareness and sensitivity and should look for solutions which accommodate cultural differences in ways that will enhance the educational performance of Indigenous Australians.

The third view diverges dramatically from the first two and explicitly questions the assumption that there is a single set of educational outcomes

that are applicable or even desirable for all Australians. More specifically, it suggests that an individual's or community's performance can only be assessed against a set of particular educational outcomes if those outcomes are defined by the community. Thus, different outcomes are not only appropriate but the opportunity for Indigenous communities to define them as such is essential.[2]

Manifest in educational structures, methods and philosophies, these contrasting views take starkly different forms. It is useful to imagine a continuum of schools. At one end stands a State-funded mainstream school with a standardised, core curriculum (determined by the State or Territory education department), teaching towards a set of predefined outcomes and employing standardised evaluation and assessment tools to measure the performance of all students; Indigenous students not performing to 'standard' may receive remedial assistance. In the middle stands a State school with a range of special programs for Indigenous students, Indigenous liaison staff and Aboriginal studies components of the curriculum for all students. Culturally sensitive and embracing 'difference', this school strives to find culturally appropriate avenues to encourage academic excellence among Indigenous students. At the other end of the continuum is an independent, non-government, community-controlled Indigenous school, free of the constraints of the State education system. It is funded by the Commonwealth government and may be topped-up by local resources. In this school, curriculum is shaped by the community and outcomes defined in the context of the community's unique interests and needs. The majority of Australian schools, of course, are somewhere between the first two types but, in terms of self-determination, the independent community-controlled Indigenous school is the place where the vision can take its purest form. Yet there are actually very few of these schools and relatively little is known about them.

Independent community-controlled Indigenous schools[3]

In 1994, there were 83,411 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in primary and secondary schools in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1994: 27). Of that number, only 1,350 (1.6 per cent) were enrolled in independent community-controlled Indigenous schools. Most Indigenous students attended government schools (88.0 per cent) or Catholic schools (8.5 per cent) while the remaining students were enrolled in other non-government schools (1.9 per cent).[4]

In 1994 there were 20 independent community-controlled Indigenous schools in Australia. These schools were distributed among the States of Western Australia (12), Queensland (4), New South Wales (1), Victoria (1) and the Northern Territory (2). Six of the schools were primary schools, five secondary, and the remaining nine had both primary and secondary

students. Enrolments of Indigenous students in individual schools ranged from 21 to 206 students with a mean of 62 students per school. The two schools with the smallest enrolments were in Western Australia (21 and 24 students) while the two schools with the largest enrolments were in the Northern Territory (206 and 121 students). Most of the schools (17) had only Indigenous students while three included a small number of non-Indigenous students (15.0 per cent, 8.3 per cent and 2.5 per cent).

Table 1. Independent community-controlled Indigenous schools: distribution of Indigenous primary and secondary students by sex and State, 1994.

		Primary students					
		Male		Female		Total	
State	No. of schools	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
New South Wales	1	15	45.5	18	54.5	33	4.7
Northern Territory	2	62	51.2	59	48.8	121	17.1
Queensland	4	62	48.4	66	51.6	128	18.1
Victoria	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Western Australia	12	212	50.0	212	50.0	424	60.1
Subtotal		351	49.7	355	50.3	706	100.0
		Secondary students					
		Male		Female		Total	
State	No. of schools	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
New South Wales	1	13	43.3	17	56.7	30	4.7
Northern Territory	2	103	50.0	103	50.0	206	32.0
Queensland	4	90	59.6	61	40.4	151	23.4
Victoria	1	22	44.9	27	55.1	49	7.6
Western Australia	12	98	47.1	110	52.9	208	32.3
Subtotal		326	50.6	318	49.4	644	100.0
Total	20	677	50.1	673	49.9	1,350	100.0

Source: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), unpublished school census, 1994.

