At 30 June 2004, there were 483,994 Indigenous people living in Australia. New South Wales was the state that had the largest Indigenous population with 141,533, followed by Queensland (134,013), Western Australia (69,665), and the Northern Territory (59,508). The Northern Territory had the highest proportion of Indigenous people among its population (29.8 per cent); Victoria had the lowest (0.65 per cent) (ABS, 2003). At present, there are 120,000 Indigenous people (about 26 per cent of the total Indigenous population) living in 1,200 discrete communities in remote regions. There are key differences between metropolitan and remote communities, such as isolation, land ownership, customary and kinship practices, and access to services. Indigenous people living in remote areas fare much worse than both their Indigenous and non-Indigenous city counterparts on key economic and health measures (Gray & Altman, 2005).

In this paper, the authors provide an overview of an evaluation of ‘early learnings’ from Indigenous Community Development projects funded by the Telstra Foundation. The projects look at community-identified solutions for the serious social and health problems affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The projects address themes such as early childhood development, youth participation and leadership, and the role of schools in facilitating change. As the principal project worker, Marlene Burchill also provides her Indigenous perspective on community development.
The Indigenous population is considerably younger than the non-Indigenous population. In 2001, 40 per cent of Indigenous people were aged less than 15 years, compared with 21 per cent of non-Indigenous people. Only 2.6 per cent of the Indigenous population were aged 65 years or over compared with the 12 per cent of the non-Indigenous population. Indigenous youths are more likely to be imprisoned than the general population, and the rate of suicides in police custody remains high. Rates of unemployment, health problems and poverty are likewise higher than the general population, and school retention rates and university attendance are much lower than the general population (ABS, 2003).

Many other factors affect Indigenous communities. Indigenous children are over-represented in the child protection system and in out-of-home care (see Higgins, Bromfield, Higgins, and Richardson, 2006). Indigenous children suffer from more preventable illnesses, malnutrition, communicable diseases, mental health and substance abuse, and have poorer access to medical and mental health services than non-Indigenous children. Indigenous adults die up to 20 years younger than non-Indigenous Australians. Many Indigenous communities are characterised by poverty and substandard housing (overcrowding, inadequate water and washing facilities, poor sanitation, and limited food storage). Indigenous young people have lower levels of participation in and completion of formal education, and consequently poorer educational outcomes (ABS, 2003; AIHW, 2001; National Children’s and Youth Law Centre and Defence for Children International (Australia), 2005).

Noted Indigenous academic and commentator, Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue commented:

“What is significant is that no matter which factors are examined – be it poverty, nutrition, access to services, smoking... the list goes on – you will find that Indigenous people are over represented at the wrong end of the spectrum” (O’Donoghue, 2000, p. 723).

The current health status of Indigenous people can be viewed as a result of generations of isolation from the mainstream economy, extreme social disadvantage, poverty and powerlessness, and the breakdown of traditional tribal law and cultural practices. There have been improvements on some issues, but no improvement—or even decline—on others. Indigenous health has improved with the establishment of Indigenous medical centres; however, it remains significantly inferior to that of the general population. Often the diseases that confront Indigenous communities are those that reflect poor living conditions: infant mortality, eye and ear infections, diseases related to alcohol and drug abuse, malnutrition, asthma and sexually transmitted infections (Sam, 1992).

The impact of colonisation

In order to understand the current issues facing Indigenous communities, it is vital to understand the history of colonisation, argued Burchill (cited in Higgins, 2005):

“Those involved in supporting Indigenous communities today need to begin with the impact of colonisation and its devastating consequences on all aspects of lives, culture, mores and spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Change will only occur when these needs are addressed within this context. Our original communities have been destroyed completely. We need assistance to develop communities that recognise heritage, but also, so that we can function positively and as equals in a modern contemporary Australia” (p. 6).

The past resonates into the present – intergenerational trauma resonates in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person (Atkinson, 2002). This level of trauma is dependent on the individual circumstances and how individuals have coped and/or managed their lives within the context of racist and oppressive policies and practices over time. The consequences of separation from parents and community are evidenced across the country. Past policies of child removal have damaged culture, family ties, and modelling of parental and cultural roles (for example, see Zubrick et al., 2005 for evidence on the impact of forced separation and relocation on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in Western Australia).

Burchill (cited in Higgins, 2005) commented:

“As an Indigenous person growing up, I was taught about family and relationships. Historically, Indigenous families were groups or clans of people whose lives were organised according to the tribal affiliations. Traditionally groups were composed of Elders, mother, fathers, sisters, and brothers. Culture was steeped in mythology and dreamtime stories... A complex set of laws developed from within groups to govern every facet of life and relationships... Healing the community needs to happen before we can move forward and pass on a positive cultural heritage. We need to get back to the basics: nurturing; self-discipline; modelling; the drive to keep going under great difficulty” (pp. 5-6).

