Section 3

Aboriginal wellbeing and learning for life

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Introduction

In South Australia, the substantial disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples is well documented [1]. Key social and economic indicators such as poverty, employment, housing, education, justice and health show that Aboriginal peoples are at significantly higher risk of poorer wellbeing and social exclusion compared with non-Aboriginal South Australians, and represent the most disadvantaged population groups in our community.

In order to understand Aboriginal learning, development and wellbeing today, the impact of dispossession of lands, colonisation, genocide, lost and stolen generations of families and the attempted decimation of the innumerable cultures of the peoples inhabiting Australia before 1770, must be acknowledged [2,3]. Therefore, from a social and political perspective, for there to be a start to improving Aboriginal wellbeing, a process of true reconciliation, that acknowledges the past in the light of the present, needs to be embraced across all the sectors of society, and will require a substantial change in attitudes, practices and the sharing of power [4,5].

Access to education for Aboriginal peoples is a basic human right enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and strengthened in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Education is a key to improving life chances and life choices. However, many young Aboriginal people are disadvantaged in terms of their access to appropriate and high quality education, and, as a consequence, are not reaching formal educational milestones, thus perpetuating intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage [6]. The extent of this disadvantage, and the challenges and opportunities to overcome it, are well documented [6].

While there has been improvement in educational outcomes for Aboriginal students over the last decade in Australia - participation in education has increased across all education levels (schools, universities, and vocational education and training) as well as the number of students graduating from Year 12 and attaining post-school qualifications - progress has been slow, and significant inequalities between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students continue to exist [1]. These outcomes are linked to the historical exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from the Australian education system, both formally through past government policies and informally through the failure to deliver educational services that meet their needs [7]. There has also been tacit acceptance over many years of the non-achievement of educational standards by Aboriginal children and young people by those with the power to remedy it [8].

In order to improve educational outcomes further, there is a need to address all the factors that impact on the ability of Aboriginal students to access and to engage successfully in education. There is much ground to be made up if the following objective in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* is to be achieved: '[That] all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens ...[and] working with all school sectors to 'close the gap' for young Indigenous Australians' [9].

Commonwealth, State and Territory government policies have sought to improve and strengthen:

- 'preschool access and attendance as a precondition of 'school readiness';

- school attendance;

- the quality of school leadership and teaching;

- the design and delivery of culturally relevant and capability appropriate curriculum and teaching approaches;

- literacy and numeracy outcomes;

- post-school transitions into employment through the delivery of improved school and non-school based vocational and employment pathways; and

- school, family and community partnerships to support improved school attendance, engagement, retention and attainment' [10].

The extent of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples has also framed a number of approaches in South Australia. *Doing it right* is the South Australian Government's policy framework for action: the Government's commitment to Aboriginal families and communities in South Australia [11].

The *Doing it right* policy framework:

- *recognises and respects Indigenous people as the original owners of this land with continuing rights and responsibilities associated with traditional ownership and connection to land and waters;*

- *acknowledges the impact on Indigenous people of dispossession from the land and traditional culture and the need for this to be understood by all South Australians as a basis for genuine reconciliation;*

- *respects the unique culture and customs of the traditional owners of the land and supports efforts to protect and promote cultural heritage as a cornerstone of family and community life;*

- *recognises that Aboriginal people represent the most disadvantaged group in our community;*

- *acknowledges that the high levels of poverty, unemployment and poor physical and mental health experienced by Aboriginal Australians are unacceptable and must be redressed if Aboriginal families and communities are to participate fully in the life of our state; and*

- *respects the cultural, social, political and economic rights of Indigenous peoples and affirms equity with other South Australians in citizenship entitlements and participation* [11].

Within this framework, the following goals are outlined:

- *That Aboriginal South Australians will have the same choices as other South Australians and the same opportunities to share in the social and economic advantages of living in our state.*

- *That all South Australians will continue to be enriched by Indigenous culture and values, with respect by the wider community based on a new understanding and mutual esteem.*

- *That engagement and partnership with Aboriginal communities will be the platform for sustained improvement in the well being of Aboriginal families* [11].

