

# Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory

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## CIS publications on Indigenous affairs

### Book

Helen Hughes, *Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition* (Sydney: CIS, 2007).

### Issue Analysis

No. 88 *Kava and after in the Nhulunbuy (Gulf of Carpentaria) Hinterland* Helen Hughes

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### Also by Helen Hughes

Helen Hughes, "Strangers in Their Own Country: A Diary of Hope," *Quadrant* 52:3 (March 2008).

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## Executive Summary

The Northern Territory has known for more than a decade that Indigenous students are completing its Aboriginal schools (Learning Centres and Community Education Centres) with the numeracy and literacy skills of five-year-olds. Ten thousand illiterate, non-numerate teenagers and young men and women in their 20s are unemployable because of the educational failures of the last decade.

The causes of failing education—inequitable school facilities, inappropriate curriculums, and inadequate teaching—in Aboriginal schools are also known. Unfortunately, these causes have not been addressed in the Rudd government's recent appropriation of \$98 million to add 200 teachers to the Northern Territory by 2011. This initiative falls far short of the measures necessary to bring Northern Territory Indigenous education to mainstream standards.

Many Aboriginal schools do not have standard facilities such as electricity, ablution blocks, and teaching equipment. But the principal causes of the absence of literacy and numeracy are not physical shortcomings but separate Aboriginal curriculums and substandard teaching. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that live in the open Australian society and attend mainstream schools perform as well as their peers.

Many of the men and women who actually stand in front of the class in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory have so little training that they are not numerate, literate, or even articulate in English. Poor teaching is also the result of teachers driving or flying in for one, two, or three days a week to Homeland Learning Centres. This leads to short teaching hours, discontinuity, and lack of class control. Many Aboriginal schools are not open five days a week. Yet a few effective teachers, who often have to break Northern Territory Department of Education rules, achieve high attendance, literacy, and numeracy for their students.

Because most children graduating from Aboriginal primary schools were unable to manage the work in mainstream high schools, the Northern Territory Department of Education extended Community Education Centres and even Homeland Learning Centres to year 10 and even year 12. Most of these extension classes do not cover mainstream secondary syllabuses. At best, they provide remedial primary-school-level literacy and numeracy.

The almost total absence of Indigenous tradesmen such as electricians and plumbers in the Homelands and remote communities is an indictment of the Northern Territory's Aboriginal vocational training. Vocational courses that do not require English, literacy, and numeracy are merely pretend courses. The Northern Territory has not seen the rising participation of Indigenous students in mainstream professional courses that is marked in the rest of Australia.

Parents are constantly blamed for poor educational outcomes. Three generations of welfare dependence, poor education, and public housing have led to family and community dysfunction, so that teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, drug addiction, and crowded housing often undermine school attendance. But the principal causes of nonattendance are the ineffective curriculums and poor teaching that have children sitting in class year after year without learning. Indigenous parents know that Aboriginal schools do not provide the minimal learning needed to work in shops and on construction sites, let alone in the more skilled positions that continue to be dominated by non-Indigenous staff in their remote settlements.

Indigenous parents are no longer prepared to be cajoled, pressured, and bullied into second-rate, separate Aboriginal education for their children. They argue that they speak vernacular languages at home and that their communities teach children traditions and culture. Parents want their children taught mainstream curriculums in English from kindergarten so that they are truly fluent in English, fully literate and numerate, and have computing skills, and so are prepared for jobs and life.

### *An agenda for action*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children deserve and must have the same school facilities, curriculums, and teaching as other Australian children so that they may choose how and where to live.

More than 4,000 preschool places are needed immediately for Indigenous children in the Northern Territory.

All primary schooling must be brought up to mainstream standards with fully equipped schools, mainstream curriculums, and full-time qualified resident teachers, to put an end to the years of failure by non-performing Aboriginal schools. This will require more than 200 houses to be built for teachers. Training to ensure that teachers and Assistant Teachers who lack mainstream qualifications become qualified is long overdue.

If mainstream schooling is not deemed to be viable in very small communities, arrangements will have to be made to board children or assist their parents to move so that they can attend school.

Remedial teaching for the Indigenous early teenagers who have missed out on primary education is a major challenge for the Northern Territory. The needs of these youngsters must be recognised and addressed. They cannot remain hidden in pretend secondary classes in remote locations. As Indigenous children learn the full primary syllabus, they must have access to the same range of academic and vocational secondary courses, equipped and taught to mainstream standards, as non-Indigenous students.

The benchmark literacy and numeracy tests that are to be administered in May 2008 nationwide for the first time for years 3, 5, 7, and 9 must be used to monitor the transformation of Northern Territory Indigenous education. All children must be tested. All parents must be informed of the results. The number of children tested, and the pass rates, must be published by the years tested and by school to inform parents and taxpayers of progress.

All remote schools should be twinned with mainstream schools so that exchanges of students, teachers, and parents can expose substandard conditions and enable Australians to learn at first hand how their taxes are being spent.

Vocational training can only begin when trainees have a command of English and are literate and numerate. Resources now devoted to pretend vocational courses should be used for a major remedial education, literacy, and numeracy campaign for older teens and young men and women in their 20s who have missed out on schooling during the past 10 years.

## History

For over 30 years, Indigenous education has been the subject of public inquiries.<sup>1</sup> It was 10 years ago, in March 1998, that the Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education began the major inquiry that was released as *Katu Kalpa* in 2002.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) published its Report on Rural and Remote Education, which largely focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>3</sup> It concluded that

Participation in education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is still very low at all educational levels, in absolute terms, as well as in comparison with other Australians. The levels of literacy and numeracy are not adequate to equip many of them for the labour market. There is very limited involvement by parents and communities in the education of their children, at all levels, due to the lack of education of the parents themselves. A lack of exposure to a learning culture from early childhood also hinders the learning progress in later life.<sup>4</sup>

Research papers reporting that Indigenous children were being denied educational opportunities supported the evidence submitted to the inquiries.<sup>5</sup> The Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training's annual reports (and the annual reports of state education departments) began to map the marked differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student enrolments in the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> The Productivity Commission, acting as a secretariat for the Steering Committee of COAG (Council of Australian Governments) public servants, published annual reports entitled *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, which drew attention to differences in Indigenous enrolments throughout Australia. The Northern Territory was the worst performer.<sup>7</sup> When Kirsten Storry's *What is Working in Good Schools in Remote Indigenous Communities?* summarised the principal trends in Indigenous education by state and territory, it was clear that there had been no significant improvement in the decade to 2007.<sup>8</sup>

### The evidence

It was reported that in Maningrida, 'school attendance records show an average combined attendance for the hub and homeland centre schools of around 64%, but some weeks that attendance can drop as low as 20%.<sup>9</sup>

'It was clearly documented' that of the 200 students who entered Yirara Secondary College in Alice Springs in 1999, approximately 130 'would enter the school with numeracy and literacy levels equivalent to those of an average five to seven year old non-Aboriginal child.'<sup>10</sup>

Dr Christine Nicholls, a senior lecturer in Australian studies at Flinders University, stated that 'there was no high school at Lajamanu, despite the fact that ... 200 to 250 children should have attended a high school ... often, through no fault of the internal arrangements of the school ... they would have a grade 2 or 3 teacher, trained for early primary or possibly for infants, to teach these kids.'<sup>11</sup>

The Northern Territory Department of Education has been well aware that it was failing Indigenous children. It recorded that the rate of participation of Indigenous students in the four-year-old age group was 15–20% lower than that of non-Indigenous students: 57.7% of Indigenous students attend preschool compared with 91.0% of non-Indigenous students. The Indigenous participation rate for the compulsory schooling years (ages 4–14) was 87.1% for males and 99.6% for females. These figures declined to 39.6% for females and 28.2% for males in the 15 to 19 year old age group. The Department of Education added: 'It should be noted that participation rates do not accurately reflect attendance rates as participation relates to enrolment.'<sup>12</sup> The Department of Education was also aware that its Community Education Centres did not prepare students for secondary education: its Board of Studies had to approve bridging courses to high school education for these students because they could not handle secondary school work. Homeland Learning Centre students were not expected to proceed to secondary schools.