Aboriginal families who are not able to provide basic love and nurturing may not have had the opportunity themselves to grow up in a strong, healthy family and community where they could learn to look after children and understand safe and sustainable child rearing practices. The removal policies and other legislation were based on the assumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were incapable and not competent to raise their children, despite the fact that within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the simple practice of having many mothers, fathers and grandparents to care for kin is acceptable: ‘It takes a village to raise a child’.

The problems for Indigenous people have multiplied, particularly family violence and drug dependency. Poverty is also a crucial factor associated with family breakdown, child neglect and child removal: “Impoverished communities raise impoverished children” (Cadd, 2002, p. 1). The close cultural kinship ties that existed previously within Indigenous communities across Australia have been eroded. As a result, Indigenous communities today are made up of many different tribal groups sharing the same community. Communities need to take collective responsibility for ensuring the welfare of children. This does not just mean protecting them from harm. It goes further than this; it also means providing a positive sense of self, the world, and the future. It is important to not focus solely on individuals. In many
instances, it is necessary to start again: to firmly develop the bonds and trust for a stable foundation toward community development from an Indigenous perspective.

**Community development from an Indigenous perspective**

Community development implies an awareness of exploitation and oppression. It is based primarily on the notion that people are capable of finding solutions to their problems: Experts can best contribute by supporting initiatives decided collectively by people who have joined together to address their community’s needs.

According to Indigenous academic Juanita Sherwood (1999), community development refers to “working with communities to assist communities in finding plausible solutions to the problems they have identified” (p. 7). Indigenous people in Australia have participated in community development for thousands of years, yet they have been forced to adapt to a non-Indigenous community development model for several decades. Sherwood emphasised the importance of community development processes being “initiated by the community and not put upon the community” (p. 8).

The aim of community development activities is to achieve better community outcomes for Indigenous communities. However, mainstream models of community development—as well as other more intensive therapeutic practices such as counselling and medical interventions to support Indigenous people—in many respects draw heavily on western models of thinking rather than a combined effort to integrate western and Indigenous cultural practices. Dodson (2002) emphasised that for change to occur, it needs to be “a two way street, so far it’s only been one way” (p. 22). Well-meaning efforts that ultimately fail contribute to the suspicion and mistrust that does exist within Indigenous communities and individuals.

An Indigenous community development model requires understanding, commitment, collaboration, partnership and respect (Sherwood, 1999). This means working with communities to help them identify workable solutions to the problems they have identified. But it also means listening to and supporting the local people to progress these solutions to their own problems. There are many local Indigenous community members who possess expertise in many fields. Unfortunately there seems to be an assumption by external people that communities do not have local expertise and the skills pool is limited.

What is needed is another approach: to engage properly in communities, conduct skills and knowledge audits of community members and stakeholders, believe in the local people, and accord them authentic and proper respect. If external people demonstrated this approach, there would be a shift in the community dynamic and a new way of working together. To build capacity in communities should never imply that communities are starting from scratch – both parties have skills, energy and ideas to contribute to the process. This will enable communities to acquire skills that are necessary to develop culturally-appropriate programs and projects that will ultimately benefit their community (Sherwood, 1999).

Below, we outline four key themes to community development in Indigenous communities: facilitating local leadership and empowerment; ensuring the physical and cultural health and wellbeing of children; fostering youth participation; and finally, recognising the critical role that schools can play in a community development project.

**Leadership and empowerment**

A key to community development and community-generated change is leadership. Many commentators argue that Indigenous people need a bigger say and greater control over their affairs (including Indigenous leadership at all stages from the grassroots level up to policy development and implementation), allowing for their sense of shared value, time and place (Anderson, 2002; Chapman, 2002). When writing about leadership, Indigenous authors have emphasised the need for Indigenous people to take control of their own people (Perkins, 1990), the need for the shackles of welfare dependency to have been removed (Pearson, 2001) and to build the capacity of the local community (Dodson, 2002). Community development and change involves empowering individuals to maximise their potential, creating sustainable employment and lasting partnerships between communities, government and the corporate sector.

Solid partnerships are needed to create change and empower communities. Dodson argued: “No one individual will have everything needed to undertake community capacity building, but groups of individuals do” (p. 23). Collaboration is also important: “A positive Indigenous community development model must incorporate ‘yarning up not down’ (Burchill, 2004). Burchill (cited in Higgins, 2005) explains:

“Yarning up relates to ‘yarning for outcomes’ rather than speaking down to Indigenous people. Yarning down is an indication that the outsider knows best or takes control of the outcomes for Indigenous people. Well-meaning people come to work with us but they do the work for us and we haven’t learnt how to do it” (p. 8).

**Fostering children’s health, culture and wellbeing**

One key focus of community development initiatives is children’s wellbeing. Nationally—and internationally—researchers and policy makers are focusing their attention on children’s early years. These are the formative years when children’s physical growth and development are
occurring. It is also paralleled by cognitive and emotional development. In order to successfully negotiate these developmental stages, children need a good start, with adequate antenatal and post-natal care, nutrition, and educational opportunities (Duffie & Rogers, 2002).