The dramatic fall-off of Indigenous students at the secondary levels is widely viewed as a major crisis in Indigenous education (Groome and Hamilton 1995; Yunupingu 1995). Table 1 shows the number and State/Territory distribution of independent community-controlled Indigenous schools and the enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by sex and level (primary or secondary) for 1994. In the 20 schools, there was a total of 706 (52.2 per cent) primary and 664

(49.2 per cent) secondary students. These findings are quite different from those revealed by the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) in 1994. The NATSIS figures for students attending all types of schools indicate a higher proportion in primary school (64.2 per cent) and a lower proportion in secondary school (32.1 per cent), and 3.7 per cent attending combined primary/secondary schools. Though neither of these sets of figures purports to show retention, there is some suggestion that, in comparison to government schools, independent community-controlled Indigenous schools may increase the retention levels of secondary students. This would parallel the higher senior secondary retention rates of non-government schools in general.[5] Additional data, showing secondary retention rates over time in independent community-controlled Indigenous schools, are required to conclude if such schools are associated with increased secondary retention. Overall, the proportion of male to female students in the 20 independent community-controlled Indigenous schools for all States was 49.7 per cent male to 50.3 per cent female at the primary level and 50.6 per cent male to 49.4 per cent female at the secondary level.[6]

It is widely assumed that Indigenous school staff are an important ingredient for the academic success of Indigenous children. Of a total of 465.5 school staff in the 20 schools in 1994, 203.5 (43.7 per cent) were non-Indigenous and the remaining 262 (56.3 per cent) were Indigenous.[7] The number of independent community-controlled Indigenous schools is very small for some of the States and thus comparing percentages is problematic, especially for New South Wales and Victoria where there is only one school in each and two schools in the Northern Territory. With this caution in mind, it is interesting to consider the patterns in States with higher numbers of schools. In Western Australia, with 12 schools, 70.0 per cent of the staff are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In Queensland, on the other hand, with four schools, 60.3 per cent of school staff are Indigenous.

Figures on the permanent and temporary status of school staff show a clear difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. In the 20 independent community-controlled Indigenous schools, 91.9 per cent of the non-Indigenous staff hold permanent positions, while only 72.1 per cent of Indigenous staff are employed as permanent staff. Conversely, 27.9 per cent of Indigenous school staff are temporary employees, as opposed to only 8.1 per cent of non-Indigenous staff.

Table 2 allows a closer examination of the actual roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in these schools. It shows the number and percentage of Indigenous staff in the independent community-controlled Indigenous schools for each State. The roles as defined by DEETYA include: administration, teacher, secretarial, researcher liaison and community. Those individuals identified as responsible for school

'administration' include educational administrators and non-teaching principals. 'Teacher' includes those staff who are qualified teachers with responsibilities for students. The 'secretarial' role includes secretarial workers, administrative and other general support staff, while 'researcher' includes staff classified as researchers, resource officers and curriculum advisors. 'Liaison' staff is broadly defined to include liaison officers, teaching assistants and other school-based education workers. The final staff role, 'community', includes those individuals from the local community employed to teach Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture, history or languages.

Table 2. Independent community-controlled Indigenous schools: distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff by role and full-time/part-time status, 1994.

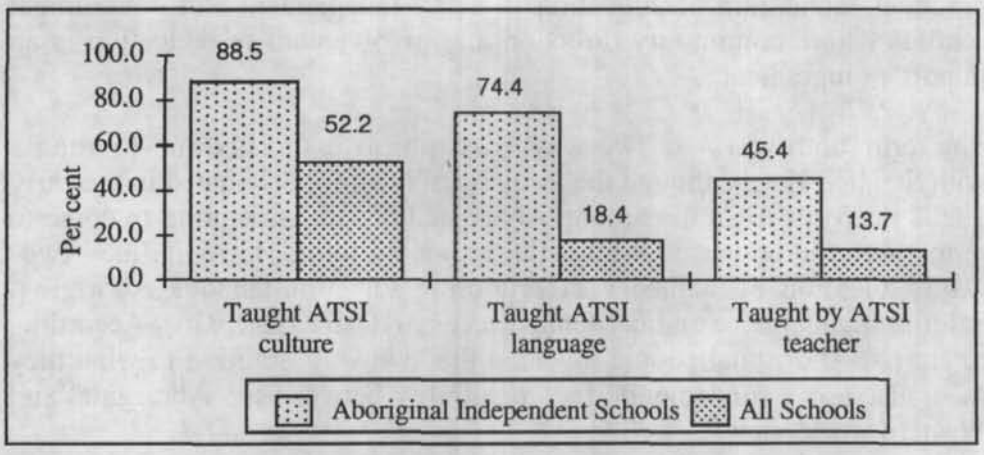
	Full-time staff		Part-time staff		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Administration	13	86.7	2	13.3	15	5.5
Teacher	27	58.7	19	41.3	46	17.0
Secretarial	39	77.2	11.5	22.8	50.5	18.6
Research	5	83.3	1	16.7	6	2.2
Liaison	74	83.6	14.5	16.4	88.5	32.7
Community	10	15.4	55	84.6	65	24.0
Total	168	62.0	103	38.0	271	100

