

# Identity, Culture and the Politics of Community Development



# Identity, Culture and the Politics of Community Development

Edited by

Stacey-Ann Wilson

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## PREFACE

The idea for this book project came about when I coordinated a community development course as Senior Research Fellow at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The course was geared toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and those working in Indigenous communities. The intent of the book was for community development practitioners – not necessarily academics – to be able to reflect on community development practices in the context of identity, culture, politics and globalisation. When the project was eventually pitched to academics, it was geared primarily to those who were active in community development so that it was not merely a theoretical exercise, but where theory met practice.

There were concerns that the topics were too eclectic and not focussed enough on the usual preoccupation of community development in a globalised world, that of north-to-south development. The strength of this book is that it is preoccupied with a localised politics of community development. Another strength is that it focuses attention on an aspect of community development that is often overlooked: identity and culture.

While the project went through different iterations, the focus on identity and culture did not waiver from its initial articulation to my Community Development course participants at QUT. Happily, two short papers in this volume are from participants in that course. I also need to make special mention of my colleague Camille Nakhid at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, the contributing editor of this volume. Despite her own schedule, she provided invaluable support in the mid-stage of the project. She gave of her time to review and comment on chapters and I thank her greatly for that.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my assistant on the community development course, the deadly Darren Brady, now Program Director (Queensland) at Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME); who provided tremendous support during and after the course at QUT.

Finally, but certainly not least, I want to thank the contributors for sharing their original work for this publication and for their patience as this project went through its different iterations. This book quite literally could not have happened without you.



## INTRODUCTION

# THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

STACEY-ANN WILSON

If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.

—Abraham Maslow

The relationship between identity, culture and community development is immeasurable and yet community development planners and practitioners often ignore these connections in their homogenising development initiatives. Project designs, especially top-down community projects often do not take into account the nuanced ways in which cultural identity and the associated traditions and ways of being impact on the ways communities respond to development initiatives, which ultimately affects development outcomes. Consultation with communities is too often done after the project has been conceived, asking communities to simply rubber stamp project designs. Consultation has to give way to incorporation if development efforts are to be successful. Communities will need to be able to inject their cultural identities and sometimes even their community politics in the design in order to overcome the homogenising and exclusionary nature of many top-down community development initiatives.

The underlying premise of this book is that community development in nearly every society must take into consideration identity and culture, be it national identity, clan, tribe, ethnicity, indigeneity or professional identities or location-based identities. Identity and culture are important and relevant to national and regional development efforts and outcomes, they are not separate. It is important that community development practitioners not just passively acknowledge culture, but be mindful of the political imperative of incorporating cultural systems, cultural values and

traditions into community development initiatives. These efforts will have positive impact not only on getting community buy-in, but also increases the likelihood of project success as community members commit and take responsibility and ownership for the outcomes.

The politics of community development in relation to the exclusion and inclusion of identity and culture is most evident in big budget top-down (government and non-governmental organisation) initiatives. However, bottom-up (local) development projects have also been guilty of selective exclusion/inclusion particularly in diverse communities. The politics that goes along with community development cannot be ignored. Power relations within communities determine who gets included and who gets excluded. At the national level, minority groups, particularly Indigenous people and recent immigrants tend to be excluded from the gains of national economic development. When effort is made to include such groups, the effort is often insensitive to the needs of the communities and sometimes marginalises aspects of community culture, values and traditions in an effort at integration. On the other hand, particularly in relation to Indigenous people, there is a tendency of top-down approaches (when not engaged in assimilationist efforts) to engage a protectionist and preservationist narrative about Indigenous communities.

The chapters in the volume highlight that including identity and culture in community development design is not about treating cultural identity as a commodity in economic development but rather as social capital in community, as an intrinsic asset for all types of community action from social cohesion to community economic development. Neither is it simply about the protection or preservation or even promotion of a culture or identity but about their incorporation, their non-exclusion in the community development design and implementation.

This book is an effort to rethink and reconceptualise “community” in an international context and interrogate what community building, community engagement and community development would entail in this context. The contributors in this volume address identity, culture, and community development in both developing and developed countries from multidisciplinary perspectives. The chapters in this volume explore different conceptual and theoretical frameworks in analysing identity and culture in community development and also provide empirical insights on community development efforts around the globe. Furthermore, the chapters explore different community engagement processes, different development models and different stakeholder participation models and processes in an effort to demonstrate that there is not one-size-fits all design when it comes to community development.