When thinking about health and wellbeing, it is important to consider children’s cultural needs: to learn about their identity, their people’s past, and to envisage a positive future. For Indigenous communities—many of which face significant health, economic and social disadvantage compared to other sections of Australian society—this is a difficult task. Individuals and communities face the challenge of ‘growing up’ Indigenous children who are physically healthy, engaged educationally, and connected to their family, their history, and their culture.

Youth participation

Another important principle of community development is building the capacity of local individuals, organisations and communities to identify problems, develop solutions, and engage in actions to implement these solutions—and this includes young people. This requires creativity, vision, and—most importantly—leadership. Leadership needs to be recognised and developed in local communities. In order to sustain changes, however, it is critical to look to the next generation—and to equip young people with training and experiences in order to foster leadership skills. This involves having vision—but also empowering young people to envisage their own future. For skills to be transferred to the next generation, they need to be modelled, and young people mentored by existing leaders. Building capacity for the next generation, therefore, means youth engagement and participation: creating opportunities for intergenerational skill transfer; developing self-determination; and fostering hope.

Schools: A sentinel site for change

Schools can be an important element in a community development strategy for a variety of reasons. They are a place where young people spend a large amount of time. The culture of a school—and the values that are transmitted to place where young people spend a large amount of time. The development strategy for a variety of reasons. They are a

Evaluation of 14 Telstra Foundation Indigenous Community Development Projects

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was contracted by the Telstra Foundation to evaluate 14 of the 69 Indigenous Community Development Projects they had funded up to 2005 (see Box 1). Two of the projects—Keeping kids healthy makes a better world and Strong & Smart—are described below, to demonstrate how positive Indigenous community development can be achieved (for the full report of the 14 projects, see Higgins, 2005).

“Keeping kids healthy makes a better world”

(UNICEF with Waltja Tjurtargku Palyapayi Aboriginal Association, Alice Springs, Northern Territory)

The first project we describe—Keeping kids healthy makes a better world—is an Indigenous child health and nutrition program in remote communities in the Northern Territory. The communities wanted to target the health of 0-5 year old children in their own communities in Central Australia through the development of a culturally appropriate and sustainable community-based nutrition program.

UNICEF is an international aid and community development organisation that has traditionally focused on promoting sustainable economic and social enhancement to improve the standard of living of people, particularly women and children, in developing countries. UNICEF, in partnership with Waltja Tjurtargku Palyapayi Aboriginal Association (Waltja), sought funding from the Telstra Foundation to extend child nutrition programs in remote communities.

Waltja was formerly known as the Central Australian Family Resource Centre. When funding for the Centre was withdrawn in 1997, the members decided to form the Waltja Tjurtargku Palyapayi Aboriginal Association. Tjurtargku

BOX 1  Indigenous Community Development Projects

From its establishment in 2002 until October 2005, the Community Development Fund of the Telstra Foundation provided support for 69 Indigenous projects to benefit Indigenous children and young people. In 2005, the Australian Institute of Family Studies was contracted to evaluate early learnings from 14 of these projects:

- Torres Strait Paediatric Asthma Education (Qld Institute of Medical Research & partners);
- Traditional Indigenous Games in central and far north Qld (Qld University of Technology);
- Keeping kids healthy makes a better world Indigenous child health & nutrition program in Central Australia (UNICEF & Waltja);
- Children’s Picture Dictionaries literacy resource for Central Australian communities (Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs);
- Aga Iritija Archive Project: Knowing the past to strengthen our future (Social History Unit, Pitjantjara Council, Anangu Lands in Central Australia);
- Jarjum Youth Group (Murr & Torres Strait Islander Network, Logan, Qld);
- Soaring Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts (Port Adelaide, SA);
- Reconciliation through Education national workshop program (Reconciliation Australia);
- Cape York Youth Network (Cape York Trust, Cairns, Qld); and
- After-hours Youth Drop-in Centre in Alice Springs town centre (Tangentyere Council).
- Early Intervention Program for Indigenous Youth (Curtin University of Technology & Indigenous Psychological Services, Perth, WA);
- Jobs 4U2 Indigenous School-to-work Project (Gambina Koorie Economic Employment & Training Agency, Shepparton, Vic);
- Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program (Balga Senior High School & The Smith Family, Perth, WA); and
- Strong & Smart Digital Project (Queensland University of Technology with Cherbourg State School, Qld).