Source: DEETYA, unpublished reports from independent Aboriginal schools, 1994.

What is most immediately striking about Table 2 is the relatively small number of Indigenous teachers. When all the independent community-controlled Indigenous schools in all the States are taken as a group, less than one in five (17.0 per cent) Indigenous staff are employed as teachers. Again, the small numbers make comparisons between individual States difficult to interpret, but in Queensland, for example, where there are four schools, there are two administrators and nine teachers; Western Australia, with 12 schools, has 35 teachers and nine administrators. Looking at the distribution of roles across all schools, it is clear that the majority of Indigenous staff are involved in activities that are, according to traditional models of education, outside the realm of primary educational responsibility. Only 22.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff work as teachers or administrators. Research, liaison and community workers comprise 58.9 per cent. Such staff positions are relatively recent inventions and, while clearly valuable, they are not typically positions staffed by individuals with academic qualifications. Consequently, they are not positions with much room for advancement or likelihood of permanency.

At this level of analysis it is impossible to adequately describe the various curricular approaches used in independent community-controlled Indigenous schools, but the available data do afford an overview of the teaching of Indigenous languages and culture as part of a school's curriculum. Of the 20 independent community-controlled Indigenous schools, 17 (85.0 per cent) report the provision of Indigenous history or culture instruction in some form. On the other hand, 13 (65.0 per cent) taught an Indigenous language either as a special course or as the main language of instruction. Though these figures apply to schools rather than individual students, it is interesting to compare these figures to those for individual students collected as part of NATSIS in 1994.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling by type of school attended, Australia, 1994.



Source: Adapted from ABS, NATSIS, 1994.

According to that survey (Figure 1), 88.5 per cent of the Indigenous students in Aboriginal independent schools were taught Indigenous culture (as opposed to 52.2 per cent of Indigenous students in all types of schools). Of the Indigenous students attending Aboriginal independent schools, NATSIS found that 74.4 per cent were taught an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language (compared to only 18.4 per cent for Indigenous students in all types of schools). According to NATSIS, Indigenous teachers provided instruction to 45.4 per cent of Indigenous students in Aboriginal independent schools, compared to only 13.7 per cent for all schools. Though data are not available to compare the experience of individual students in independent community-controlled Indigenous schools with their counterparts in Aboriginal independent or other schools, it can be said that, except for the two Northern Territory schools that reported no Indigenous teachers, all of the other 18 schools employed such

teachers. However, given the high numbers of community workers employed by all of the schools, it is likely that students in these three schools were also taught by Indigenous teachers. Clearly, Indigenous students in independent schools are far more likely to learn about Indigenous culture and learn Indigenous languages than are their counterparts in other types of Australian schools; their chances of receiving that instruction from an Indigenous teacher are also much greater.

Independent schools and 'both ways' education

In its promotion of research and analysis into community-controlled education, the National Review's recommendation 35 calls for additional funding for innovative proposals for, among other things, trials of the local delivery of 'both ways' education. Though there is much debate over this approach, 'both ways' education provides much of the philosophical and practical foundation of education in many independent and government schools where community direction and involvement in education is an important ingredient.