## **Overview of the Book**

The book is thematically divided into four parts. Part one of the book, which contains three chapters, covers issues relating to identity, politics and Indigenous community development. In Chapter 1 Tania Kihl explores the effects of globalisation on community development practices in remote Indigenous communities in Australia. She argues that globalisation provides an interesting challenge for community development in rural and remote communities. Her concern is that within the context of an urban-biased national development agenda, what support and resources will be made available to ensure community development in rural and remote communities and who will ensure that these efforts will both support needs and provide resources to support growth within those communities. A key consideration within the Australian context is the disproportionate concentration of Indigenous peoples located in rural and remote communities in comparison with non-Indigenous Australians. Utilising the asset based community development (ABCD) model, Kihl focuses on physical, human and social assets and explore the difference and challenges between urban and rural/remote communities. She also highlights specific opportunities present in discrete Indigenous communities; and considers appropriate community development approaches for this particular group.

In Chapter 2 a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators explore the issue of cultural identity and development within a remote Aboriginal school community in South Australia. Nicky Prosser, Janine Litchfield, Penny Dadleh, and Tracey Warren reflect on the journey to build a school cultural identity in collaboration with the community, which is owned and celebrated by the community. These educators have concluded that cultural identity is perhaps the most important characteristics for their students and as educators they needed to embrace it in order to enable them to celebrate the school consensus: "Culture Keeps Us Strong." This small but diverse remote community, made up of Aboriginal, Afghan and European residents, has a school site which covers crèche to senior secondary education. Having cultural cohesion is therefore an essential component of any development effort whether at the school level or in the community. The educators believe that by developing their unique cultural identity and vision for the future it will go a long way toward providing ongoing success for the students at Marree Aboriginal School.

In the last chapter in this section Chapter 3, I discuss the potential for community development through community, that is band-level mobilisation and Aboriginal rights claims in Canada. I consider how First Nations political mobilisation at the local level gives us insight into the

nature and scope of group rights claims for social change and community development. In mobilising and asserting group rights, Aboriginal people are reimagining democracy not in its traditional liberal or socialist forms confined to notions of the nation-state, but instead a kind of post-statist democracy that recognises multi-national sovereignty on the one hand and co-occupation and peaceful co-existence on the other. It is in the context of rights claims that many First Nations bands are pursuing expanded community development mandates in Canada, including reconciliation and self-help efforts.

Part two of the book, which contains three chapters, looks at the changing characteristics of community and community activism. In Chapter 4, Jane Verbitsky discusses Antarctica as a community. Antarctica is not only the fifth largest continent in the world but also the coldest, windiest, driest, and most remote place on earth. Despite both its isolation and the physical difficulties of voyaging to and surviving in the territory, the white continent is host to communities of scientists and support personnel who staff the research stations that are scattered across Antarctica. Permanent national scientific research stations were first established in Antarctica in the 1940s as a corollary to the claims by seven states (Australia, Argentina, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom) to sovereignty over parts of Antarctica. However, since the establishment of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty formalizing governance arrangements in the southernmost territory, their numbers have swelled and there are now thirty research stations operating in Antarctica. These stations and the work undertaken by the scientific communities across the continent reflect the Treaty's designation of Antarctica as a non-militarized area dedicated to cooperative, international scientific research. Although the stations are established and operated by state signatories to the Treaty, the Antarctic scientists represent a unique, multi-national epistemic community based upon cosmopolitan arrangements. This chapter traces the origins and evolution of the Antarctic scientific community, the impact of the Antarctic Treaty, the changing characteristics of the community, and the tensions between the cosmopolitan norms and values underlying the construction of the modern Antarctic scientific community and the communitarian politics of nationalism and sovereignty.

In Chapter 5 Heather Devere deals with the issue of peace building within and between communities. She argues that while international peace building relies on well-coordinated diplomatic and military efforts it is usually insufficient. The place of the community in peace building she argues is crucial. Conflict is inevitable within any community, no matter how small. What is important for peace building is to work with and

through the conflict to transform conflict into stable peace. The same sort of skills and knowledge that are needed for international peace building can be applied to working with conflict in local, religious, ethnic, or even family and communities. In fact, the flipside is also true. The international community can learn from processes that have been in place in many traditional societies that work towards resolving community conflict. This chapter explores some of the options for peace building within communities and between communities, whether they are international or local.