To this end, South Australia's Strategic Plan has a number of targets aimed at improving the wellbeing and opportunities for Aboriginal peoples in all areas of life. It also reflects the positive contribution that Aboriginal communities make to the State, by including targets for attaining sustainability and fostering creativity [12]. The *DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005–2010* is the South Australian Government's plan to strengthen relationships between the South Australian educational system setting and Aboriginal peoples across South Australia [13].

Understanding Aboriginal wellbeing and learning for life

Most social indicators of Aboriginal wellbeing, such as the ones included later in this report, tend to reflect a 'deficit' model, highlighting problems and the extent of disadvantage experienced over a lifetime, and between generations. While there is an imperative to illustrate the unmet need for appropriate resources and services, this approach overlooks the strengths, capabilities and passion that the majority of Aboriginal peoples demonstrate in caring for their family, community, their environment, and their lands; and fails to represent the holistic nature of Aboriginal cultures and histories [14, 15].

In this report, an understanding of Aboriginal wellbeing is drawn from the definition proposed by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) Working Party in 1989:

Not just the physical wellbeing of the individual but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. This is the whole-of-life view and it also includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life [16].

The NAHS definition notes that achieving wellbeing is an attribute of communities as well as of the individuals within a community; and it identifies cultural wellbeing, along with physical, social, spiritual and emotional wellbeing, as equally important [16]. Culture and identity are central to Aboriginal perceptions of wellbeing [17]. Aboriginal cultures are numerous and heterogeneous, made up of many different kinship and language groups that have adapted to diverse living conditions throughout Australia over thousands of years. These cultures are dynamic and evolving [17]. For example, over fifty per cent of Aboriginal peoples identify with a cultural grouping, and at least eleven per cent speak an Indigenous language at home [18].

The NAHS definition emphasises a holistic approach, and highlights the importance of many of the determinants of learning and development identified in the previous section of the atlas. However, an understanding of Aboriginal wellbeing encompasses a far broader interpretation of 'community', which has family and kin relationships at its centre; and the family relationship or kinship system is not necessarily confined to a geographic area, and the connections are not weakened by distance [19].

With respect to the way community functions, Chong and colleagues (2009) have observed that:

Our definition of what is meant by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community functioning hinges on the understanding of the primacy of family relationships, roles and responsibilities, and connection to land in social and business life. However, people from family and language groups are usually living in disparate places. It is rarely the case that an Indigenous 'community' consists only of people from the one family or language group. The implications of this are that an Indigenous person may be part of many communities. For example, a person may be part of a culture community because of family relationships and connection to land. There may also be membership of a 'historical community' in the place where the person grew up and there is a shared history. Then there is membership of the community in the place where the person currently lives [14].

Thus, an Aboriginal community's social capabilities are fundamental to enhancing individual and collective knowledge and wellbeing, engaging in social and economic development, and in resolving local issues [14].

These attributes are affirmed in the United Nations' *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, to which Australia is a signatory. There are implications for the provision of learning, development and education and training services by government and other providers. In particular, the *Declaration* recognises "the right of indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child", "the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" and "the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons" [20]. States have responsibilities for ensuring that these and other rights outlined are protected and supported, and that mechanisms to enable these rights are implemented.

In order to uphold these rights, Aboriginal cultures and histories need to underpin policy, planning and service delivery in the sectors responsible for Aboriginal wellbeing, learning and development, and Aboriginal peoples must be 'included to do business' [21]. Culture is not something that can be easily understood by non-Aboriginal people, and it must be respected, acknowledged and included appropriately [21].

Supportive pathways to Aboriginal wellbeing and learning for life

The three priority outcomes in the Council of Australian Governments' framework for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage offer a vision for a better life for Aboriginal peoples [22]. They are not isolated outcomes, but interdependent upon each other. The first, 'Positive child development and prevention of violence, crime and self harm' are key determinants in the achievement of the second one, 'Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity'. Without these conditions in place, the potential to achieve the third, 'Improved wealth creation and economic sustainability' is impaired.