The term 'both ways' or 'two-way' education is associated most strongly with Stephen Harris, though the idea appears to have originated in the early 1970s in North Australia among Aboriginal people attempting to come to terms with the power of White educational systems. Harris defines 'two-way' education as 'a theory of schooling for simultaneous Aboriginal cultural maintenance and academic success' (Harris 1990: xiii). According to Harris, Aboriginal people invented the 'two-way' solution to what they recognised as a fundamental incompatibility between the Aboriginal and Western world views:

> ... they seemed to be saying that if the two worlds are, indeed, so very different, then the job of schooling was not to try to teach only the dominant world, or to merely teach in two languages for that matter, but to teach children how to maintain their primary identity in the Aboriginal world while becoming competent and confident in both worlds (1994: 142).

Thus, the achievement of competence in both worlds should be the ultimate aim of Indigenous education. According to Harris, 'two-way' education is underpinned by a series of fundamental orientations or principles (Harris 1994: 143-44). First, 'two-way' schools are organised around two separate systems or domains: the Western and the Aboriginal. While operating in the Western domain, Indigenous children are subject to Western structures and approaches and Western content; in the Aboriginal domain, the culture of the students comes to the fore and learning is shaped by Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning. The ideal outcome of this separation is facility with the content and teaching/learning styles of both – Aboriginal people with two distinct sets of cultural skills.

Second, Harris defines 'two-way' schools as controlled by local Aboriginal people. In such schools, the idea and subsequent development of 'two-way' schooling originates with local Aboriginal people and is owned and controlled by them. In this sense, educational control begins and remains with the community; education is bottom-up, not top-down.

Third, administrative structures and processes in 'two-way' schools are essentially Aboriginal, not Western. Thus, the Aboriginal style of the school is reflected in an Aboriginal way of doing things on the administrative as well as the instructional levels; the Aboriginal community administers and manages the school, not a remote 'central office'.

Fourth, the Western domain of education is not presented as neutral or equivalent to the Aboriginal domain but as an alien system to be analysed critically rather than identified with. According to Harris, Aboriginal students need not only to become aware of the Western content of what is being taught but they also need to develop confidence in playing out the non-Indigenous roles and applying skills and concepts in order to gain facility and ability to negotiate with the Western system. Through this approach, studying the Western domain is a process not of, but against, assimilation.

Finally, the teaching of both domains is necessarily and strongly contextualised. In Harris' words, 'schools as far as possible should do Aboriginal things in Aboriginal ways in Aboriginal contexts for Aboriginal reasons' (Harris 1994: 144). The priority in the Aboriginal domain is to strengthen identity and maintain Aboriginal culture, not to imitate the structures and approaches of the Western domain.

On the ground, 'both ways' education looks markedly different from mainstream education. Leadership and ownership comes from the community, not the State or regional education system. Aboriginal people – staff, parents and unschooled elders – control and participate in both domains of teaching. Non-Aboriginal teachers, on the other hand, assume the role of consultant to the community and work to priorities set by Aboriginal people in the community, a radical departure from traditional schooling. The non-Indigenous teacher is charged with teaching the aspects of the Western curriculum the school council has endorsed, making the 'hidden' part of the Western curriculum explicit and specific, trusting Aboriginal people in or out of school to maintain Aboriginal culture and supporting them where asked to (Harris 1993: 8-9).

The curriculum of a 'both ways' school provides instruction in both the Aboriginal and Western domains. The Western domain of the curriculum focuses on the 'three Rs' as technical skills for mainstream subjects and pathways to Western resources for those who want to pursue them. The

approach is fairly formal, with fully qualified teachers (accredited by the Western educational system), in Western-style classrooms, teaching according to negotiated timetables. In contrast, the Aboriginal domain of the curriculum focuses on Aboriginal identity, tradition and language. The overall approach is flexible and the curriculum is taught by trained Aboriginal teachers and local adults expert in specific knowledge and skills, in classrooms and other locations and on excursions as community activities allow. In this context, teaching is organised according to culturally appropriate timetables. According to Harris and other proponents of 'both ways' education, this approach is the only effective model for promoting academic success for Indigenous students while protecting and nurturing the traditional culture.

What is described above is an idealised version and one which focuses on the philosophy and orientation of such schools. In practice, there is – as one would expect – variation in administration, teaching and curriculum from place to place. Though most 'both ways' schools are in remote areas where English is not the first (or sometimes even the second or third) language, the philosophical approach has influenced schools and Indigenous communities across the country. The key is community control: in these schools, parents and community members shape the curriculum, hire the teachers, and control the school.[8] Presumably, this is what was envisaged in the recommendation of the National Review.