## The education system continues to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Commonwealth, state, and territory departments of education have thus known for the past 10 years that education for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was failing. The exception were children whose parents worked and lived in the open society, so that their children attended mainstream schools; children whose parents were able to drive or bus them to mainstream schools; and children who boarded with relatives to have access to mainstream schools. Unable to prevail on the NT Department of Education to bring their schools to mainstream standards, Groote Eylandt communities are using their royalties to send children to mainstream boarding schools to escape what Nicholas Rothwell, the respected commentator on Indigenous issues, has called 'the wreckage of the Territory's education system.'<sup>13</sup> These children usually need one to two years' remedial coaching before they can keep up in class.

Each inquiry into Indigenous education also noted that without education, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders could not get jobs, earn incomes, and own houses. They were condemned to welfare dependence. The dysfunctional implications of joblessness and welfare have become the everyday fare of Australian newspapers, magazines, and media. They have shamed Australia abroad. And yet the education system continues to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Why has Australia, a compassionate country with one of the world's most effective democracies, ignored the extreme educational deprivation of most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders? This paper discusses the actions that have to be taken to end Aboriginal educational failure. The focus is on the Northern Territory, because it is the worst performer, but the problem is nationwide.

### Northern Territory schools

The Northern Territory Department of Education's *Indigenous Languages and Culture in Northern Territory Schools Report 2004–5* and *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006–2009* outlined Indigenous education policies. Appalling benchmark test rates were reported for Indigenous students in years 3, 5, and 7 in the *Strategic Plan*, but there were no targets for future benchmark performance.<sup>14</sup> Although there was no evidence of rising standards, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Syd Stirling, thought 'the gains in the educational outcomes of Indigenous students over the past five years ... heartening.'<sup>15</sup>

Preschools are only available for a small proportion of Indigenous children, mainly in urban areas. Preschools can introduce children to the English language, to schooling habits and to socialising in groups, gradually extending their attention span so that they are ready to attend school. Because enabling Indigenous children to become fluent in English has never been regarded as a serious objective, preschools have never been on the Northern Territory Education Department's horizon. Preschool classes will have to be provided for more than the 4,000 Indigenous three- to five-year-olds counted in the 2006 census.

In the Northern Territory, funding follows enrolment, so that there has been considerable pressure to enrol children in schools. In rounded figures, 42,000 young Territorians were to be starting or returning to preschool, primary, middle school, and senior classes in government and private schools in the first week of school in 2008.<sup>16</sup> It seems that this number does not include children enrolled in Homeland Learning Centres, but most primary school children, including Indigenous children, appear to be enrolled in the Northern Territory.<sup>17</sup> In secondary school, however, the enrolment of Indigenous students falls more sharply after year 10 than that of non-Indigenous students.

The Northern Territory reports that it contains 258 schools. There are 216 government schools, of which 10 are Community Education Centres and more than 50 are Homeland Learning Centres. There are 44 non-government schools, of which two are Community Education Centres and two are Homeland Learning Centres. Government schools enrolled 81% of primary and 72% of secondary students. Dating back to missionary days, the Territory has contracted Christian churches to provide education to Indigenous children in remote areas. In government schools, 45% of students were Indigenous, and in non-government schools 35% were Indigenous.



**Table 1:** Enrolment in government primary and secondary schools 2004–5 to 2006–7

	Pre-primary		Primary		Secondary		Total primary and secondary	
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
2004–5	1,403	2,005	8,550	11,301	3,359	6,280	11,909	17,581
2005–6	1,414	1,913	8,757	11,201	3,532	6,289	12,289	17,490
2006–7	1,378	1,894	8,994	10,947	3,600	6,073	12,594	17,020

**Source:** Northern Territory Department of Education<sup>18</sup>

There is no clear division between primary and secondary schools. There appear to be 14 secondary schools, but 26 schools combine primary and secondary classes. Indigenous secondary enrolments have been rising.

**Table 2:** Enrolment in non-government primary and secondary schools 2004–5 to 2006–7

	Primary		Secondary		Total primary and secondary	
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
2004–5	1,138	3,980	1,264	2,381	2,402	6,361
2005–6	1,161	4,007	1,306	2,376	2,467	6,383
2006–7	1,396	4,065	1,322	2,443	2,718	6,508

**Source:** Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training<sup>19</sup>

### *Aboriginal schools*

Although the Northern Territory's Community Education Centres frequently include secondary classes, most have not been equipped to mainstream standards. Offensive graffiti and poor maintenance result in teaching environments that would not be tolerated by non-Indigenous parents. The Northern Territory Department of Education's online directory does not even show the more than 50 Homeland Learning Centres that now appear to operate in remote communities.<sup>20</sup> These centres had an enrolment of 1,016 in 1999.<sup>21</sup> The number of children enrolled in these schools has presumably increased in the past decade. These schools are not equipped or maintained to the standard of the Department of Education's mainstream primary schools. Homeland Learning Centres frequently lack basic facilities such as ablution blocks, sometimes they do not have electricity connections, and many are poorly maintained. Some do not have adequate classroom space, so that desks and seating are a problem. They generally do not have the teaching equipment and materials—notably books, paper, and writing and drawing materials—essential for primary schools. They do not normally use 'school of the air' broadcasts to supplement limited teaching. They often do not have facilities to show school television programs or the myriad teaching programs available on DVDs. Aboriginal schools lack libraries, books, maps, science equipment, computer facilities, and other teaching aids available to mainstream schoolchildren throughout Australia. Sometimes there are not even pens, pencils, and paper.

**Aboriginal schools lack libraries, books, maps, science equipment, computer facilities, and other teaching aids.**

The Northern Territory has avoided discussing the issue of the viability of providing compulsory primary education in small communities, opting in practice for substandard schools that deny children basic educational opportunities. It is frequently in breach of its own listed policies that schools should be open daily for lessons for five hours and 20 minutes, and for a total of six-and-a-quarter hours a day. The five-day week is often not observed. Homeland Learning Centres are

often not open for a week at the beginning and end of each term, so that they do not operate for the 40 weeks mandated by the Department of Education. Class numbers are often greater than the maximum 27 students per class.<sup>22</sup>

### *Secondary education*

The Northern Territory has turned its back on the 10-year-old recommendation of *Katu Kalpa* that

The argument that Aboriginal youth are not ‘ready’ for ‘proper’ secondary education programmes, and so therefore should be offered ‘transitional’ education programmes, is not ultimately a valid one.<sup>23</sup>

Aboriginal schooling has in effect not been extended to secondary education. When Aboriginal children began to enter secondary education in the 2000s, it became widely evident in Darwin, Alice Springs, and Nhulunbuy that those who completed year 6 in Aboriginal primary schools could not handle the work in mainstream secondary schools. Ignoring the failure of Aboriginal primary schools, the Department of Education claimed that Indigenous students were not able to handle high school work because they were lonely and could not fit into mainstream society. Aboriginal secondary classes were therefore rolled out throughout the Territory by extending Community Education Centres and even some Homeland Learning Centres to year 10 and even to year 12. Aboriginal high schools were opened and more are planned.<sup>24</sup> The option of bussing children to established high schools, thus providing economies of scale in academic and vocational options for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, have been rejected. For example, because students from the Yirrkala Community Education Centre were failing at Nhulunbuy High School, the Yirrkala Community Education Centre had secondary school classes added instead of bussing students 20 minutes to Nhulunbuy. Taxpayers are now expected to pay for two high schools that lack economies of scale.