In Chapter 6 Ursula M de Jong, Robert J Fuller, Fiona Gray and David Jones explore the topic of community activism and place in Australia. Their research is located in the context of the “sea change” phenomenon, which is fundamentally changing the coastal towns of Australia. Their contribution is in the context of research findings that have concluded that detailed research is needed to develop new responses to coastal development, particularly in terms of promoting community wellbeing, strengthening social cohesion, avoiding socio-economic and socio-spatial polarisation and preserving sense of place. This chapter considers the theoretical frameworks of place and identity and community activism and place, in addition to examining a number of specific case studies. The authors acknowledge that the efforts of ordinary people are vital to community and place but are seldom recognised or celebrated. Their focus is on the twin historic coastal townships of Sorrento and Queenscliff, located either side of Port Phillip Heads, in Victoria, Australia. Four local community organisations, the Queenscliff Community Association (QCA), the Queenscliff Historical Museum (QHM), the Nepean Historical Society (NHS) and the Nepean Conservation Group (NCG) provide diverse case studies for their analysis, highlighting different aspects of culture and place identity. The case studies demonstrate that communities possess local knowledge that must be respected. The authors highlight that in three out of four case studies this was ignored in the top down decision-making. Local communities participate both proactively and reactively in the planning process to change the outcomes of proposed developments in order to achieve a result mindful of a holistic approach to place, and respectful of the historical roots of the present. The authors conclude that it is critical that participation and community consultation be meaningful, not just a perfunctory process.

Part three of the book, which contains three chapters, is mindful of Maslow’s caution as quoted at the beginning of this introduction. In this section we look at some tools used in community engagement and community development. In Chapter 7 Marilyn Lashley examines the

parallel development of culturally anchored strategies aimed at spiritual and material uplift of African American and New Zealand Maori communities in the twentieth century. The central focus is the role culture plays in African American and New Zealand Maori community development and political mobilization. The chapter discusses racial advancement aspirations and efforts by the Black Church and the Maori Marae that promote community development and identifies similarities in ideology, political mobilization and self-help strategies pursued by Maori and African Americans. In particular, she identifies contributions to community development by Maori leaders in the early twentieth century—Pai Marire, Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana, Princess Te Puea Herangi and Sir Apirana Ngata and highlights the role and contributions of the Black Church. The chapter describes the impact of these earlier approaches on contemporary community development by situating contemporary approaches in their appropriate historical contexts. Lashley outlines striking similarities in the role shared culture plays in advancing the economic, social and spiritual wellbeing of Maori and African American communities. Foremost, she finds that culture is the seamless nexus of sacred and secular that makes the material uplift of these communities possible and real.

In Chapter 8 Mary Okocha explores the role of community radio in national development in Nigeria. Despite the country's natural resource wealth, Nigeria is rated one of the most underdeveloped countries of the world. This, Okocha argues shows the imperative need to construct social bridges that will positively link the country together, bearing in mind the diversity and plurality of the Nigerian society and the importance of seeking a more convenient way of communicating effectively with the people. The grassroots, that is the rural areas, home to the bulk of the country's population and the source of her wealth and strength, remain largely marginalized and voiceless. Mainstream media have been unable to provide adequate coverage and engagement for grassroots governance and development, thus the rural people are denied access to modern communication channels and consequently denied credible information on issues which affect their lives and communities and denied the opportunity to participate in nation building. This chapter attempts an appraisal of ways through which community radio can address topical developmental challenges. Through interview in select communities in Oyo State, Nigeria, Okocha examines the problems of information dissemination, and explores ways of breaking these barriers and encouraging community participation. Using a community based programme *Abiye* on the federal owned radio station, (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Ibadan

National Station) she appraises the level of participation by the target audience and how this has been able to proffer solutions to their local problems.

In Chapter 9 Selin Mutdogan discusses a movement to create sustainable communities in Turkey. The Cittaslow movement, which was founded in Italy in 1999, is a way to create sustainable community with all aspects of social, economic, environmental and cultural characteristics in mind. The movement is against the 'fast' lifestyle and tries to preserve the towns' cultural, natural and social values and re-establish the bonds between them. The movement has expanded rapidly with some 147 cittaslow towns in 24 countries including the United States and South Korea. In Turkey, the first cittaslow town was accredited in 2009 and since then there are four more towns that have joined up. These four towns are completely different geographically, economically, socially and ecologically but they have become more sustainable, more liveable and economically more self-sufficient places than before. This chapter explains what the cittaslow movement is, its goals and how it affects the city, community and environment.