Community control in education: what do people want?

NATSIS included a series of questions related to education. In a result that surprised many, the survey showed that nearly 86 per cent of Indigenous parents were 'happy' with their children's education (Table 3). The same survey indicated that 48 per cent of Indigenous people sampled preferred not to send their children to an Indigenous community-controlled school; only 33 per cent would have preferred to send their children to such schools. The responses in each of these cases are remarkably consistent with responses in the three main geographical categories: 'capital cities', 'other urban' or 'rural' locations. Similarly, a 1995 study undertaken by the Schools Council focusing on the needs of Aboriginal adolescents (Groome and Hamilton 1995), and the recent Review of the New Schools Policy (DEET 1995), found little interest in such schools among Indigenous Australians.

On the surface, these findings conflict with what is commonly assumed about Indigenous education: given the choice, Indigenous people prefer to send their children to their 'own schools'. Indeed, community control in various forms has long been promoted by influential educational theorists such as Freire (1982), Apple (1982) and Giroux (1983) as the solution to the problem of comparatively poor academic performance and retention for

disadvantaged people the world over. Many Indigenous Australians hold similar beliefs and calls for Indigenous Australia to take control of its own education reach back to the earliest days of the self-determination policy (ACG 1975). According to this view, Indigenous students gain strength and pride in independent community-controlled schools as well as critical insights and skills with which they are better able to change the dominant society. Thus, community control of education provides, in the terms of Freire, the best pathway to empowerment and emancipation.[9]

Table 3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons with children attending primary or secondary school: attitudes to schooling by part-of-State, Australia, 1994.

Attitudes to children's schooling	Part-of-State (Per cent) Capital city	Other urban	Rural	Total
Whether happy with education children are receiving at school				
Happy with education	80.8	85.2	90.6	85.8
Not happy with education	15.6	9.0	7.5	10.3
Don't know/not stated	3.6	5.8	1.9	4.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Whether preferred to send children to Aboriginal community-controlled school				
Would have preferred	34.8	32.7	32.4	33.2
Would not have preferred	51.7	50.8	41.2	48.0
Already attends	1.8	3.4	15.4	6.8
Don't know/not stated	11.8	13.1	11.0	12.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Adapted from ABS, NATSIS, 1994.

Though independent community-controlled schools would appear to provide a sensible solution to the racism and discrimination Indigenous students often meet in 'mainstream' schools, NATSIS and other research raises a series of questions about the desirability of that solution from an Indigenous perspective. While it might be tempting, in consideration of these findings, to simply dismiss independent community-controlled schools as an educational option with little support in the Indigenous community, that would be to misunderstand a complex and important issue that merits much closer consideration. There is a range of alternative explanations for these results that are worthy of careful consideration.

First, many Indigenous people have invested heavily in local schools and they and their children have experienced positive changes in mainstream education. In some cases, individuals have overcome apartheid, racism and

discrimination and they now feel part of the school community. After many years, the needs of Indigenous students are finally being addressed and increasing numbers of Indigenous parents and community members are participating in local decision-making processes. Taking the option of sending a child to an independent Indigenous school would signal a withdrawal from the wider educational community at a time when many are feeling for the first time that they are partners in the system.

Second, the notion of a community-controlled Indigenous school may not as yet be completely understood in many communities. There are actually very few examples of such schools across the country to provide models to emulate, a situation that is no less true in urban areas than in remote regions. While the idea of an independent community-controlled school may sound appealing in the abstract, the process of actually getting one off the ground is an expensive and daunting task. It may be that few people view the prospect as a realistic one in their communities at this time.

Third, if a community-controlled school does exist in the region, logistical considerations may remain an important consideration for any parent. It could well be that a parent would only express a preference to send a child to such a school if the family lived within easy access to the school, a statistical improbability for the majority at present. This may be a particularly important issue for parents of primary school children. In general, parents in Australia tend to look positively on their local primary schools, and twice as many children of respondents to NATSIS were enrolled in primary (64 per cent) as in secondary schools (32 per cent). Thus, it is not surprising to find that most Indigenous families express a preference for the local government school.