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Mt Liebig (Amurrunyungu) is located 340 kilometres west of Alice Springs. Access to the community is by road, the majority of which is unsealed and often in a poor condition, and by a weekly mail plane flight. The community of 250 people is comprised mainly of Pintupi/Luritja language groups with strong traditional roots. Mt Liebig is governed by a Community Government Council elected by local residents. The community has a Council office, a store, an aged-care service, a child-care service, a clinic and a church. Mt Liebig also has a primary school. Secondary students are required to stay in Alice Springs, Darwin or Adelaide to continue their studies. The Northern Territory Government operates the school and the clinic; all other local services are community owned and operated. The Mt Liebig community suffers from a number of family related issues including high instances of infant gastro-intestinal disease, alcohol and substance misuse, family violence and youth self-harm issues. The community has consistently approached Waltja over a number of years for assistance in developing programs to address these issues, as well as training and support for child care and aged care. Mt Liebig had a nutrition program funded by the Northern Territory Government; however, funding was insufficient, and the program only operates intermittently and is subject to the direct support of current clinic staff.

Waltja’s members from Titjikala have sought assistance in improving the nutritional needs of women, young children and families, not just high-risk children or families, so as to have a wide impact, and avoid shame. The success of the intervention was due to the level of local community participation and input into healthy food choices for the children: both bush and store foods. The Project Coordinator (Waltja) explained:

“It was important that the local people were deciding on what was best for themselves rather than outsiders deciding on what was best for them.”

Outcomes and achievements

Some of the main community development strategies included providing the opportunity for Elders to educate young people through going on bush trips to source bush medicines and bush foods. Community members worked with the local community store manager to develop a health store policy towards the types of food that are stocked. Store training was provided for local Aboriginal community members. More broadly, local Aboriginal community members were trained to assist in improving the nutritional needs of women, young children and the wider community. A child-care centre was also established in Nyirripi and Titjikala won a National Heart Foundation Award for their vegetable garden.

The Project Coordinator from Waltja said:

“Promoting bush and healthy store foods helped to maintain a positive approach advocating traditional ways of looking after children.”

Palyapayi means “doing good work for families”. Waltja services remote communities across 700,000 square kilometres in Central Australia. The members of Waltja are all Aboriginal women who live in remote communities in Central Australia. All members actively participate in Waltja projects, workshops, training and community-based activities. Each of the participating communities is different, even though they may be geographically close to each other (see Box 2).

Key processes

The main focus was to identify and address risk factors for poor nutrition in 0-5 year olds associated with poverty, failure-to-thrive and poor health outcomes for Aboriginal children. From an organisational perspective, strategies included:

- forging the partnership between UNICEF and Waltja;
- establishing a Nutrition Steering Committee to oversee the project implementation, development, and evaluation;
- employing a coordinator and local Aboriginal nutrition workers in each of the four communities;
- training workers in the nutritional needs of children; and
- establishing a brokerage fund to support a range of purchases, such as gardening utensils.

The main early intervention strategies were:

- supporting communities to adopt activities to improve nutrition for youth and children, including provision of healthy lunches or dinners for children to prevent health crises (for example, needing to be hospitalised in Alice Springs);
- establishing community gardens;
- cooking demonstrations of health foods;
- information days and regional workshop to educate local Aboriginal community members (in particular, women); and
- lobbying for the availability of affordable and healthy foods.

It was important that the project included all children and families, not just high-risk children or families, so as to have wide impact, and avoid shame. The success of the intervention was due to the level of local community participation and input into healthy food choices for the children: both bush and store foods. The Project Coordinator (Waltja) explained:

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BOX 2 Central Australian remote communities that participated

Mt Liebig (Amurrunyungu) is located 340 kilometres west of Alice Springs. Access to the community is by road, the majority of which is unsealed and often in a poor condition, and by a weekly mail plane flight. The community of 250 people is comprised mainly of Pintupi/Luritja language groups with very strong traditional roots. Mt Liebig is governed by a Community Government Council elected by local residents. The community has a Council office, a store, an aged-care service, a child-care service, a clinic and a church. Mt Liebig also has a primary school. Secondary students are required to stay in Alice Springs, Darwin or Adelaide to continue their studies. The Northern Territory Government operates the school and the clinic; all other local services are community owned and operated. The Mt Liebig community suffers from a number of family related issues including high instances of infant gastro-intestinal disease, alcohol and substance misuse, family violence and youth self-harm issues. The community has consistently approached Waltja over a number of years for assistance in developing programs to address these issues, as well as training and support for child care and aged care. Mt Liebig had a nutrition program funded by the Northern Territory Government; however, funding was insufficient, and the program only operates intermittently and is subject to the direct support of current clinic staff.

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Outcomes and achievements

Some of the main community development strategies included providing the opportunity for Elders to educate young people through going on bush trips to source bush medicines and bush foods. Community members worked with the local community store manager to develop a health store policy towards the types of food that are stocked. Store training was provided for local Aboriginal community members. More broadly, local Aboriginal community members were trained to assist in improving the nutritional needs of women, young children and the wider community. A child-care centre was also established in Nyirripi and Titjikala won a National Heart Foundation Award for their vegetable garden.