#### **The Tiwi Islands College Project**

The Tiwi Land Council began to be concerned with declining standards and participation in education in the 1990s. The Tiwi Education Board was established to prepare for a state-of-the-art residential college at Pickertaramoor on Melville Island, on a site equidistant from the three principal settlements on the Tiwi Islands, ‘as a very special place where young people will be able to focus on their studies and find many pathways to a fulfilling future life.’<sup>25</sup> The college is to accommodate 200 students. The Howard government contributed more than \$10 million. The college is situated on the original site of the Tiwi timber industry headquarters. It is to cover basic literacy and numeracy skills but to specialise in disciplines related to timber and horticulture. During the week, students will live in group homes staffed by house parents to ensure ‘traditional, church and family teaching.’ There will be a Tiwi College Football Academy, and a wide range of sports activities.

The college opened its doors in 2008 to 50 students, with enthusiastic secondary teachers. They, however, found that ‘About seventy percent of those students that we have tested have an equivalent of year one or less reading age.’<sup>26</sup> Another teacher commented, ‘This could be one of the toughest teaching weeks of my life. The majority of our students (including those that have been attending boarding schools around the country such as Downlands in Toowoomba) have a reading age equivalent of 6–7 years.’<sup>27</sup>

The Aboriginal primary schools on the Tiwi Islands were, as the community suspected, failing to teach their children the basics. Typically, their graduates could not manage to keep up at a mainstream boarding school. Teachers expecting secondary school pupils will now have to turn back to elementary literacy and numeracy before they can begin the secondary teaching. Until the Aboriginal Tiwi primary schools’ curriculums and teaching are reconstructed, Tiwi College is doomed to remain a remedial primary school.

Because most Indigenous primary school leavers, particularly in remote areas, are at year 1 level, so-called secondary classes mostly teach elementary English, numeracy, and literacy. They do not have the science laboratories, art rooms, and facilities for drama, music, and sports of mainstream

high schools. Vocational workshops are limited and access to work experience in the trades, retail, and commercial firms is absent. The part-time jobs from which mainstream secondary students learn are not available. The more remote and isolated they are, the less do these schools match mainstream secondary experience.

### Blame the parents

Widespread anecdotal evidence suggests that school attendance by Aboriginal children is lower than that of non-Indigenous children in mainstream schools. The Northern Territory Department of Education, however, does not publish attendance data. Because enrolment is not synonymous with attendance, real education participation rates are unknown.

Indigenous parents have been blamed for their children's poor attendance and so, implicitly, for poor pass rates. Parental irresponsibility has been a constant government concern. The Department of Education, Science and Training's major Indigenous education program allocated more than \$11 million between 2005 and 2008 to a Parent School Partnership Initiative for 115 school councils in the Northern Territory, to address Indigenous parents' alleged failure to send their children to school. The program involved 623 separate grants, micromanaged from Canberra by public servants who clearly had no idea of the real issues in remote schools. Schools first had to fill out complex forms to apply to be recipients; if chosen, they had to fill out a second complex form to receive a grant. The Acacia Hill School Council received 11 separate grants. Allocations were typically to involve parents in schooling and to encourage children to stay at school to years 10 and 12. Grant recipients for the latter reason included schools that had been requesting full-time English-speaking teachers for years without any response, but that did not go beyond year 2 or 3 in teaching. Not surprisingly, the funding apparently did not reach the designated schools.<sup>28</sup>

**Remote community parents with their limited English and experience of bureaucratic negotiations have no chance of having their views taken seriously.**

Blaming the parents for low school attendance was a feature of early COAG 'initiatives' and subsequent Shared Responsibility Agreements that sought to improve social conditions in remote communities. Communities received funding for facilities such as petrol pumps in return for signing up to send their children to school. Sequestering welfare incomes of parents who did not send their children to school became a major issue in the commonwealth 'intervention' in the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory Education Department has argued that the disparity of educational performance between Indigenous and other children was the result of

a variety of factors ... including the remoteness of their schooling ... socio-economic status, the levels of English usage at home and in the community, health status, school attendance and mobility.<sup>29</sup>

Thirty years of welfare dependence, poor education, and crowded public housing have created family and social dysfunction that includes appalling health, alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling, child pregnancies, and violence. These have contributed to low school attendance. But they are not the principal cause of poor attendance or dismal educational outcomes. The underlying reasons why children who have attended school regularly—when it has been open—cannot read and write or count beyond 10 are substandard Aboriginal schools, special curriculums for Aboriginals, and poor teaching in Aboriginal schools.

Many Indigenous parents are acutely aware that their children are not learning at school. But they also know that they are less articulate in English than their grandparents who went to missionary schools. They are conscious of their inability to discuss their children's lack of learning when representatives of the Northern Territory Department of Education and other bureaucrats descend on their communities. While elaborate consultation rituals are observed with established Indigenous leaders in Darwin, remote community parents with their limited English and experience of bureaucratic negotiations have no chance of having their views taken seriously.

Indigenous parents believe they can teach their children their languages at home and that their communities must teach, preserve, and evolve their traditions and their culture. But they want their children to be fluent in English and to have the same education as other Australian children, so that they can get jobs, own their own houses, and in their turn raise children who will have the same choices as other Australians. They know that the most recently arrived immigrant children have better English instruction than their children.

Ten years ago it was clear that

basic literacy and numeracy is a necessity for employment in the mining industry, which has a preferential program and is actively seeking to increase the number of Indigenous mining employees by providing cadetships and work place tuition in numeracy and literacy. It has found that 'most potential employees from communities could not read occupational health and safety documents, or even signs around the minesite. They cannot fill in the application forms, write their date of birth or tally numbers as is required for many jobs.'<sup>30</sup>

Indigenous parents are keenly aware that their children are not being educated well enough to be able to take up the jobs around them. They know there are jobs within remote communities and in shops, tourism, and mines. They see electricians, plumbers, locksmiths, and construction workers contracted to do jobs in their communities. Many non-Indigenous staff hold low-skilled clerical jobs in remote communities. Non-Indigenous administrators rule because Indigenous men and women cannot read the documents or understand the financial accounts they must sign as board members of Indigenous organisations.

Because parents are concerned, they are aware that their children are not learning although performance information is being withheld. Many Indigenous children have not been included in benchmark tests for years 3, 5, and 7 because teachers knew that they could not pass them.

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Parents have not been informed that these tests have not been administered. When a remote community sought to have its children tested by qualified remedial teachers, the Department of Education objected vehemently and would not permit the school building to be used. Mothers had to bring the children to be tested one by one in a makeshift office. The parents were appalled when the results were released to them. Not one of 27 children aged 5–17 tested, who had all been attending school regularly, some for as long as 10 years, exhibited literacy beyond year 1 primary level. The parents, with the help of a mainstream grammar school, wanted to advertise for full-

time teachers they had built accommodation for in the community. They were adamantly refused permission to do so, although a neighbouring non-Indigenous primary school was advertising as the discussions took place. The Indigenous school still does not have full-time resident teachers. The parents' request for remedial education for their teenagers—who cannot read, write, or count after years of attending the schooling provided by the Department of Education—has not even received the courtesy of a reply.

Twinning mainstream schools with remote schools is essential to end the bullying of Indigenous parents, who want to see their children educated. Exchanges of students, teachers, and parents would shine a light into the dark corners that suffer bureaucratic neglect and see resources wasted. Many Australians could see for themselves how Indigenous children have been shortchanged, and help their parents to put an end to Indigenous children being treated differently from other Australians.