Part 4 of the book contains the last 2 chapters, which discusses immigrant re-settlement and community integration efforts in New Zealand. In Chapter 10 Adesayo Adelowo looks at African women's experience in creating a new home in New Zealand. She notes that community development starts from the principle that within any community, there is a wealth of knowledge and experience, which if used in creative ways, can be channelled into collective action to achieve the communities' desired goals. Since the immigration of African women to New Zealand is a recent phenomenon, Adelowo argues that it is important to know how these women have used their wealth of knowledge and experience to achieve their desired goals of migrating and that of participating in the economic growth of New Zealand. This chapter explores barriers African women have experienced in the process of migration to and integration within New Zealand and how they have used the social-cultural ethos of communalism from Africentric perspective to overcome these barriers and integrate.

In Chapter 11, the final chapter in the book, Shoichi Isogai and Camille Nakhid describe the resettlement experiences of eight female Japanese settlers living in Auckland. Both policy-makers and mainstream social service providers in New Zealand poorly understand the Japanese community settlement needs. This chapter explores the settlement needs of Japanese settlers in the Auckland region in an effort to assist social service providers and policy-makers to understand the important challenges facing

Japanese settler communities in Auckland and to enable non-governmental organisations to develop services to address these identified needs.



## **PART I:**

# **IDENTITY, POLITICS AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE EFFECTS OF GLOBALISATION ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

TANIA KIHLE

Globalisation provides an interesting challenge for community development in rural and remote communities. As services and populations grow amongst urban communities, what support and resources are required to ensure community development in rural and remote communities in both supporting actual needs and providing true resources to support growth within that community? A key consideration for this question within the Australian context is the disproportionate concentration of Indigenous peoples located in rural and remote communities in comparison with non-Indigenous Australians.

One of the tools in relation to community development is the asset based community development (ABCD) model. ABCD defined by Kretzmann and McKnight outlines assets as “the gifts, skills and capacities of individuals, associations and institutions” (Phillips and Pittman, 2009, 40). Seven classifications of assets have been determined – physical, human, financial, environmental, political, cultural and social. This chapter focuses on only three of these assets – physical, human and social as it sets out to broadly explore the difference and challenges between urban and rural and remote communities. The chapter also examines the specific opportunities present in discrete Indigenous communities and consider appropriate community development approaches for this particular group. Discrete Indigenous communities refer to geographic locations that are inhabited predominantly by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples with housing managed on a community basis (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

There is a dominant argument that an urban community offers far more tangible opportunities for community development than a rural community. Resources in the form of people, time and money are readily available, opportunities to partner with business and government are often stronger and technology gains are frequently more prevalent and of a higher standard in urban communities. However, despite the apparent over-supply of physical assets, there is not always a corresponding population of residents willing to engage in community development activities. Changes in the composition of local communities, which are prompted by population migration to urban areas – often in search of employment or further education – can have an adverse effect on people's ability to connect to and engage with their community. Increasingly, with population migration, we have seen the closure of key physical assets in rural and remote communities with factories, schools, banking and postal services declining over recent years. The closure of such assets can reduce the sense of community support and physical space in which to undertake activities.

Interestingly, whilst the physical assets may not be as prevalent in rural/remote communities, there is a growing sense of combining remaining assets and developing real partnerships to deliver desired (or required) outcomes. In his book *Community Development around the World: Practice, Theory, Research, Training*, Campfens (1997) acknowledges:

[I]ncreasingly, local authorities, non-profit NGOs, the business sector, and community organisations are working together through partnership councils. These groups recognise that local communities must develop their own resources and skills to address not only local economic and employment needs but also the needs of children, young people, the elderly, young families and others (449).

In the discrete Indigenous communities of Doomadgee and Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria this was particularly evident in 2012 with key representatives from within the community, organisations who service these communities and government representatives establishing Local Implementation Plans. These plans focussed on existing physical assets, opportunities to share these across the region and the identification of specific activities to address community needs. A strong people-development focus that supports the establishment of horizontal partnerships was taken to ensure that community buy-in existed, cultural considerations were in place and a sense of co-operation existed for all stakeholders.