The Project Coordinator from Waltja said:

“Promoting bush and healthy store foods helped to maintain a positive approach advocating traditional ways of looking after children.”

Nyirripi is located 450 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. Access is by a mainly unsealed road (which is often in a poor condition), and by a once weekly mail plane flight. The community of 250 people is predominantly from the Warlpiri language group. Nyirripi is governed by a Community Government Council. Local services include a council office, clinic, primary school, community-owned store, church, and a limited aged-care service. The school and the clinic are both operated by the Northern Territory Government. The community also has a non-functional women’s centre and are hoping to develop a child-care service in the near future. Instances of the social issues identified for Mt Liebig (with the exception of inhalant misuse) are also prominent in Nyirripi.
Although the project was initially focused on nutrition, it has broadened its focus to wellbeing of children. A nutrition worker (Nyirripi Clinic) explained:

“The nutrition program at the child-care centre works in partnership with the clinic. The staff share health information about kids, which helps in dealing with nutrition issues”.

Social outcomes included storytelling, photos and the production of a cookbook, and the employment of local nutrition workers in each of the communities.

Aboriginal Health Workers and Registered Nurses in Nyirripi, Watiyawanu (Mt Liebig), Willowra and Tjitjikala have observed an increase in the number of healthier children in the community and an increase in knowledge among community members participating in the project on nutrition and healthy eating. One nutrition worker from the Nyirripi Clinic stated:

“The nutrition program contributes to better health outcomes for the kids. Due to education around nutrition, women are buying more fruit and vegetables and the kids are eating healthier meals. The program has helped to decrease the amount of anaemia cases not just through meals but also through education around nutrition.”

The project has led to an increase in the nutrition awareness in communities, particularly among women. An Indigenous Project Officer from UNICEF commented:

“There has been proof that failure-to-thrive kids have actually decreased in communities. Families are more aware of the nutrition needs of kids, which has also had an influence on the stores with more fruit and vegetables, and different campaigns happening in the schools as well around food and healthy breakfast programs.”

Community members have an increased confidence in raising issues with the community store manager and ordering in more healthy snacks and fresh vegetables. Practical cooking demonstrations are conducted showing healthy and affordable ways to prepare fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as holding nutrition and health awareness days. Some families are making different choices about how they use their money, choosing to purchase nutritious food for their children, rather than, for example, using their money for gambling. Men are becoming more involved in the program in various ways, such as gardening, dropping the children off at childcare, sitting with them at lunchtime and cooking meals. Men have reported that they want to be more involved in family life as it makes them feel good and they are able to identify a role for themselves.

Community volunteers have become involved in nutrition activities. These volunteers have also attended training workshops in areas of nutrition, food preparation and healthy living. This has strengthened partnerships and coordination between community-based organisations in support of each community nutrition program. It has also provided an appropriate forum for young families to start talking about other pressing issues, such as domestic violence and alcohol and other drugs. This has resulted in a working relationship with local partners such as Alcohol and Other Drugs, The Heart Foundation, Sexual Health and Family Planning, and Family and Children’s Services.

“Some families are making different choices about how they use their money, choosing to purchase nutritious food for their children, rather than, for example, using their money for gambling.”

**Barriers and opportunities**

Implementing a community development project—particularly in remote Indigenous communities—means being able to deal with obstacles that emerge during the implementation phase. A practical obstacle to running some of the program was the weather. Due to the remote location of the communities and poor road accessibility, rain often interferes with particular activities that have been planned. It was also difficult to achieve community ownership of all nutrition activities. A key element of this process was encouraging remote community clinics to support local nutrition workers.

One of the major challenges of the program has been getting specific data on the health and nutrition of the children who are supported through the program. The main issue has been the confidentiality of this information in small communities. Because of the small number of children, providing data on health status or participation rates in the program at a local level may risk identifying particular children or families—and there is a lot of shame surrounding poor nutrition of children.

The project members have observed the changes in attitude and behaviour of participants in each community. There has been no formal collection of quantitative data; however, UNICEF is exploring options with Waltja and government counterparts regarding how to improve the monitoring and data collection systems in each community, which will assist with future evaluation of health outcomes associated with the project. An Indigenous Project Officer from UNICEF noted:

“The project has had a strong focus on capacity building of local partners such as Waltja. In 2004, after two years of Telstra Foundation funding UNICEF to implement the nutrition program with Waltja, there was a shift in funding and the support was provided directly to Waltja. UNICEF Australia continues to support Waltja with capacity building, reporting writing, monitoring and evaluation.”

There are also opportunities for community nutrition programs to be independently managed and operated by the local community. In the future, a project such as this would be best conducted in fewer communities at a time, as the amount of time the project coordinator spent in the various communities—as well as the time on administration, travel,
and follow-up—was limited. Participants identified some improvements that could be implemented for monitoring the project, as well as increasing opportunities for local Aboriginal community members to have access to accredited training courses, for example, ‘train the trainer’ programs and training in food and nutrition, as well as budgeting and administration.