### **Performance indicators**

It is widely accepted that standardised tests are the only way of measuring schools' output. Australia has moved toward national literacy and numeracy tests for years 3, 5, 7, and 9, which will be taken by all Australian schoolchildren in May 2008. The Northern Territory began benchmark testing of children in years 3, 5, and 7 in the 2000s. The reported results for 2005 follow:

**Table 3:** Percentage of benchmark passes in government schools for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students 2004–5

		Remote Indigenous	Urban Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Reading	Year 3	20%	57%	87%
	Year 5	20%	62%	91%
Numeracy	Year 3	48%	80%	97%
	Year 5	16%	56%	89%

Source: Northern Territory Department of Education<sup>31</sup>

The pass rates reported for non-Indigenous students have been in the same range, though somewhat below national averages. Pass rates for urban Indigenous students were much lower than for non-Indigenous students, and pass rates for remote Indigenous children were appalling. All the published pass rates are grossly optimistic, because children not expected to pass were not included in the tests. Most children in Homeland Learning Centres have thus never been tested. Studies of Wadey and Manigrada reported low levels of participation in tests year after year, with zero students achieving benchmarks year after year.<sup>32</sup> The numbers and proportions of children tested have not been published.

The Northern Territory Department of Education has ceased publishing performance results for 'remote Indigenous' students. Its *Annual Report, 2006–7* claimed that 'reading and numeracy results for non-Indigenous students show improvement across the board,'<sup>33</sup> although there was no supporting evidence for this claim.<sup>34</sup> The benchmark pass rates for Indigenous students were still shocking in 2006–7. Except for year 3 numeracy, at 62%, they were still from half to a less than a third of non-Indigenous pass rates. Learning Centre students were again not included in benchmark tests, and the numbers and proportions of students tested were not published.

**Non-Indigenous administrators rule because Indigenous men and women cannot read the documents or understand the financial accounts they must sign.**

**Table 4:** Percentage of benchmark passes in government schools 2006–7

		Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Reading	Year 3	40%	85%
	Year 5	38%	91%
	Year 7	37%	90%
Numeracy	Year 3	62%	96%
	Year 5	32%	89%
	Year 7	29%	85%

Source: Northern Territory Department of Education<sup>35</sup>

As table 5 indicates, the Northern Territory Department of Education is aware that its benchmark testing was not up to the standard expected of the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy being introduced throughout Australia in May 2008.

Although all student test results are likely to be affected by the tightening of test conditions, Indigenous students' results are expected to decline significantly when all students are tested. The removal or covering up of environmental print, such as tables of numbers from 1 to 100, which typically sit in large print in front of Aboriginal classrooms, is likely to affect results.

The ratio of Indigenous students achieving the Northern Territory Certificate of Education in 2006 is another indicator of the separateness of Indigenous education. In 2006, a record of 933 students, 724 in government and 209 in non-government schools, graduated with the Certificate of Education. Of these, only 92 were Indigenous students. Only thirty were from remote communities. But the Certificate of Education does not entitle students entry to university. Only 707 students with Certificates of Education (76%) achieved a Tertiary Entrance Rank. The number of Indigenous students who did so was not reported by the Department of Education.

**Table 5:** Key changes—Northern Territory testing and National Assessment

Northern Territory	National Assessment
Test is multilevel, i.e. variable entry and exit points.	Test is according to year level and students must attempt to complete all of the test booklet.
Test components were reading, spelling, writing and numeracy.	Test components are reading, writing, numeracy and language conventions (spelling, punctuation & grammar).
Years 3, 5 and 7 students in urban schools and 8, 10, 12 yr old students in remote Indigenous communities participated.	Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students participate. Participation by age no longer occurs.
Administration of writing commenced with group discussions and brainstorm.	Administration of writing is through reading of script by teachers, with no discussion opportunities.
Environmental print in classrooms allowed.	Environmental print to be removed or covered.

**Source:** Northern Territory Government<sup>36</sup>

### School curriculums

Homeland Learning Centres, which include some middle high-school years, and Community Education Centres, some of which include middle and senior high school years, do not follow mainstream curriculums. These deeply embedded separate curriculums have originated in several strands of thought about Indigenous education.

#### *Teaching in the vernacular*

In the Northern Territory, children are still initially taught in a vernacular language, despite the research that shows that the ability to learn languages recedes with age. Worldwide foreign languages are being taught in kindergarten, but in the Northern Territory Aboriginal children are supposed to start with 15% of the time in English in pre-primary classes, and to proceed to 50% English teaching by year 4. But the teachers and Teachers' Aides who speak vernacular languages often do not know how to read and write, and are not numerate.

#### *Mainstream education is not for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*

An even stronger strand in the Northern Territory Aboriginal curriculum exceptionalism is the belief that Indigenous culture can only be kept alive by denying children a mainstream education. This philosophy envisages that Aborigines should continue to live predominantly as traditional hunter-gatherers. Professor Jon Altman, the director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, has been the foremost exponent of this view. He wrote that

Too much emphasis is being placed in the current debate on providing opportunity for indigenous kids in very remote Australia for imagined futures as 'lawyers, doctors, and plumbers' (as suggested by Amanda Vanstone) and too little for futures as artists, land managers and hunters living on the land they own ... rather than just seek mainstream education, solutions to complex non-mainstream Indigenous circumstances, we should develop curricula relevant to local settings and new enterprises.<sup>37</sup>

Professor Altman expanded this vision for remote communities into a 'hybrid' economy dependent on welfare and transfers for education, health, and other services.<sup>38</sup> He sees Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as artists, rangers, and other land carers, arguing 'for training people for work on their own land, rather than training them for mainstream jobs away from their home communities.'<sup>39</sup>

But Aborigines in remote communities are rejecting this view of their future. They know that if their children cannot speak English, read, write, and have mathematical and computing

skills, they cannot become real rangers. They see youngsters issued with uniforms but working for professionally trained non-Indigenous staff. Parents are annoyed when pretend rangers wreck boats and cars because they cannot read the use and maintenance instructions, and cannot attain marine and other qualifications. When wild pigs dig up gardens, the community has to wait for a real non-Indigenous ranger to shoot them.

Because parents clearly understand these issues, they are clamouring for their children to be taught the mainstream curriculum in English from kindergarten onward. They are confident that they can teach their children their language and culture at home and in the community. Ten years ago, a witness to the Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education stated:

I have always been taught, and I certainly stand by this today, that the languages I have on both my mother's and my father's side are something that I will never lose. I do not need anybody to put it into print to retain it for me, and I do not need anybody to teach me or my children what my language is.<sup>40</sup>

Indigenous parents understand that in today's environment, Indigenous languages and culture will be greatly strengthened and will evolve when communities become literate.

#### *Aboriginal children are different*

Perhaps the strongest support for a separate curriculum for Aboriginal children comes from educators who believe that Aboriginal children are so different from other children that they cannot absorb basic language, mathematical, or other learning unless it is formulated to be culturally 'appropriate.' This does not only apply to history and geography, but to such basics as language and mathematics. Learning English or algebra are thus thought to be different for Aboriginal children than for Chinese, Japanese, French, German, or other Australian children. This has led to the burgeoning of a generously funded industry that has developed curriculum approaches particularly tailored to Aboriginal children, which have resulted in them not being able to speak English, read, write, or count. The Australian Research Council (ARC) is funding multiple projects to develop 'culturally sensitive' curriculums for Aboriginal children. Yet Aboriginal children in the open society attending mainstream schools are managing schooling like their peers.

*Wombat Divine* is an example of a text deemed culturally appropriate to teach literacy for an entire term's 'early childhood' and 'primary' classes for five- to six-year-olds in Homeland Learning Centres. This rather amazing combination of Australian flora and fauna with Christian myths was marketed as a preschool story book—presumably one of many that children of that age would read during the year. Many non-Indigenous parents would consider it too naive to give their young children. But in Homeland Learning Centres, it was used as the sole text for years 1 to 10 in term 4, 2005. Children were expected to work from one large-scale laminated text in the junior class, and one in the senior class. They were not deemed worthy of using individual books. The workbooks based on *Wombat Divine* had model letters to copy, and a great deal of scope for colouring pictures, as would be suited to early schoolers. Reading was principally taught by guessing whole words. The children learned words in the text off by heart, but could not sight-read them.