An interesting point for consideration around community assets is that for the most part in urban communities, the human capital is mobile. This

mobility in community members allows for new skills and talents to be brought to the pool and allows for richer attempts at community development. In remote communities, this is often not always the case due to lower levels of mobility (in some cases – non-existent levels, particularly in discrete Indigenous communities) thus the opportunity to develop human capital and explore new ideas can be somewhat limited. Human capital is defined as:

the skills, talents, and knowledge of community members . . . In contrast to physical capital, human capital is mobile. People move in and out of communities, and, thus, over time, human capital can change. In addition, skills, talents and knowledge change due to many kinds of cultural, societal and institutional mechanisms (Phillips and Pittman, 2009, 41).

Human assets certainly exist in remote communities but the opportunity for skills, talent and knowledge to grow via education or work experience is somewhat hampered and may have an influence on the types of community development activities undertaken. Whilst urban communities may present more opportunities in terms of physical assets and human capital available to support projects, what though of the social capital? Phillips and Pittman (2009) note:

the quality of social relationships is essential for solidarity building and successful community initiatives. Friendships, trust, and the willingness to share some resources are integral to collective action (22).

Rural and remote communities offer community development practitioners pockets of rich bonding social capital,

which ties individuals to others like themselves (race, economic status, nationality). However, unless amalgamated with the social capital of others in the same community, it does not necessarily produce benefits for that community (Phillips and Pittman, 2009, 50).

The bonds of race, economic status and nationality certainly appear strong within remote Indigenous communities. In most circumstances these social bonds create a platform for interest and engagement in community development activities. Uncovering a common area of interest for change within these communities requires the practitioner to develop their own social assets with community members, to be seen as someone with a genuine interest in change within that community, and to be able to have the support of key elders within the community to whom others look to for leadership and approval.

In addition to size and location, local culture is an increasingly important area within rural and remote communities. “Local culture provides a sense of identity for rural communities and residents. This identity facilitates common understandings, traditions, and values, all central to the identification of plans of action to improve well-being” (Brennan, 2005, 1). Within remote Indigenous communities, local culture is very evident from traditional art and totems, strong inter-generational ties, song and dance, hunting and cultivating the land (the customary economy) and the use of traditional oral language. With 28% of the Australian Indigenous population living in remote and very remote areas, community development practitioners need to understand the importance of local culture and the existing social bonding capital as very strong community assets. These assets should always be considered and weaved into proposed projects to ensure the strongest opportunity for success. This approach – a territorial approach – is gaining increased recognition as a best-fit model to support “bottom-up” approaches to community development.

With globalisation, use of technology – particularly that of social mediums is whittling down the historically held view of community. Residents in urban areas are often too busy with their daily lives to build these important relationships. Despite this, collective groups within urban areas still create capacity for change and for community development to have a role to play. Increasingly social assets are creeping into the area of technology, particularly with the growth of social networking mediums.

The growth and acceptance of technology is having an impact on social assets – particularly within urban communities where access levels are high.

People are becoming less attached to their place and more linked to communities of interest. The growth of the Internet, for example, provides new opportunities for individuals to connect with other people who have similar interests and concerns. Many issues that concern residents, however, are place based, such as schools, housing and environmental quality (Green and Haines, 2008, 2).

Whilst technology is an ever-present asset and function of urban community development projects, this is not always the case for rural and remote communities. Some remote communities within Australia are hampered by the availability of strong Internet connections, mobile phone coverage and even more so, by the availability of actual hardware. Despite this there is growing evidence of these communities beginning to embrace technologies. Increasingly such technologies provide an opportunity for community members to connect with family and friends, feel that they are

participating in society on the same level as inner-city residents (e.g. internet banking, SMS, on-line news services, Facebook) and to preserve community history and culture. Two strong examples of communities creating access and availability of technology for residents include the Ration Shed Museum in Cherbourg and the provision of XO laptops<sup>1</sup> to discrete remote Indigenous communities.