A range of determinants of Aboriginal wellbeing, learning and development are included here. Each is embedded in the overall social structure, in political, economic and educational systems, in diverse cultural requirements, and in local community and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples' actions [3, 23, 24]. There is a strong thread of interdependence between them, and the nature of the inter-relationships is complex. For example,

post-secondary educational attainment is linked to year 10 and 12 retention and attainment [25]. These, in turn, are related to household income, education and employment, and so forth. None of these policy areas in isolation will achieve the priority outcomes mentioned above, but they have the capacity to address the existing intergenerational cycle of disadvantage for Aboriginal peoples.

1. Health and cultural wellbeing

Health status and learning and development are closely inter-related and this relationship is critically important for Aboriginal wellbeing [26]. Education plays a central role in the creation of health, and can be understood both as a determinant of health and as an intervention to address health inequalities [26, 27]. However, it should be remembered that, for Aboriginal peoples, the attempted erosion of their pre-colonisation knowledge and practices about life skills, health and survival, which were integrally bound up with land, its ownership, custodianship and use for economic and cultural purposes, has contributed to the current inequalities [26]. Other consequences of colonisation and its aftermath have included the pervasiveness of loss and grief, and the impact of racism and discrimination, which significantly affect wellbeing, learning and development [28, 29].

Maternal health, nutrition, early attachment, cultural identity, and good physical and emotional health in childhood are important for early learning and development, readiness to learn, education participation and achievement, and participation in the work force [18]. For example, high rates of malnutrition, hepatitis B, anaemia, and vision and hearing disabilities disproportionately affect young Aboriginal children and impact upon their learning and development outcomes [30].

The health of Aboriginal South Australians is also more likely to be affected by exposure to environmental factors such as poor housing and inadequate infrastructure [1]. Many Aboriginal peoples living in remote communities do not yet have access to affordable healthy food, quality housing, reliable supplies of water and electricity or adequate sewerage and drainage systems, all of which are essential for health, wellbeing, learning and development [1].

Both health status and educational experiences, and the interactions between them, have effects that reverberate throughout an individual's life-course and on to subsequent generations. For example, the falling Aboriginal infant mortality rate in the 1970s resulted in an increased demand on the education and health systems in subsequent decades; but, at the same time, the premature mortality of adults reduced the number of senior education and health

leaders in communities who could advise and lead their peoples [27].

Quality of health and control of traditional lands also affect community wellbeing and the capacity of Aboriginal communities to develop strong governance structures. Community-controlled primary health care services, for example, play an important role in health promotion and education and in improving community strength, health and hope through self-determination; and strong involvement by parents in schools can influence educational outcomes [31, 32]. The National Enquiry into Rural and Remote Education observed that 'where parents and community members play an active and decision-making role in the school, students enjoy their schooling and feel optimistic about their current and future prospects' [30].

2. Early life factors

Early life factors and experiences influence growth, the ability to learn, physical and mental health, and resilience in later life, and may have effects across generations. The extent of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal communities and by individual families impacts significantly on their youngest and most vulnerable members. Factors such as low birthweight, failure to thrive and the effects of trauma can have serious consequences for children's development and wellbeing [33]. Parents in communities experiencing such adversity may suffer high rates of emotional distress that also affect their children, especially they are left without healing and resolution [33].

The imposition of mainstream culture and services has not delivered the necessary improvements in wellbeing to Aboriginal families and communities; and there is a recognition that a 'both ways' approach to service design and delivery is required, which places value and respect on practices from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures [34, 35]. In order to enable a 'both ways' approach, cultural knowledge from the diversity of Aboriginal communities needs to be respected and sit alongside mainstream early childhood services. This includes knowledge about conception and birth, family roles and responsibilities, language, land, discipline, emotional development, dreaming, play and exploration, and physical development. In this way, the importance of the early years of life for subsequent health, development and learning in childhood, adolescence and adult life can be strengthened by the incorporation of Aboriginal child-rearing, parenting and cultural practices [36]. Many of these practices also have positive lessons for non-Aboriginal child rearing and early child development practices.

3. Housing

As a population, Aboriginal peoples are more likely than non-Aboriginal people to live in multiple family households, particularly in rural areas and in those communities where the properties are owned or managed by the community. Consequently, and particularly in these areas, Aboriginal households are more likely to contain a greater number of people, and households will vary in size as community members come and go.