Elementary addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division drills are not taught in maths classes. Children are not taught mental arithmetic. Typically, at high school age, they are still counting on their fingers, and thus cannot count beyond 10. Exercises set for a week's work would represent one scant lesson's set of exercises in a mainstream primary school. Children are not taught multiplication tables. Teaching aids such as DVDs on which times tables are sung and easily accessible computer maths games are not in use. Instead of using the tried and successful methods that enable most non-Indigenous children to pass year 3, 5, and 7 benchmark tests, and that enable Indigenous children to learn in leaps and bounds once they are exposed to them, academics concerned with Indigenous children's mathematics learning assume that only special,

**Children are not taught mental arithmetic. Typically, at high school age, they are still counting on their fingers, and thus cannot count beyond 10.**

‘culturally appropriate’ methodologies will enable Indigenous children to count. Table 6 shows projects in this area that have been funded by the ARC.

**Table 6:** Selected Australian Research Council funded mathematics curriculum research for Indigenous students

Project	
“integrating algebra and Indigenous contexts in the secondary years of schooling to develop algebra pedagogy that reflects the world view of Indigenous students”	\$159,713
“an alternative, community-based model of Indigenous teacher education aimed at building local capacity to support numeracy learning in the middle years”	\$396,000
“work with eight schools to improve and sustain Years 1–7 mathematics outcomes by enhancing aides’ tutoring effectiveness through culturally appropriate mathematics and mathematics pedagogy knowledge”	\$280,000
“guidelines for development of rigorous and culturally-appropriate practices in mathematics with application across all equity contexts”	\$249,657

**Source:** ARC<sup>41</sup>

Youngsters who cannot read, write, or count cannot proceed to secondary classes. That Aboriginal secondary classes are not taught at mainstream secondary levels is evident from the following extract from a Programme Book for Homeland teachers (table 7):

**Table 7:** ‘Where do we want secondary students to get to by the end of Term 4 in secondary mathematics?’

<p><b>Number sense:</b> Use number patterns and relationships, involving addition, subtraction, multiplication and division Recall or work out mentally, multiplication facts including 2x, 5x and 10x Using strategies including doubling</p>
<p><b>Measurement and data sense:</b> Use appropriate uniform informal units and litre to estimate, describe, measure, compare and order capacities Use digital and analogue clocks, calendars and timetables accurately</p>
<p><b>Spatial sense:</b> Recognise, describe, draw and make a range of 2D shapes and 3D objects, use some geometric language to describe their features</p>

These objectives for secondary school students have been taken from the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework for Band 2, that is, covering year 5 National Numeracy Benchmarks. The material covered in the Homelands Programme Book has been carefully selected to be simpler than the Band 1, year 3 National Numeracy Benchmarks. Such is the difference between the mainstream and Aboriginal curriculums.

Children are not being taught history, geography, or science. Two bright, well-brought-up girls of 15 and 16 who had attended the Homeland Learning Centre where *Wombat Divine* had been a text for nine and 10 years respectively could not read *The Cat in the Hat*, write a paragraph describing their journey from East Arnhem Land to Sydney without assistance with almost every word, did not know when to use capital letters, thought there were 100 minutes in an hour, did not know how many weeks there were in a year, how many grams in a kilogram, how to divide a piece of material in two, or how to add, let alone subtract, numbers higher than 10. They thought a poster of Kevin Rudd during the 2007 election was of George W. Bush. They could not find



Canberra on a map, and did not know what ‘capital of Australia’ meant. They could not read street and shop signs and café menus or use public transport.<sup>42</sup>

## Staffing and teaching

The overwhelming weight of experience, supported by research, suggests that the quality of teaching is the most important determinant of schooling outcomes. The Northern Territory established the Teacher Registration Board to ensure teacher quality. In 2007, in its third year of operation, there were 4,572 teachers registered in the Northern Territory, an increase of 91 teachers in that year.<sup>43</sup> A total of 4,572 teachers were registered under three schedules, with additional provision for teachers still studying, special teachers, and special cases.

**Table 8:** Northern Territory Teacher Registration Board schedules

Schedule	Description	Number of teachers in 2007
A	Four years of tertiary education with at least one year of pre-service teacher education. Many teachers have postgraduate qualifications beyond the required four years.	2,982
B	Less than four years of tertiary education, but at least one year of pre-service teacher education. This category was created for teachers employed in 2005 who were registered under a transition clause.	712
R	At least three years of tertiary education, including at least one year of pre-service teacher education, and registration with an Australian or New Zealand registration authority.	878

**Source:** Northern Territory Teacher Registration Board<sup>44</sup>

Teachers registered under schedules A and R are qualified and fully trained, and those under schedule T are either trade or specialist teachers. But 712 teachers who had been teaching before 2005 only have limited qualifications. Of the 164 teachers who identify as Indigenous, only 75 are qualified teachers. The other 89 Indigenous teachers transferred in 2005 with limited qualifications. Most of these qualifications were from very limited courses at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. These teachers’ skills have not been upgraded. Because they have been isolated in remote communities since graduation from the Batchelor Institute, their literacy and numeracy have eroded. The transferred teachers appear to be heavily concentrated in Indigenous schools.

Teaching classes that combine several age levels requires experienced teachers, but many of the teachers in Indigenous schools are new graduates. Classroom teachers were guaranteed transfers to Darwin, Alice Springs, or Katherine after three years’ service in a remote locality.<sup>45</sup> Inexperienced teachers often find it difficult to maintain class discipline, particularly in mixed-age classes.

An additional problem appears to be the Northern Territory teaching philosophy. Most education graduates of Australian and New Zealand university education faculties have been trained in ‘new maths’ and ‘whole word’ methodologies. The appropriateness of such training is being questioned in mainstream schools throughout Australia because it is argued that it has resulted in falling school achievement levels. This debate is of great importance to the future of Australia’s education and economic productivity, but for children for whom English is a second language, the absence of phonetics is disastrous. The guesswork and repetitiveness of whole word learning not only fails to teach children literacy in English, but closes their minds to learning. Systems such as MULTILIT, Scaffolding Literacy, and Yachad Accelerated Learning have been devised to stimulate literacy. They have frequently been successful. But Northern Territory teachers have

**Of the 164 teachers who identify as Indigenous, only 75 are qualified teachers.**

complained that when they have successfully departed from Aboriginal curriculums to use these approaches, they have been instructed to cease such teaching and return to a curriculum they know results in failure.