Fourth, the concept of community control is a culturally loaded one that requires close examination. What exactly does that phrase 'Aboriginal community-controlled school' mean to people? Many Indigenous communities have long-standing experience with community-controlled institutions which are in fact factionally controlled. A local medical or legal service, for example, is often heavily influenced by particular families, clans or factions and access to the resources and services of such institutions is often complex and riddled with conflict. The idea of a community-controlled school may conjure up visions of yet another potentially difficult political arena where factions vie for influence over resources which are ostensibly those of the wider community.

Fifth, while the notion of community control is a crucial element of policies of self-determination, and community-controlled institutions and enterprises are prominent in Indigenous communities across the country, there is something special about Indigenous peoples' perceptions of schooling that should be considered. For many members of the Indigenous

community, the idea of a separate Indigenous school harks back to mission and boarding schools and there remains tremendous ambivalence about such schools. Though there are exceptions, and some Indigenous Australians prize the education they secured in such institutions, for many these schools are remembered as a form of educational apartheid. For those individuals, separate schools were second-class schools, with second-class teachers, for second-class citizens. It may be that some individuals equate Aboriginal community-controlled schools with those institutions and so they prefer to see their children take their places in the classrooms alongside other Australians.

Finally, if Indigenous parents express reluctance to support Indigenous community-controlled schools, it is possible that they are not yet convinced that such institutions provide a better educational outcome. To date, there is little accumulated evidence that the academic outcomes are better than in mainstream schools. While there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the supportive environment of such schools encourages academic success, there may not yet be sufficient evidence for Indigenous parents to judge.

These various explanations for why Indigenous Australians may have reservations about independent community-controlled schools begin to highlight the complexity of the issue. Clearly, there is tremendous diversity within and between Indigenous communities and to assume a unity in perception and interest is misguided and naive. It is unrealistic to anticipate that a single solution to the varying needs and conflicting interests will ever be found; a variety of different approaches and solutions will be necessary.

Community, control and policy

If many Indigenous Australians are indeed sceptical of the path of empowerment through educational separation, that scepticism may be tempered by a strong belief that they can 'make it' in the mainstream educational system. Obviously, many Indigenous Australians believe emancipation can be had through mainstream institutions and cite positive outcomes from such schools. Yet community control of schools has remained a prominent issue and, in some communities, has become an important symbol of the struggle for acknowledgment of the validity of Indigenous culture. Clearly, community control of education raises thorny questions and reveals deep tensions within some Indigenous communities.

Ideology versus pedagogy

The major challenge for those concerned with policy decisions regarding independent community-controlled Indigenous schools is to disentangle ideology from pedagogy. Where there is dissatisfaction with the existing

educational system and a legacy of racism and poor educational outcomes, there is a range of logical avenues of action. For example, individuals or communities may choose to resist the system without attempting to change it. Alternatively, some may seek to work from within the existing system and refashion it so that it better suits the needs and interests of the community. Still other members of the community may choose to withdraw their children from an existing school and create their own community-controlled school. Acting on these choices requires varying degrees of political sophistication, commitment and experience. While there is, for many Indigenous communities, an obvious ideological attraction to the notion of community control of education, this is not simply an ideological choice. Communities also need to understand the pedagogical costs and benefits of the choices they make, and there is a stark absence of data to indicate the pedagogical success or failure of such schools. In simple terms, do independent community-controlled schools deliver? Do they address and provide for the needs of the community?

This, of course, only begs the question of what the aim of education for Indigenous Australians actually is and the answer is extraordinarily complex. For example, for one community, education may be viewed as the avenue to equity in employment opportunity; for another, it is a means to increased facility with the tools and conventions of a second (the dominant) culture; for a third, education may be one of a series of mechanisms for ensuring the continuing vitality of Indigenous culture. If anything is certain, it is that these answers will vary from place to place but, if education is to play some role in shaping the future of Indigenous Australians, as clearly it must, the question must be asked. To this end, there is a clear need for case studies of existing Indigenous community-controlled schools that document the costs and benefits of economic, social and pedagogical practices and choices. As a first step, policy makers should initiate a program to draw together all that is known about existing community-controlled Indigenous education programs across the country so that the outcomes (both cultural and educational) can be objectively assessed. If policy makers and communities are to make the best decisions about educational options, they need to have far better information available on models and approaches and better data on outcomes.