Aboriginal people are more likely to access accommodation in the public rental sector, while non-Aboriginal people are more likely to own or be purchasing their home. This again reflects their greater economic disadvantage, and also highlights the presence of racial discrimination in sections of the private rental market [37]. A significant proportion of Aboriginal people rely on the South Australian Housing Trust, the Aboriginal Housing Authority and Aboriginal community or cooperative housing groups for their accommodation. However, there is much heterogeneity within the Aboriginal population, and not all families are reliant on public housing.

Access to safe, clean shelter, which allows formal and informal learning to take place, is important for wellbeing and development of all children, young people and adults.

4. Income, employment and socioeconomic position

Aboriginal peoples, as a group, are widely recognised as being financially disadvantaged. Low levels of income are a strong indicator of relative disadvantage in areas such as educational attainment, labour force activity, housing and health. The lack of formal education has been identified by some researchers as the largest single factor associated with poor outcomes for Aboriginal employment [38].

As a group, the levels of income of Aboriginal peoples tend to be lower than those of non-Aboriginal people in comparable circumstances. Those who live in remote areas often have limited access to services taken for granted by people living in urban areas. Many have to rely on government allowances as their major source of income, in the absence of employment and training opportunities [39].

Research shows that the more control a person has over their work and life, the better their health outcomes [40]. A lack of control over one's life can be replicated in biological responses to stress that can be pathways to poor physical and mental health and further disadvantage [28, 41]. Health-harming levels of stress can occur as a result of the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples in a dominant culture in which

they are socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged, and where racism and discrimination are endemic [42, 43]. Aboriginal peoples and communities must have control over their lives and lands to progress self-determination, and enhance their wellbeing; but they must be supported to do so, in an environment of harmony and mutual respect [42].

Opportunities for the further establishment of Aboriginal-run enterprises and the employment of young Aboriginal people following their participation in education and training are important areas for improving income and socioeconomic position. Aboriginal peoples can experience high levels of control over local governance arrangements, providing the opportunity to develop sound, stable, culturally appropriate governing arrangements to meet the needs of their communities. Effective governance training is a key ingredient in supporting this control [44].

5. Learning, education and training

Young Aboriginal children learn through their culture and the cultures of others, and their participation in those cultures shapes their identity [31]. They come to formal educational settings as experienced, active learners with skills and capacities which need to be appropriately recognised and acknowledged in mainstream settings. They may also have need of extra support (for example, if they have a disability such as hearing loss). The presence of an Aboriginal preschool worker significantly increases preschool participation rates, as do programs that encourage and support parents' involvement.

Factors linked to Aboriginal students' individual life experiences have a direct impact on their capacity to engage with school and learn, and these interact in complex ways [45].They include having basic material and personal support needs met; their experience of the formal learning environment; their foundation skills such as communication, English language skills and social interaction; personal and cultural identity; Aboriginal role models; social behaviour and engagement with school; learning support needs; and life and vocational goals and aspirations [26].

Many of these are influenced by family, community, cultural and social contexts. For example, past negative experiences of school, and those of their parents and other family members, can impact on school attendance and retention [45]. Issues which may affect school experience include institutional, peer and teacher racism in school environments; ineffective racial harassment policies; ineffective grievance procedures; lack of respect and value for all cultures; poor communication processes with individuals, peers, parents and communities; confusion about the roles of Aboriginal education

workers; the need for cultural awareness training of teachers and counsellors; the need for support structures such as dedicated spaces for Aboriginal students' homework and tutoring assistance; population mobility; and poverty [46]. Others have described a mindset within schools that accepts absenteeism and poor educational outcomes from Aboriginal students as 'normal' [47]. In contrast, schools with high Aboriginal attendance levels attribute their success to well-trained, culturally sensitive teachers who can build a rapport with Aboriginal students and their families, offer additional support and develop individualised learning plans [31].

Educational institutions, such as schools, are based around systems that include political, cultural, community, home, school, year-level, classroom, and peer groups [27].These can interact with each other in supportive and non-supportive ways, and should be institutions that build wellbeing and give students a sense of belonging, participating and being valued. Non-racist, inclusive environments are essential starting points in classrooms [24].