Teachers' salaries in January 2007 ranged from \$39,459 to \$70,047, with executive teachers' salaries ranging from \$76,128 to \$105,949. Generous allowances and free housing appropriately reward teachers in remote localities.<sup>46</sup>

Homeland Learning Centres rely heavily on Assistant Teachers at salaries ranging from \$33,642 to \$43,646 at the end of January 2006.<sup>47</sup> An Assistant Teacher Level 1 recognises prior learning in Australian Indigenous languages and culture; an Assistant Teacher Level 2 may be accessed after completion of the equivalent of one year of formal study of the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education General Education Program, or equivalent, or four years' continuous service; an Assistant Teacher Level 3 may be accessed after completion or equivalent of two years of the Batchelor General Education program plus completion of the first year of the teacher training program or equivalent; and an Assistant Teacher Level 4 may be accessed after completion of three years of formal study of the Batchelor General Education Program plus completion of two years of the teacher education program or equivalent.<sup>48</sup>

Although Assistant Teachers are not qualified according to current Teacher Registration Board rules, they may be in charge of a Homeland Learning Centre. They receive a special allowance if they are in charge.<sup>49</sup>

**Communities want full-time resident teachers that will integrate into the community and assist with remedial teaching, adult literacy, sport, banking, and fledgling enterprises.**

#### *Drive-in and fly-in teachers*

Homeland Learning Centres that lack qualified Indigenous teachers are supported by teachers who drive in or fly in, perhaps one or two days a week. They generally arrive at about 10 a.m. and leave shortly after lunch. Many of these teachers also lack standard qualifications, let alone skills in teaching phonetics and English as a second language (ESL). Schools often do not meet until they arrive. In its submission to the Senate Enquiry into the Howard government's Northern Territory Emergency Legislation in August 2007, the Laynhapuy Homelands Association stated that 'there are not enough service providers on the ground to even cover the most basic literacy and numeracy needs across

LHAI (Laynhapuy Homelands Association Incorporated), let alone make rapid improvements to allow for succession in the timeframes mentioned by the Minister.<sup>50</sup>

The fly-in system is costly as well as inefficient, but it benefits Homeland Association management because their airlines are sources of income. Fly-in teachers are located in administrative blocks managed by Homelands managers who thus have a conflict of interest between arranging housing for full-time resident teachers in Homeland Learning Centre schools and earning air charter income. At best, they compromise by having teachers do three-day stints in a community to keep up airline traffic. But communities want full-time resident teachers that will integrate into the community and assist with remedial teaching, adult literacy, sport, banking, and fledgling enterprises. The Amanbidji primary school website (in a community of 60 to 80, with 12 to 18 schoolchildren, situated 475km west of Katherine) indicates that a dedicated full-time resident teacher can make an enormous difference, not only to a school but also to a community.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Teachers' Aides*

Aboriginal schools also rely heavily on Teachers' Aides paid not by the Northern Territory Education Department but by CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) budgets. These Teachers' Aides do not have even the qualifications necessary to be an Assistant Teacher. Many are not articulate or literate in English. CDEP is a patronage employment system that spreads the funding available to selected, that is favoured, recipients. These CDEP-paid Teachers' Aides are often the only teachers in front of a class. The only support they receive is two weeks of so-called training at the beginning of each term, delivered by fly-in teachers who introduce the syllabus for the forthcoming term. A week at the end of term is devoted to writing up school reports with the help of fly-in teachers.

There has not even been the pretence of training Teachers' Aides to enable them to qualify as teachers. To acquire minimal literacy, numeracy, and teaching skills, most of these Teachers' Aides would require several years' tuition and mentoring. Unless such provisions are made, they will continue to be cheated, and so will the children they are supposed to teach.

#### *Current commonwealth funding*

Under recently passed legislation, 200 additional teachers are to be recruited by the Northern Territory by 2011. The Northern Territory would have to build houses for the the 26 Community Education Centres and the 54 Homeland Learning Centres, providing them with free accommodation, to enable these teachers to be resident. Currently, teachers' residences are estimated to cost \$450,000 in the Top End, on average. They have taken years to construct. Houses for the 200 new teachers alone would require \$90 million. Such a sum would not clear the backlog of new residences required for existing drive-in and fly-in teachers. Apart from the financial implications, the Northern Territory has apparently not had the capacity to start building teachers' houses, for which the Howard government allocated funding in 2007. Once again, the Commonwealth Government and the Northern Territory Government appear not to have faced up to the implications of providing education for Aboriginal children in remote communities.

The allocation of funds to enable Teachers' Aides to move from CDEP to Northern Territory Education Department payrolls is long overdue. The funds allocated to support teachers are, however, likely to fall far short of the effort that has to be made to bring unqualified teachers to Teacher Registration Board requirements. The critical issue is how the funding 'to improve literacy' standards is to be spent. On effective mainstream curriculums? On training teachers in ESL teaching? And what about the gap in numeracy?

**The Commonwealth Government and the Northern Territory Government appear not to have faced up to the implications of providing education for Aboriginal children in remote communities.**

#### **Commonwealth of Australia, *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Act 2008***

Funding of \$63,962 is provided for an additional 200 teachers from 2008 to 2011 to be employed by the Northern Territory; which will be responsible for deploying and housing the teachers.

In addition, \$34 million is to fund:

- \$3.485 million to support teachers with a strong emphasis on developing a local Indigenous schools force
- \$7.660 million for additional classrooms
- \$4.854 to improve literacy standards to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students
- \$18.406 million for the creation of 190 jobs in Northern Territory schools for former CDEP participants<sup>52</sup>

### **Tertiary education**

Despite its small population of around 200,000, the Northern Territory has two tertiary institutions, Charles Darwin University and the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, which also aspires to university status. The courses offered in both of these institutions range from vocational sub-certificate courses offered to students who are neither numerate nor articulate or literate in English, to doctoral studies. Both institutions include vocational education. Because they have large roles in vocational education in remote communities, they have a very broad geographic reach, with several campuses, annexes, study centres, and more than 100 vocational course delivery locations.<sup>53</sup> Taxpayers are paying for very considerable duplication.

The Batchelor Institute had its origins in the 1960s in providing courses for Aboriginal teaching and health assistants. It has developed into 'a unique place of knowledge and skills, where Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander Australians can undertake journeys of learning for empowerment and advancement while strengthening identity.<sup>54</sup> Charles Darwin University, established in the 2000s, similarly seeks to develop ‘an understanding of Indigenous perspectives to enable the university to best serve the needs of Indigenous citizens and communities.’<sup>55</sup> It provides mainstream TAFE and university courses.

Charles Darwin University, in 2006, had a total of 513 academic staff; almost half, 213, were vocational education instructors. It was the largest registered training organisation in the Northern Territory, and the principal supplier of Aboriginal vocational courses. Vocational training made a substantial contribution to its finances. In 2004, its total vocational course enrolment was equivalent to 4,686 full-time students.<sup>56</sup> Vocational education was even more important to the Batchelor Institute. In 2006, only 184 out of 931 (less than 20%) of the Batchelor Institute’s mainly Indigenous students were in professional degrees. Master’s and doctoral degrees in ‘Indigenous Knowledges’ have been introduced.<sup>57</sup>

**Table 9:** Size and Indigenous proportion of academic staff, Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Indigenous Education 2006

	<b>Number of Indigenous academic staff</b>	<b>Total number of academic staff</b>	<b>Indigenous proportion of total academic staff</b>
2001	33	159	21%
2006	22	146	15%

**Source:** Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education<sup>58</sup>

Charles Darwin University enrolled 5,766 tertiary students in 2006. Of these, only 242 were Indigenous. Only a little over half (56%) of the Indigenous cohort completed their courses.<sup>59</sup> Education, with an enrolment of 1, 872 (32%) and health, with an enrolment of 1,045 (18%) were again popular, though ‘Society and Culture’ had a higher enrolment than health, with 1,247 students (21%).

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are clearly underrepresented in the Northern Territory’s higher education institutions. The principal reason is, of course, that few Indigenous students can reach the level of secondary schooling that would enable them to qualify for entry to Charles Darwin or other Australian universities. The quality of the Batchelor Institute’s professional, that is, bachelor’s degrees, is an issue. The institute has not been evaluated with other Australian universities.<sup>60</sup> It is extremely doubtful whether holders of the Batchelor Institute’s bachelor’s

degrees would be accepted for postgraduate study elsewhere in Australia. The Batchelor Institute is therefore not a path to law, medicine, or other professional degrees and careers for Indigenous students. The effectiveness of business and engineering studies should be measured by such performance criteria as the salaries received by graduates. The quality of education courses should be judged by the benchmark pass rates of students taught by graduates. Unless such criteria demonstrate that the Batchelor Institute’s degrees are of the same quality as other university degrees in Australia, the Indigenous students are not being treated equitably.