Strong and Smart digital project
(Queensland University of Technology with Cherbourg State School, Queensland)

The second project we profile here – the Strong and Smart digital project – was developed to tackle technological illiteracy among rural Indigenous children and their communities by providing training in current communication media and digital technology. The additional goal was to use multimedia training as means of improving school engagement and retention, while fostering cultural identity and pride.

In 2002, members of the Queensland University of Technology’s department of Film and Television partnered with the Cherbourg State School to produce a film called ‘Strong and Smart’. It tells the story of the rise of the Cherbourg State School from a situation of aimless despair to an institution with a sense of purpose, direction and unity (see Box 3). The ‘Strong and Smart’ theme reflected in the film is embedded in the school’s curriculum, activities and teaching methods. These are centred on motivating Indigenous children and young people to be strong and smart Australians.

The Cherbourg community experienced considerable economic and social disadvantage, including domestic violence, alcohol and substance misuse, and child abuse. The school community recognised that an intervention was needed to address these issues. These social problems are not the result of Aboriginal culture, but are the legacies of the other historical and sociological processes. However, a program was needed to reinforce positive Indigenous culture, to promote literacy, technological skills, and a sense of pride and achievement for community members.

Key processes

Funds from the Telstra Foundation were used to purchase a digital camera and to fund components of the salaries of the Project Manager, Coordinator and three tutors in editing, camera and sound. Combined with other funding, the principal activity for the project as a whole was to engage with 250 school children, 46 staff and 3,000 community members in supporting and developing further a range of digital resources to build information/communication capabilities at a local level. The former Principal of the Cherbourg State School explained:

“It’s one thing to get the kids to school and to sit in classrooms, but you’ve got to do more. You’ve got to change what’s happening inside the school and I think the digital project has made the school a more exciting place to be, where kids can engage in those activities. They’re going to be excited about coming to school whether that attendance incentive is there or not.”

Community members, children and young people were consulted and engaged in developing appropriate resources that reflected their knowledge needs of their own community. Through this process, high participation and ownership was created and sustained. As noted by Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003), “if learning is contextualised, culturally relevant, and authentic, students will become more engaged in their education” (p. 88). The project strategy consisted of five elements: materials production, staff and student training, development of a digital domain, positioning the school in the broader community, and finally, distribution and promotion of the DVD. The goal was to produce a broad spectrum of interactive digital program content – ranging from inserts from the original ‘Strong and Smart’ DVD film (full length interviews) to newly created content like historical archives of Aboriginal studies and social issues such as domestic violence and truancy.

The development of literacy skills is a central priority and the school aims to generate educational outcomes comparable to other schools in Queensland, while at the same time nurturing a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today’s society. The Strong and Smart digital project has helped address an important aspect of literacy—digital literacy and computer skills—that will equip the young people who have participated with life skills in communication and media technologies. The former Principal emphasised:

“The pursuit of information and communication technology excellence is something that we’ve always insisted on. I’ve always described it to our kids and our staff as the ‘new literacy’. And as I say to them: ‘We’ve got left behind in the old literacy and we’re not going to be left behind in this one’.”

Outcomes and achievements

The project successfully engaged all target groups, in particular students from Grades 5, 6, and 7. The students acquired the skills to produce a DVD of short films – which was positively received by community members and revitalised cultural pride. The School Liaison Officer noted:

“It’s bringing back the history, you know, making it accessible to people again. By using the DVD we can tell the truth about our history.”

Many families viewed the DVDs in their own home environment with all family members. This created stronger ties among each other and validated cultural and family histories from their own Indigenous perspectives. A community member stated:

“The kids like being in front of the camera. Oh yes, they love it. I think the older kids got a lot out of it. One of the children that did it is my niece and she’s been
helping me learn to use the camera. And another thing too, a lot of our children and people in the community – they’re not afraid now to be filmed.”

The project motivated the students and enabled improved relationships between students and the teaching staff. It also significantly improved students’ attendance and participation rates. The project facilitated an introduction to new technological concepts through alignment and adding value to existing educational strategic priorities within the Cherbourg State School.

In a formal, independent evaluation of Cherbourg’s digital project published in 2005, Dr Martin Hirst documented the achievements of the project against each of the stated aims. All the stakeholders and participants he interviewed for the evaluation were positive about the DVD and the ‘Strong and Smart’ vision for the Cherbourg community:

“It is clear from the comments offered during my interviews with key members of the Cherbourg community that the DVD is seen as an important achievement and something that the community as a whole can feel proud of. I was constantly told anecdotal stories of families gathering around the television to watch the DVD and many community members commented that the private screenings elicited strong emotional responses from those who viewed it. For participants, an increase in their own self-worth—described as feelings of ‘pride’—was a constant point emphasised in our interviews.” (Hirst, 2005)

Other key outcomes noted in the report include:
- use of the DVD as a teaching aid not only in the Cherbourg State School, but also by other educational administrators;
- use of the DVD in training Indigenous staff;
- providing skills to both pupils and teachers;
- improving student attendance;
- improving school retention and literacy rates; and
- involvement of the broader community in life of the school.