Piloting and monitoring community-controlled schools

In the current political and economic environment, there is tremendous pressure on educational resources and that pressure is more likely to increase than abate. Until now, community-controlled education has emerged and evolved in a variety of contexts and there have been few opportunities for broad consideration, much less evaluation of their successes and failures. There is value in proceeding with explorations into community-controlled Indigenous schools but it is particularly important that every effort is made to ensure that we learn from these experiments. One means of exploring the costs and benefits of such schools would be to

establish an identified pool of funding (with contributions from the Commonwealth and States and Territories) to support the creation and operation of a limited number of pilot schools in a range of locations. Two schools per State or Territory representing a range of urban, rural and remote sites would seem appropriate. Given adequate information and support, communities could apply for funds for one of a limited number of such pilot schools. The applications would need to specify costs, curriculum, staffing structures and the like, and describe the mechanisms for community input and involvement. A national task force comprising Indigenous educators and administrators could oversee competitive applications for demonstration grants and then monitor the progress of such schools over the course of the grant period. Critically important to such a project would be a rigorous independent evaluation and monitoring program as well as the provision of ongoing support from the State/Territory and Commonwealth educational systems.

Communities, not just schools

In every major review of Indigenous education policy since the 1970s, community involvement in education has been highlighted as a priority (Schwab 1995). Various programs have been put into place to increase the participation of Indigenous Australians in educational decision-making, particularly at the local level. Though progress has undoubtedly been made, after nearly 25 years it remains an unresolved problem. If Indigenous Australians are to play a role in determining the shape and content of education in their communities, it is necessary to look for new ways to facilitate their involvement. Aboriginal communities have often been described by anthropologists as essentially inward looking (von Sturmer 1973; Myers 1986; Schwab 1988). Interest and concern is focused most intently on the individual, immediate kin and, to a much lesser degree, on the wider community. This orientation helps to explain the difficulties individuals and communities have faced in dealing with State educational institutions, teachers and administrators. Thus, it makes little sense to continue to pursue traditional models that attempt to draw the Indigenous community into a foreign institution; the more effective approach may be to look for ways to bring the school into the community. Perhaps the place to start is for teachers and administrators to approach communities and seek ways that schools can address those community interests and needs. Community development models might be appropriate tools in this regard.

Involvement and choice

True 'both ways' education, as defined by Harris, is and will remain a rare occurrence. Most Indigenous students live as a minority in urban or rural areas and attend schools where English is the dominant language. In such schools, 'domain separation' is a practical impossibility. In addition,

Indigenous students are often only one of several minorities in a school, each potentially vying for shares of resources. Consequently, achieving a true 'both ways' community-controlled school is not a realistic option in most Indigenous communities. Yet there are alternatives. Indigenous people in urban and rural communities across the country have appropriated the idea of 'both ways' education, and adapted it to their own local aspirations and opportunities, and there are varying constructions of 'both ways' education models in schools across the country. In a few urban areas, education departments have facilitated and supported the creation of Indigenous community schools as part of the State system. Some State systems are working to augment and reshape existing curriculum to include Indigenous cultural content and that appears to benefit Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children alike, but the challenge remains to do this in a fashion that involves local parents and community members in decision-making within the school. The most pressing issue for most Indigenous Australians is thus not how to move the control of education into their hands but how to increase the sense of investment and community involvement in shaping the future of Australian education.

The AEP Review summarised the issue of community control in terms of equity on the one hand and cultural identity on the other:

> The tension between equity - the desire for access to an education giving equal capacity to compete for employment, especially acquisition of English literacy - and the preservation of a separate cultural and linguistic identity, may only be resolved by offering an element of choice to local communities (Yunupingu 1995: 18).