The Ration Shed Museum in Cherbourg has become a community hub for access of technology, recording of oral histories and traditional languages via the use of film and the development of an online timeline brought to life with photographs and recorded stories. In addition to capturing local history the Ration Shed Museum takes pride in building a strong sense of history and common social assets amongst the community members. Across Queensland, similar facilities exist in some discrete Indigenous communities via Indigenous Knowledge Centres, which seek to provide a similar function. The provision of XO laptops to school-aged children in similar communities allows for the hardware to exist and for community members to have the opportunity to interact in the global society. Such physical assets provide an avenue for community development activities to be explored and to further build on social assets within the community. An important consideration within the provision of technology to rural and remote communities (and particularly Indigenous communities) is that of “negotiating the fine line between supporting communities in the use of broadband and telling them what to do with it” (O’Donnell et al, 2007, 6).

There is a growing argument that the differences between rural and remote and urban community development are diminishing – with little difference seen to be in place in today’s modern society. Campfens argues that “rural community development is moving away from a locality-focused, communitywide, village development approach, and toward a more integrated regional approach that emphasizes target groups” (Campfens, 1997, 447). This argument certainly has some substance but for the remote discrete Indigenous communities in Australia, activities with a community development focus are still required to provide basic self-help and to work towards self-reliance. The work that FaHCSIA<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> XO Laptops have been specifically designed for the harsh Australian outback. Through the charity One Laptop Per Child, they have been progressively distributing these laptops to primary school aged children in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and Gulf regions of Queensland.

<sup>2</sup> FaHCSIA (Department of Families and Housing, Community Service and Indigenous Affairs) under their ‘closing the gap’ initiatives funded the development of community capacity building and community engagement

undertook in their remote service delivery communities provided good opportunities for community development practitioners to establish programs from the ground up to support individualised capacity building within these communities.

Within rural and remote communities particularly, local culture remains strong and a key component for consideration in community development projects. Local culture plays a central role in shaping community development, local character, and responses to needs. Continuing to ignore culture's critical role will constrain development efforts, rendering them little more than short-term solutions for endemic rural problems (Brennan, 2005). Settings in urban or rural and remote communities provide their own unique opportunities and challenges for community development. Certainly gains can be made through the growing prevalence of technology, physical assets and human capital available via urban communities. The challenges that the lack of these resources can present in rural and remote communities allows for strong relationships to be built and for rich examples of inter-community connectedness and buy-in to develop – often resulting in stronger outcomes and greater opportunities for sustainability for community development projects in these communities.

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programs within the discrete communities of Doomadgee and Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In 2014, this Department ceased with the creation of Department Social Services and Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet taking full responsibility for policy and outcomes relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF MARREE ABORIGINAL SCHOOL IN AUSTRALIA

NICKY PROSSER, JANINE LITCHFIELD,  
PENNY DADLEH AND TRACEY WARREN

Marree Aboriginal School which covers crèche to year 12, sits in a rural and isolated area approximately 660km north of Adelaide at the junction of the Birdsville and Oodnadatta Tracks. The population of just over 100 permanent residents derive from Aboriginal, Afghan and European heritage. Marree Aboriginal School is classified as a category 1 disadvantaged school with 94% Aboriginal enrolments. The school enjoys strong community support with families prepared to be involved in all relevant aspects of teaching and learning programmes and operational practices.

Students at Marree engage in a range of activities under the Jane Goodall Institute “Roots & Shoots” umbrella and are involved in a variety of projects informed by the philosophy of “connecting young people with their community, teaching them that they can make a difference in the world, increasing their confidence, and instilling new interest in protecting the environment, animals and their community” (Roots & Shoots, A program of the Jane Goodall Institute). The school consistently pursues relationships with local organisations in Australia that support us in delivering a high quality curriculum that incorporates strong cultural values.

### **Acknowledging cultural identity**

As a site we support the psychology that tells us we learn best when we feel good about who we are. As a result, we pose the following question:

who are our Marree students in terms of their culture? In answering this question we find it important to first explore how we understand culture. We continue the discussion on Marree and what culture and a cultural identity means for the people who call themselves the “Marree Community.”

As Brennan (2009, 2) states, culture “is often used broadly to represent entire ways of life...including rules, values and expected behaviours.” For the purpose of this chapter, we concur with Brennan’s definition of culture, and define it as “the shared products of society” (2009, 2). However, Brennan also maintains “culture has many definitions and interpretations”(ibid). We found that defining culture in the specific context of Marree is as difficult as defining it in the broader sense. What began as a simple task of deciding on a definition soon turned into a heated discussion between the authors of this chapter and onlookers.