**Few Indigenous students can reach the level of secondary schooling ... to qualify for entry to Charles Darwin or other Australian universities.**

In the rest of Australia, notably in the southern states, increasing numbers of Indigenous students are staying in school until year 12 and qualifying for university entry. The trend among Indigenous university entrants is away from courses in soft ‘cultural studies’ and service occupations such as teaching and nursing, to professional social sciences and disciplines such as medicine, the law, engineering, architecture, and business. The universities are responding. The University of South Australia, for example, has scrapped its Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies. For Indigenous youngsters in the Northern Territory, these are still far distant horizons. Only those attending mainstream boarding schools will be able to join the trend towards tertiary education for professional careers.

### *Vocational training*

The Northern Territory's vocational education inevitably follows the duality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous primary and secondary education. In 2006, Charles Darwin University delivered 2,564,811 hours of vocational curriculum. Over 80% of this was delivered at its urban and regional campuses, in conventional disciplines including apprenticeships in the trades and traineeships in business studies. From these courses, youngsters became qualified electricians, plumbers, construction workers, and other tradesmen, and learned other skills. But 20% of the annual curriculum hours were delivered to remote Indigenous students who lacked elementary literacy and numeracy. Charles Darwin staff conduct 'censuses' that record the existing qualifications of all staff earning CDEP allowances, and record the training those staff wish to receive. Charles Darwin University offers courses of two or more weeks in an even wider range of subjects than its published lists indicate. For example, a two-week course on suicide has been offered, presumably under the mental health rubric. Courses are offered in more than 100 locations, but youngsters and adult men and women are very happy to break the boredom of their lives by attending a course as a paid holiday. As they cannot read or write, they cannot use printed instruction material or write assignments. Charles Darwin University has well-equipped, air conditioned trucks that open into air conditioned classrooms for such courses. Computers are on offer. Pass rates are high, with certificates I, II, III and even IV freely dispensed because everyone knows that they are only valid for CDEP jobs.

Most of the of the 847 students enrolled in 2006 in the Batchelor Institute's advanced diploma, diploma and graduate diploma, certificate and graduate certificate, and preparation for tertiary studies courses also have weak literacy and numeracy. The Batchelor Institute also provides 'transitional' curriculums of spoken and written English that should have been covered in high school years. Other courses included sport and recreation, art and crafts, Indigenous culture, general construction, broadcasting, conservation and land management, and business. The Batchelor Institute's concentration has been on health (161 students in 2006) and education (135 students), to provide Aboriginal aides to staff the Northern Territory's services for Aborigines.<sup>61</sup>

Remote communities complain that young men go off to train for course after course but do not learn anything useful. Non-Indigenous tradesmen have to be brought in to even large Indigenous communities to do the simplest electrical, plumbing, and other construction jobs. Indigenous staff with a certificate III in clerical work and administration cannot draft simple letters, maintain financial data, write minutes at meetings, or maintain communication by email.

### **A lost generation**

Ignoring the appalling effects of the Northern Territory's separate Aboriginal education system has led to the existence of communities where the only literate and numerate English speakers are a few older men and women who were educated by missionaries. Missionary schools only aimed to train boys to be bush workers and girls to be domestic servants, but at least they taught them English and basic literacy and numeracy. A few very bright children escaped from remote communities on scholarships. The mission schools were not far behind mainstream primary schooling until secondary education began to be general in the 1950s. But during the past 30 years, Indigenous and non-Indigenous schooling has diverged sharply. Non-Indigenous children now expect to study at least to year 10, and many continue to year 12. It is becoming recognised that many children are better off in apprenticeships or traineeships after year 10, or simply getting work experience before perhaps moving to further training later. The proportion of unskilled and low-skilled jobs in the labour market is shrinking. The core components expected of a youngster with year 10 education are a firm grasp of spoken English, the three Rs, some general knowledge, familiarity with computers, and the social skills acquired in good classrooms.

**Youngsters and adult men and women are very happy to break the boredom of their lives by attending a course as a paid holiday. As they cannot read or write, they cannot use printed instruction material or write assignments.**

Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory have failed to provide Indigenous students with these essentials for entry into the labour force. Some 5,000 Indigenous teenagers, and another 5,000 young men and women in their 20s, are unable to speak English, and are illiterate and non-numerate. They cannot read road signs, menus, or instructions on packages of medicines, cleaning materials, and other packaged goods. Aborigines are often accused of using taxis wastefully, but many cannot read well enough to use public transport. They cannot fill shelves in a supermarket, or serve in a shop or café. Many somehow obtain driving licenses even though they could not pass the written test. The cost in road accidents is evident in wrecked vehicles in the Top End. Indigenous workers are accused of using equipment carelessly, but they cannot read instructions and manuals. These young people's education has made them more foreign in their own country than the latest immigrants from Somalia. Indigenous youngsters are incredibly vulnerable in their remote communities, where only an occasional hunt or search for bush food may break the anomie of an endless string of workless days. They are even more vulnerable when they visit Darwin, Alice Springs, or other towns. The stories of Indigenous youngsters staging break-ins to get into jail for the regular meals, sport, and literacy classes it offers are not apocryphal.

To overcome the damage these youngsters' education has done to them would require sheltered accommodation in English-speaking environments, mentored part-time introductory jobs, and one-on-one tuition for one or two years. The cost of sheltered accommodation for teenagers who are unable to live at home is \$900 a week in Sydney.<sup>62</sup> If the Northern Territory were serious about tackling the deficit its Aboriginal education policies have created, the cost would be between \$500 million and \$1 billion.

Such sums are not likely to be forthcoming. These youngsters are not likely to be compensated for the years they have lost. Hopefully, some at least will find a combination of work and tuition in literacy and maths in English-speaking environments that will enable them to progress quickly so that they can return to full-time education when their English, literacy, and numeracy skills are adequate, or at least get jobs and learn as they work. For most of these 10,000 young women and men, however, remedial English, literacy, and numeracy courses in their home communities will be their only option. The resources currently used in pretend vocational courses could be used for a literacy and numeracy campaign for the youngsters who have been left behind, with new criteria for funding and monitoring such a campaign to ensure that students and teachers recognise that real results are expected.