In following through with the recommendation of the AEP Review for 'research and analysis of the immediate and long-term complexities of building community-controlled education' (Yunupingu 1995: 26), it will be necessary to ask to what degree it is possible to have it 'both ways' in Indigenous education? Can families and communities attain educational equity and maintain their identities as Indigenous Australians? Is it necessary to compromise? Clearly, if Indigenous communities are to be offered 'an element of choice', they need better information on the option of community-controlled schools, their costs and benefits.

Notes

1. There is an important discussion contrasting equity and statistical equality in employment (Altman and Sanders 1991) that is also relevant to the realm of education and training (Schwab 1995).

2. This theme is prominent in the draft National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples prepared for and presented to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in November 1995. The draft report, highlighting priorities, outcomes, strategies and targets, features an emphasis on equitable and appropriate educational achievement for Indigenous students.

3. The Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) Aboriginal Education Branch has funded a small number of independent Aboriginal schools through the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Scheme since the beginning of the AEP in 1990. These schools are independent in the sense that they are neither part of State or Territory government educational systems nor affiliated non-government systems (for example, Catholic systemic schools). Each of these schools is required to file an annual report to DEETYA. Included in this report is information related to progress toward the AEP goals. This discussion paper draws on unpublished data from those reports as well as unpublished DEETYA school census data. The most recent and complete data set is for 1994.

   Of the 23 independent schools funded by DEETYA's Aboriginal Education Branch in 1994, 20 are included in this analysis. The three excluded schools are unusual in that Indigenous students comprise relatively smaller proportions of their enrolments (23.1 per cent, 53.4 per cent and 54.6 per cent) than the rest of the schools; the remaining 20 schools had 85 per cent or greater Indigenous enrolment. It is assumed here that notions of community control will be fundamentally different in schools with 23 per cent versus 100 per cent Indigenous enrolments.

4. In 1994 there were 7,159 government and 2,520 non-government schools in the country (ABS 1994: 4). Between 1986 and 1994 Catholic enrolments decreased by 3 per cent while non-Catholic enrolments increased by 33 per cent. In terms of numbers of schools, Catholic schools have decreased by a net of eight schools while non-Catholic schools have increased by a net of 89 (Department of Employment, Education, Training (DEET) 1995: 16). The number of Indigenous independent schools has increased steadily but slowly over that same period of time.

5. Where ABS data show the retention rate for all students to year 12 in government schools at 70.6 per cent, the corresponding figure for non-government schools is 83.3 per cent. Looking more closely at the non-government school rates shows retention for Anglican, Catholic and Other at 99.3 per cent, 75.5 per cent and 96.1 per cent (ABS 1994: 60).

6. The ABS ratio for Indigenous students in all Australian schools is 51.3 per cent male and 48.7 per cent female at the primary level and 50.4 per cent male to 49.6 per cent female at the secondary level (ABS 1994: 26).

7. These figures include both full-time and half-time staff positions.

8. It is important to acknowledge that Harris' conception of 'two-way' education is not without its critics. Ralph Folds (1992), for example, has criticised the theory for building up expectations that Aborigines can achieve, through control of their own educational system, outcomes that have evaded the majority school system for many decades. Folds argues that Aboriginal schools are not 'non-antagonistic arenas where equal exchange, synthesis or compartmentalisation can occur in a cooperative manner' but rather arenas of cultural contestation where there is most likely to be a winner and a loser (Folds 1992: 10). 'Two-way' models, he claims, camouflage what is ultimately a model for assimilation (Folds 1993).

   This is a vitally important debate but one that will not be engaged in here. Suffice it to say that Folds steers the debate for education in the direction of what ultimately may be the most critical questions underpinning Indigenous self-determination: To what degree will the Commonwealth allow Indigenous Australians to determine the shape of their institutions? To what degree will they be allowed to define 'equitable outcomes'? Who will pay?

9. There is a well-developed counterpoint to this theoretical and political perspective (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Willis 1977) which argues that such approaches ultimately only serve to reproduce the existing disparity in power and influence. In this case, the argument might be made that, while 'both ways' approaches encourage a sense of identity and cultural maintenance, they do not provide the skills and knowledge Indigenous people need to be self-sufficient in the wider society. Further, one might ask to what degree Indigenous Australians overestimate the potential of schools, government or independent, to affect outcomes in employment and income. While this is clearly a critically important debate, there is not space to address it here.

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