Sensitivity to cultural difference and attaining a cultural fit, by aligning curriculum, delivery and teaching with local Aboriginal cultural assumptions, perceptions, values and needs are essential for education and training to succeed [48, 49]. This can be achieved through programs and approaches that recognise Aboriginal culture and values within a learning environment that preserves and reinforces identity, and provides a range of culturally appropriate mechanisms for support [17, 50, 51]. Cultural diversity and knowledge need to be valued highly and made explicit in all educational settings. This will encourage greater involvement of Aboriginal parents, caregivers and community members in the education of their children. In addition, cultural fit will be enhanced by programs that support wider Aboriginal community goals, as opposed to those which may directly or indirectly work against them [14, 52]. For example, breakfast programs in schools might be better replaced by effective services which enable families to feed their children themselves and prevent the likelihood of service dependency.

While a drop in retention persists as Aboriginal students move toward the post-compulsory years of schooling, they are over-represented in vocationally-oriented school courses [49]. Many young Aboriginal people are intentionally pursuing the practical, hands-on learning that VET-in-School courses can provide [53]. Increasing numbers of Aboriginal students are also undertaking and completing courses at the Bachelor degree and above levels in the tertiary education sector [54]. However, VET participation is not yet providing remote and desert

peoples with pathways from learning to work or into higher level education [55].

A range of similar issues affect participation in post-school education and training by Aboriginal South Australians, including access to educational institutions, socioeconomic factors, racism and discrimination, and community expectations. Government policies have been developed to address some of these issues. It is recognised that, while there has been considerable progress to date to improve Aboriginal educational achievements in South Australia, the level of educational disadvantage that Aboriginal people continue to experience is still too high [56]. The ongoing nature of this disadvantage is exemplified by the disparities in results achieved by young Aboriginal students under NAPLAN [56].

Towards hope: principles and actions to support Aboriginal learning and development

Aboriginal value systems, including values relating to education and learning, often differ to the values held by mainstream society [57]. Mainstream society values education for its ability to develop individual skills and competencies and facilitate economic prosperity. Aboriginal peoples generally value education and learning for its ability to develop community capability [14]. Learning is valued if it is part of the social and cultural goals of the community, and as a means of developing an individual's capacity which resides in the relationships of the community [58].

Modern concepts of learning recognise that knowledge is culturally constructed, that students bring with them diverse experiences and bodies of knowledge, a broad range of skills and understanding of language and concepts, and have different ways of learning [59]. All students need educational experiences which are meaningful for the learner and which reflect the learner's background and history. Aboriginal learners are no exception [57].

Effective learning depends on the sensitive recognition of the broad life situation of the learner, which includes:
- the learner's beliefs about self, society and about schooling;
- current family and community situations;
- goals and expectations for participation in school and beyond;
- current knowledge and skills about how to learn;
- current curriculum-related knowledge and skills; and
- the nature of the educational environment that supports learning [26].

For Aboriginal students, teacher-student relationships can be significantly enhanced where teachers develop their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of their students' backgrounds, and are inclusive of local communities and cultures in developing their teaching programs [59]. Many of the curriculum programs which have been reported to be effective for Aboriginal learners are those which have been developed in true partnership with local Aboriginal educators and communities [5].

Seven key factors have been identified, which lead to positive learning outcomes for Aboriginal Australians in VET programs when continuously present [60]. These are:
- community involvement and ownership;
- Aboriginal identities, cultures, knowledge and values;
- working in true partnerships;
- flexibility in course design, content and delivery;
- quality staff and committed advocacy;
- extensive student support services; and
- appropriate funding that allows for sustainability.

The fact that significant problems continue to exist in Aboriginal peoples' education and wellbeing points the existence of powerful and static forces [27]. Conceptual change and determined action will be required at multiple levels and sustained for more than a generation, to remedy this situation and build on the progress that has been achieved for Aboriginal students, families and communities [26]. The responsibility for making improvements in educational outcomes should be a shared one [61]. That will only happen when preschools, schools and other educational bodies become more knowledgeable about, engaged with and respectful of the backgrounds, lives and aspirations of their Aboriginal students and their families, and when, in turn, Aboriginal families become more familiar with, confident about and engaged in the work of schools and other learning places [61].

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