As a project to explore the concept of culture, our students were involved in a song writing and music workshop, which resulted in the production of a booklet and CD “Culture Keeps Us Strong” (Marree Aboriginal School, 2010). This was created to symbolise the strength and importance of culture and togetherness within our community. Students developed lyrics that discussed the things that make them happy, what they enjoy doing together and their hopes for a strong community while acknowledging the difficulty of getting along with others and being together.

On examining other documents, such as The Marree Community Plan (Marree Progress Association, 2009) that exist in our setting to address the issue of community development, it is interesting to note that others, too, seem to have experienced difficulties in defining what the Marree “culture” actually is. As it turns out, the word “culture” is only briefly mentioned in these documents, and when it is, there is no explanation given as to what the term actually refers to. It seems culture is a word we use freely, without perhaps fully understanding or examining what it actually stands for in our community. If we take Brennan’s definition at its simplest level, then we are to understand that the culture of Marree must be the “shared products” of the community. But what are those shared products? Marree sits in a unique situation. It is not a closed community on Aboriginal land, and yet a large proportion of its population identifies as being Indigenous. It is not a town that has solely come about through the history of a particular industry (namely, the old Ghan Railway), and yet, many of the residents recall this history. It is not a town that solely exists to service farmers and station owners, and yet, many station owners and workers engage in our community. We are not a community who

completely affiliates with one particular group or another. We cannot, as a community, be defined as Aboriginal or Afghan or European. And yet, we have common, deep-rooted historical understandings of how we interact, behave and relate to each other. This is where we as a community are comfortable operating and we rarely step outside of this.

To be a Marree person, is not to assume a certain race. It is more about a feeling, or certain behaviours that you exhibit. It seems then it is easy to define what we are not, but it is more difficult to state what we are. Let us not forget, also, that the word culture carries societal connotations. It is often assumed that people of the same cultural identity will also be of the same race. This is not the case in Marree. Whilst we rarely speak in terms of race in Marree, it would be naïve to think that people of similar creeds did not see a similarity between themselves and others of the same race. These sub-cultures hold a cultural identity of their own. However, it is not the Marree cultural identity, which this paper is focussing on. However, we propose that different sub-groups in Marree are likely to develop unique definitions of Marree culture. Staff, students, parents, and even individual community members would all have varying views of what they define as culture in Marree. It is therefore unreasonable to assume that as purely a staff body we can make a definitive statement of what our culture is.

In defining what makes up our culture, it is useful to examine what Lawrence (2007) terms “community identity.” She states that there are three common uses of community, which refer to community as a geographic location, a network of people or organisations or an administrative category (2). The Marree community incorporates some of these into their cultural identity. It also incorporates ideas such as the shared values, rules, experiences and behaviours (Brennan 2009, 2) of those within the Marree community. We propose that a community development model for Marree must account for our cultural identities as well as and distinct from our community identity. For the purposes of this chapter, a broad and basic understanding of some aspects of our cultural identity, we feel, is enough. Regardless, it is obvious that as Brennan states, “culture plays a critical role in local community action” (ibid).

### **Embracing cultural identity**

As a school community, to embrace cultural identity at the local level, there are important questions that need to be considered. How do we get beyond an initial reluctance to engage with the local community and how do we develop the strength and adequate skills to broach the difficult

conversations with community about cultural issues? There is need to build a systemic culture where people not only feel okay about asking challenging questions but expect them.

Chambers (n.d.) discussed the effects of 6 models of bias on community interactions. He identified biases related to space, seasons, accessibility and geographic positioning, project biases centred upon new and developing projects, and biases related to interactions between people, on professional, diplomatic and personal levels. We have identified that many of these have a considerable impact upon the way personal and professional relationships develop in Marree and the gap that exists between the school and community. The impact of our geographic position is particularly felt when dealing with bureaucracies and agencies from outside of Marree, in both the frequency and durations of visits and their single outcome focus. These biases work to compound the difficulty in forming and maintaining effective professional relationships over time.