The development of literacy skills is a central priority and the school aims to generate educational outcomes comparable to other schools in Queensland, while at the same time nurturing a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today’s society.

Closing cooperation between different community groups in these developments will ensure strategic directions relating to cultural knowledge are consistent with the aims and aspirations of the Elders and community members of Cherbourg. The Strong and Smart project included opportunities for Cherbourg to initiate training groups in other Queensland communities. Because of the wider exposure the Strong and Smart digital project has created for the Cherbourg community, the positive impacts of the project can be seen as influencing the process of reconciliation. One of the ‘Strong & Smart’ team members said:

“Cherbourg has entered the consciousness of Queensland... I think we’ve made a significant contribution to reconciliation because [through the DVD] we’ve moved the Indigenous community of Cherbourg from being the despised ‘Other’ to a different kind of ‘Other’, one that’s more positive.”

The Strong and Smart digital project is linked to a philosophy of education that is holistic, emphasising the connection and overlap between different ‘Western’ compartmentalised disciplines, with unstructured and informal opportunities for learning that relate to where students are at. The project has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do have the solutions to building capacity in their own communities as long as cultural values and perspectives underpin the approaches. Planning needs to be done from the onset with the local community. Creative partnering within the community and external environments need to be forged. Most importantly, Aboriginal people need to be in control of the process.

Barriers and opportunities
The creation of a ‘digital domain’ for the Cherbourg community is a long-term goal. At present the State Library of Queensland is establishing an Indigenous Knowledge Centre at the school. This centre will ultimately strengthen and facilitate and/or partner on existing and future information and communication technology project initiatives in Cherbourg. The model of a Knowledge Centre is based on three main functions:
- a community library model;
- a cultural heritage museum; and
- a research and business unit.

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The development of literacy skills is a central priority and the school aims to generate educational outcomes comparable to other schools in Queensland, while at the same time nurturing a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today’s society.
The development and implementation of the *Strong and Smart* digital project in Cherbourg is delivering a sustainable educational, cultural and economic resource. The skills the students learn empower them to reclaim the positive aspects of their cultural and artistic heritage and create independent knowledge workers, skilled for survival in both rural and urban economies.

**Key learnings**

The key learnings that emerged from evaluation of the 14 projects—including the two projects we profiled here—are summarised below under four broad themes: trust; flexibility and leverage; Indigenous leadership; and building sustainability.

**Trust**

It takes time to build relationships. Project workers who come in from outside the community need to spend time in the community to get to know the local people and how their community operates. This is important not only in building trust, but also in being able to tailor a program to meet the specific needs of the community. A critical aspect of building trust is to identify community brokers—key people in the community who are aware of the importance of the project, perhaps know of the project worker’s credentials elsewhere, and who can ‘vouch’ for the program and the individuals involved.

But trust goes both ways: it is not only about trying to foster the trust of Indigenous communities, but about funding bodies and project workers also trusting the local community. This means having good relationships with Elders and other key players, taking the time to communicate, explain, allay fears, and then to trust that communities not only understand best their problems, but also are the ones who can be empowered to identify and work with solutions. This involves listening to—and respecting—the vision of local Indigenous communities, but also having patience. Lasting change doesn’t happen overnight.

**Flexibility and leverage**

Using established community networks as a platform to establish new services means that you enjoy the benefits of ‘economies of scale’, as long as you understand that programs often become intertwined. Funding bodies need to build in flexibility to their objectives and the deliverables they require, and value the type of integration between services that naturally occurs when services organically develop within the context of a local organisation working in the community and responding to its needs.

If project funding can add value to existing projects—and this leads to tangible outcomes for the community—then it has met the overall objectives of the funding scheme. Sometimes funds for a specific community development project can be used to leverage further investment in the community. This can be literally leveraging additional funds, or utilising the changes brought about by a small program to introduce systemic change in communities. A prime example of this is working with schools. Small changes in curriculum or support programs not only can make life changes for individuals; they build a sustainable base for ongoing changes in the community, as each new cohort of students move through the school system. These can be crucial early steps towards the broader goal of reconciliation.

**Indigenous leadership**

The need for Indigenous young people to connect with their culture was a key element in most of the projects. This involves identifying potential leaders in the young people who can take on the role of learning, fostering, respecting and communicating their culture to their own generation—and into the future.

Leadership is a two-edged sword: it is important to identify and use community leaders to bring about change; however, too many demands can easily be placed on key individuals. There is much truth to the old adage: “If you want a job done, give it to someone who is busy”. Many projects were being supported by—or implemented by—key leaders in their local communities.