## Endnotes

- 1 The principal reports were: Aboriginal Consultative Group, *Education for Aborigines: Report to the Schools Commission* (1975); *Access to Education: An Evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme* (Watts Report) (1976); *Aboriginal Futures: A Review of Research and Developments and Related Policies in the Education of Aborigines* (Watts Report) (1981); Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Education* (1985); *Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs* (1985); *Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force* (Hughes Report) (1988); Commonwealth of Australia, *A Chance for the Future: Training in Skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Management and Development* (1989); Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Review of the Training for Aborigines Program* (1991); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, *Review of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy* (1994); Commonwealth of Australia, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (1995); Northern Territory Government, *Learning Lessons: An Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Collins Report) (1999).
- 2 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education, *Katu Kalpa: Report on the Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Education and Training Programs for Indigenous Australians* (2000).
- 3 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Report on Rural and Remote Education* (2000).
- 4 As above, 4.
- 5 R. G. Schwab and D. Sutherland, *Literacy for Life: A Scoping Study for a Community Literacy Empowerment Project* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2004); J. Taylor and O. Stanley, *The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research working paper 28/2005 (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2005).
- 6 Northern Territory, Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Annual Report, 2001–2 to Annual Report, 2006–7* (2002–2007).
- 7 The Commonwealth of Australia, Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services* (various issues, most recent 2008), and *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* (various issues, most recent 2007). The failings of Indigenous education are considerably understated in these series. Participation rates given, for example, are based on enrolments rather than attendance. Benchmark passes do not include either the numbers of children tested or those excluded from benchmark tests. Increases in Aboriginal enrolments in vocational courses that do not require entry literacy and numeracy are reported to show increases in vocational education participation. The series is misleading because it breaks the fundamental evaluation rule that those responsible for policy implementation should not evaluate their own work.
- 8 K. Storry, *What is Working in Good Schools in Remote Indigenous Communities?*, CIS Issue Analysis 86 (Sydney: CIS, 2007).
- 9 HREOC, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission submission to *Report on Rural and Remote Education*, (Canberra, 2000), 11.
- 10 As above, 12.
- 11 As above, 15.
- 12 HREOC, Northern Territory Department of Education submission to *Report on Rural and Remote Education* (2000), 4.
- 13 N. Rothwell, 'On the Brink,' *Weekend Australian Magazine* (15–16 March 2008), 24.
- 14 Northern Territory, Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Indigenous Languages and Culture in Northern Territory Schools, Report 2004–2005*, (n.d.), and *Towards an Indigenous Education Plan 2006–2009, Indigenous Education Strategic Plan* (n.d.), 4–6. The published data understate the problem of Indigenous student achievement by not publishing the ratio of students that sat for benchmark tests to passes.
- 15 As above, 1.
- 16 Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, 'It's Off to School for 42,000 Territorians' (3 January 2008), [http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/corporate/newsroom/media\\_releases2008/off\\_to\\_school\\_for\\_42000territorians.shtml](http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/corporate/newsroom/media_releases2008/off_to_school_for_42000territorians.shtml).
- 17 The 2008 enrolment numbers reported are somewhat below the count of 43,381 students attending school and 44,500 enrolled school by school in the 2006 census.
- 18 Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Annual Report* (2007), 34, 36, 50.

- <sup>19</sup> As above.
- <sup>20</sup> Although 61 Homeland Learning Centres have been in existence at some time, some may no longer be open.
- <sup>21</sup> HREOC, Northern Territory Department of Education submission to *Report on Rural and Remote Education*.
- <sup>22</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education policies (n.d.), and Department of Education press release (10 August 2006).
- <sup>23</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education, *Katu Kalpa*, 4.37.
- <sup>24</sup> Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Building Better Schools* (2005).
- <sup>25</sup> Tiwi College Project, 'About the Tiwi College Project,' [http://www.tiwicollegeproject.com.index.php/About Us](http://www.tiwicollegeproject.com.index.php/About%20Us).
- <sup>26</sup> 'A Brief Note from the Eye of the Storm,' *The Copland Diary*, (18 February 2008), [http://coplanddiary.blogspot.com/2008\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://coplanddiary.blogspot.com/2008_02_01_archive.html).
- <sup>27</sup> 'Approaching Quarter Time,' *The Copland Diary* (2 March 2008), [http://coplanddiary.blogspot.com/2008\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://coplanddiary.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html).
- <sup>28</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education, Science and Training, *Whole of School Intervention Strategy Parent School Partnership Initiative, Concept Plan and Application for Funding* (n.d.).
- <sup>29</sup> As above, 39.
- <sup>30</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education, *Katu Kalpa*, 5.1.
- <sup>31</sup> Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Annual Report 2004–5* (2006), 42. The document notes that Northern Territory schools are grouped (according to Australian Bureau of Statistics classifications) into three geographic categories: provincial (covering Darwin, Palmerston and Darwin Rural up to and including Bees Creek), remote (covering Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin rural further than Bees Creek), and very remote (which includes all other areas of the Northern Territory).
- <sup>32</sup> R. G. Schwab and D. Sutherland, *Literacy for Life: A Scoping Study for a Community Literacy Empowerment Project* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2004); J. Taylor and O. Stanley, *The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region*.
- <sup>33</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education, *Annual Report, 2006–7* (2007), 39.
- <sup>34</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education, *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006–2009* (n.d.), published a table showing increasing numbers of students achieving year 3, 5, and 7 reading and numeracy benchmarks (4), but did not give percentages of students achieving these benchmarks.
- <sup>35</sup> Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Annual Report 2006–7*, 3.
- <sup>36</sup> Northern Territory Government, 'National Assessment Program,' [http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/teaching\\_and\\_learning/assessment\\_standards\\_reporting/nap/index.shtml](http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/teaching_and_learning/assessment_standards_reporting/nap/index.shtml).
- <sup>37</sup> J. Altman, letter to the editor, *The Australian* (2 June 2006).
- <sup>38</sup> *ABC News Online* (14 September, 2007).
- <sup>39</sup> J. Altman, 'The Future of Indigenous Australia,' *Arena Magazine* 64 (September 2006), 8–10.
- <sup>40</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education, *Katu Kalpa*, 4.36.
- <sup>41</sup> The National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) Data Set, New and Ongoing Indigenous Education Projects.
- <sup>42</sup> For further details see H. Hughes, 'Strangers in Their Own Land: A Diary of Hope,' *Quadrant* 52:3 (March 2008), 40–46.
- <sup>43</sup> Northern Territory Teacher Registration Board, *Annual Report, 2007*, 3.
- <sup>44</sup> As above, 17.
- <sup>45</sup> *Northern Territory Public Sector 2005–7 Teachers and Educators Certified Agreement*, 18.
- <sup>46</sup> As above, 65.
- <sup>47</sup> As above, 66.
- <sup>48</sup> As above, 16–17.
- <sup>49</sup> As above, 15.
- <sup>50</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Enquiry on Northern Territory Emergency Response, submission by the Laynhapuy Homelands Association Incorporated (9 August 2007).
- <sup>51</sup> Amanbidji Primary School, 'Amanbidji Primary School,' <http://www.schools.nt.edu.au/kathgs/amanbidji/amanbidji.htm>.



- <sup>52</sup> Julia Gillard, 'Second Reading Speech—*Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008*' (14 February 2008), <http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/gillard/releases/seconddreadingspeechindi,,20,2,2008>.
- <sup>53</sup> The Batchelor Institute has two campuses and four annexes as well as community study centres and locations of enrolled students. Charles Darwin University's principal campus is at Casuarina in Darwin, but it also has campuses in Alice Springs, Jabiru, Katherine, Nhulunbuy, Tennant Creek, and Yulara, and delivers vocational courses at more than 100 locations. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, *Annual Report, 2006* (2007), and Charles Darwin University, *Annual Report 2006* (2007).
- <sup>54</sup> Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, *Annual Report, 2006*, 2.
- <sup>55</sup> Charles Darwin University, *Annual Report 2006*, 48.
- <sup>56</sup> CDU eNews, 'CDU Indigenous VET Figures the Best Yet' (3 March 2005), <http://lists.cdu.edu.au/pipermail/cdu-media-releases/2005-March/000536.html>.
- <sup>57</sup> Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, *Annual Report, 2006*, 11.
- <sup>58</sup> Charles Darwin University *Annual Report 2006*, 15, and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, *Annual Report, 2006*, 27.
- <sup>59</sup> Charles Darwin University, *Annual Report 2006*, 11.
- <sup>60</sup> The Melbourne Institute ranked Charles Darwin University 37th out of 38 universities in its 2006 rankings. The Batchelor Institute was not ranked.
- <sup>61</sup> Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, *Annual Report, 2006*, 11.
- <sup>62</sup> This is the full cost quoted by Stepping Stone House, a Sydney facility that accommodates and supports young people so they can work and study. These youngsters have had to leave home through no fault of their own. They do not have the skills to live away from home without 24-hour support.

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**Emeritus Professor Helen Hughes** has worked in the economics of development for many years, including a period of senior management at the World Bank followed by membership of the United Nations Committee for Development Planning. She returned to Australia to a chair in economics at the Australian National University, where she was also the executive director of the National Centre of Development Studies. She was the Distinguished Fellow of the Economics Society of Australia in 2004.

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