These are the known and accepted norms of Marree. Each of these issues can be viewed from a deficit model and our challenge is to enable an asset based approach to be applied in these situations. Haines defines an asset based approach as one that focuses on “a communities strength and assets [and]...is focussed on a communities capacity rather than on its deficits” (2009, 40). It is due to the inherent bias of location and geographic positioning, and the difficulty accessing professional support services that leads isolated communities to focus solely on fulfilling their specific needs. This leads to the development of a common reliance on expertise from outside to solve problems often unique to the community. We acknowledge that this is an issue in our own school and community. Green and Haines state “the concern with an exclusive focus on needs is that a community often jumps immediately to problem solving, rather than identifying its goals and strengths”(2008, 8). There is a need to identify and value the skills our community possesses and find ways of utilising these for productive, positive outcomes. There are many disadvantages to always looking outside the community to address community issues. Green and Haines recognised that “relying on professionals and others, communities become dependent on outside resources and often lose control over the development process” (2008, 7). Subsequently, “communities become further weakened by a reliance on outside institutions to solve their problems and ... those institutions develop a vested interest in maintaining this dependency” (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 2). This reliance on outside institutions to develop and solve local issues, works to dilute and weaken the influence of local culture and cultural identity within the local community.

Mattessich (2009) identified a relationship of mutual trust as a key component in communities with high community social capacity. Trust is hard earned in Marree, due, in part, to the length of time that is needed for it to develop. A common theme impacting on sustainable community development in Marree is the difficulty in developing a trusting, meaningful relationship between long-term intergenerational residents of the area and short term visiting professional services based both within and outside of the town. It takes time for visitors to familiarise themselves with the cultural identity of Marree, our priorities, goals and concerns.

Informal social gatherings, sports events and school celebrations have an important role in community building; providing an opportunity to bring community members together and help develop some mutual experiences and common understandings. Gardner identified community building as “the practice of building connections among residents, and establishing positive patterns of individual and community behaviour based on mutual responsibility and ownership” (quoted in Mattessich, 2009, 52). We think community ownership is the vital component for Marree. As a school, our staff is a mixture of intergenerational Marree families, long-term residents who have a range of past experiences and short-term transient professionals. Our student cohort is also a mix of core residents, transient students who have firm links and view Marree and its surrounds as their country, and others who are attending our school for a defined short period of time. This blend of experiences plays a part in establishing a cultural identity within our school and maintaining this balance eases the process of preserving our school’s unique cultural identity.

### **Developing a sense of cultural identity at Marree Aboriginal School**

In Marree, our Community Plan states its vision as “a united prosperous town, proud of its unique heritage, culture and folklore” (Marree Progress Association, 2009). How can our school support and add value to this mission, engage with it and work with the community to put this vision into practice? There is much merit in the dismantling of boundaries between school and community, as our goals are the same and our visions are parallel to each other.

“Community developers know inherently that the quality of social relationships is essential for solidarity building” (Hustedde 2009, 22). This aspect has a significant influence on the cultural identity of our site. The challenge faced is to ensure there is true community ownership of the

school rather than the common perspective of teachers being the power and only authority. We commonly support the Vincent (2009) position that people “can think and work together to fashion their own future” and attempt to create opportunities for discussions to occur. Vincent also states, “there is a fine line between facilitating meetings and manipulating meetings. This is a particularly difficult task for those professionals who live and work full-time in communities” (63). This issue has particular relevance for us at Marree and is faced daily by our staff. To manage this process well requires a highly honed and practiced skill base, which is unique in its inherent knowledge of the Marree community. It would appear obvious that when formulating a plan for developing a sense of cultural identity, the local community would be consulted, engaged and key in leading the process. The realities of this are sometimes less than the ideal vision. It is therefore poignant to look for strategies for ensuring any process and conversations are meaningful.

Engoori (Gorringe and Spillman 2009) is one of the strategies of local leadership for cultural renewal, which has merit in our community and could be an asset-based framework for exploring aspects of our community engagement. Questions asked include: What assets do the community value? Which patterns, behaviours and practices do they want to change? What do we have the capacity and power to change? Which behaviours do we need to embed? Through the implementation of such a framework communities are given a tool to have all voices heard, discussions and debates about historical perspectives and value adding to assets identified within the community. In using Engoori we are encouraged to collectively value identities, relationships, diversity, multiple perspective, sense making and buy-in, challenging assumptions, decision-making and multiple initiatives (Gorringe and Spillman 2009).

In conclusion, if we celebrate the uniqueness in historical make up, culturally rich backgrounds and passions of professional entities within our community, then join together for the good of our children, what a future they could have!

## References

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