The good practices, significant developments and opportunities for leverage described in the projects we evaluated were in no small part due to the key Indigenous leaders involved. In particular, there was evidence that many of the needs would not have been identified—nor the projects developed—without the leadership of inspiring, hard working, and skilled Indigenous people. This is true not only for those key people responsible for developing the projects, or liaising with communities, but also for many Indigenous workers and members of the local communities who assisted with implementation at each stage of the project. By relying on leadership from within local Indigenous communities, many of the issues we identified as critical success factors were incorporated: trust, flexibility, leverage, and sustainability.

Community development activities need to build leadership in the next generation. Intergenerational communication and skill-transfer is crucial for sharing the load, and for ensuring sustainability: exposing young people to the ideas and experiences of Elders, project coordinators and other leaders.

But leadership is not just something demonstrated at the community level. It is also something that needs to be fostered within individuals. Each person can be encouraged to show initiative, and to take leadership of their own life, their family, and the areas within their community where they can have influence. Important mechanisms for this are building cultural pride, self-esteem, and self-determination. This is done through projects that focus on youth engagement and youth participation: fostering different models of leadership and different styles of communication.

These community development projects show the importance of engaging young people in positive activities, and providing opportunities for cultural exchange between non-Indigenous and Indigenous young people. Positive activities ranged from learning about their language, culture and history, sports and arts participation, educational workshops and forums, mentoring, training and skill-development. The opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people to work together on arts projects—or to share their stories and experiences—promotes a greater understanding of the level of oppression, poverty and disempowerment experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Building sustainability**

The final crosscutting theme was the importance of sustainability. “Sustainability is a key issue for Indigenous communities” (Dodson, 2002, p. 25). Many Indigenous communities are hurting from having their hopes raised that good things will happen, only to have funding dry up,
programs peter out, and changes come to a standstill. In working with the communities, one of the goals of the evaluation team was to assist communities in reflecting on – and documenting – how their projects were able to build in elements of sustainability. Building sustainability is important if we are to turn around the poor social indicators highlighted earlier.

One critical mechanism for ensuring sustained community change was to target schools: either to locate the program in the school, or to work cooperatively with schools to support the program. Educational resources, curriculum enhancements, economically self-sustaining youth groups, worker education kits, teacher guides, networks, archives and relationships are all critical outcomes that ensure the sustainability of the excellent work that we witnessed in the communities across the country.

The most critical mechanism for ensuring sustainability is whole-of-community involvement, utilisation of local knowledge, local resources and local personnel, and adopting a holistic approach to planning and development of projects in order to guarantee ownership. Dodson (2002) argued:

“If together we can build the capacity of Indigenous people to move from a position of impoverishment to one of prosperity; if together we can help Indigenous people to participate fully in the social, political and economic activities of our nation; and if, together, we can do all of this without compromising Indigenous cultures and identities – that will be cause for celebration” (p. 25)

Some of the important lessons learned by the organisations involved included the importance – and benefit – of collaborating with other organisations. It takes time to get to know communities when working with them. Project activities were most effective when they were able to enhance the capacity of local indigenous grass-roots organisations and community groups, building local knowledge and confidence. An important learning was the need for flexibility in designing and implementing programs. Finally, these projects highlight the importance of enhancing opportunities to transmit language and culture from one generation to the next, as well as respecting and linking activities to Indigenous cultures.

References


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Marlene Burchill is a Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung woman from central Victoria. Marlene has worked as a social worker and family therapist. Her roles included managing the Burri Family Preservation and Extended Care Programs run by the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, and as a counsellor at the Goulburn Valley Community Health Service. Marlene worked for the Australian Institute of Family Studies from 2004-5, supporting action research and evaluation of local family support and community development projects around Australia.

Daryl Higgins is a General Manager (Research) at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and a registered psychologist. He has been researching in the field of child and family wellbeing, family functioning and child abuse and neglect for over 12 years. Since joining the Institute, Daryl has been able to extend his research interests in child and family welfare to Indigenous communities – and promising practices in relation to safety, care and wellbeing of Indigenous children.

Leanne Ramsamy is a Kukaji, Western Yuluni and Walkerman woman from the Gulf and Western Cape York Peninsula areas. She has over 15 years experience in management and consultancy services to Aboriginal-controlled health services. She has held government positions in health policy and planning, child protection and community development. Leanne has conducted community consultations and organisational reviews for many organisations working with rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Sandi Taylor is a Kalkadoon, Ngewun and Yirandali woman from northwest Queensland. She has more than 20 years’ experience in service provision—primarily for Indigenous people—in such areas as Women’s Services – Domestic Violence and Legal Advocacy, Family Training, Employment and Education, Youth Services and more recently facilitating access and equity to library and information services on a statewide basis. Within Queensland, she has worked across a range of Indigenous community-controlled organisations and within dedicated and mainstream units within government departments at state and regional levels.

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