

## **Centres 'Down Under': Mapping Australia's neighbourhood centres and learning**

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*The overarching aim of this paper is to 'talk up' learning in the Australian neighbourhood centre sector, realising this aim is premised on a need to understand neighbourhood centres themselves. Hence, the paper tentatively offers a mapping of the sector by first asking: 'What is a neighbourhood centre?'. Next, the paper provides an introductory scoping of learning in centres in an effort to invite further consideration. Two important conclusions are made. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. The second is that the range of learning possibilities in centres is far-reaching, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation.*

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## **Introduction**

What do a take-a-way shop, café, lawn mowing service and a winery all have in common? There are several answers to this, but one is that they all are part of the work of Australian neighbourhood centres<sup>1</sup>. A second is that they all involve adults learning, and a possible third is that this learning may not be captured by the mechanisms that report on adult community education in Australia.

While there is a general agreement that learning occurs beyond educational institutions, traditionally those interested in measuring, accounting for and reporting on adult learning in Australia have looked towards recognised educational institutions when compiling their accounts. While this has been an appropriate starting point that has facilitated the production of many important national accounts of learning, it has failed to account for learning provided in other settings. The starting point here is a collective of organisations across Australia that is not necessarily considered to be part of Australia's educational framework (Rooney 2004, Rule 2005). Unlike schools, colleges or universities that are easily identified by educational researchers as being educational, the organisations central to this paper are not always visible, let alone obvious to those interested in learning. The organisations central to this paper are neighbourhood centres. There are over 1,000 of these located across Australia. While a more detailed description is forthcoming, a helpful first definition is that a neighbourhood centre is a small, community-owned and managed, non-profit organisation that typically subscribes to the ideas of community development.

Community development is a contested term, but generally refers to a 'bottom-up practice' (Ife 2009: 9). What this means is that people and communities are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them (Tett 2005: 126). It is a 'political activity' (Kenny 2010: 2) that values the wisdom and skills of local people, sustainability, diversity and inclusiveness, and the importance of

process (Ife 2009: 9–28). It aims to challenge discrimination and inequality and works toward a socially just society (Tett 2005: 126). Community development workers use 'tools' like advocacy, referral, information sharing, and emotional and material support as part of their community development work. Of importance to this paper, education is also a tool for community development (McArdle 1999, Tett 2005 & 2006).

Despite learning being among the practices within neighbourhood centres, national studies seldom focus on these organisations as being sites of learning (Ducie 1994, Rooney 2004). With the exception of some centres (mostly in Victoria) formally funded to provide adult education, centres by and large are not considered legitimate players in the educational landscape. Along with an estimated 500,000 other non-profit organisations (Productivity Commission 2009: 8) for whom education is not their prime purpose, neighbourhood centres are the focus of research texts typically from disciplinary areas other than education. For example, they can feature in social services literature (e.g. Coleman 1995, Connor 1993, Otto & Onyx 2006, Suhood, Marks, Waterford & Song 2006), in organisational and/or sectoral reports (ANHLC 1997, Bullen & Onyx 1999, Ducie 1994, LCSA 2002 & 2004), or in broader commentary about third sector organisations (Lyons 2001). In general, these texts speak to different audiences and seldom capture the attention of educational researchers or authorities.

A failure to acknowledge the learning potential of centres is a considerable oversight given that a community development focus typically means that those people involved are often highly representative of people under-represented in other educational settings (McIntyre & Kimberley 1996, Rooney 2004 & 2007, Suhood et al. 2006). Learning how to provide more effective educational opportunities for such people is said to be a national priority (Rudd & Smith 2007, MCEETYA 2002). Indeed, research that conceptualises

learning in these types of organisations promises educational institutions new understandings of how learning might be better provided for disadvantaged and marginalised people. Such promise provides the warrant for this research.

This paper represents a first phase of a research project that has an overarching aim of ‘talking up’ learning in neighbourhood centres into educational discourses, yet realising this aim is premised on an understanding of the sector itself. This understanding can be achieved by the provision of a mapping of the scope and uniqueness of the sector. Therefore, drawing empirical data from documentary sources, interviews and focus groups from across Australia, this paper tentatively presents such a mapping. In other words, the deceptively simple task of this paper is first to address the question of ‘what is a neighbourhood centre?’. A secondary aim is to provide an introductory scoping of learning in centres in an effort to invite further consideration. While a more comprehensive conceptualisation of learning is beyond the aim of this paper, the discussion offered here lays the groundwork for such work to begin.

The paper is presented in four sections. It begins by contextualising both the research project and the Australian neighbourhood centre sector. In the second section, it presents a preliminary mapping by addressing the question of what is a neighbourhood centre. With a provisional map established, the paper then adds further detail in the third section where the focus is on learning in centres. In particular, this section draws attention to the broad scope of learning and to the contribution centres are making to the learning landscape in terms of human, social and identity capitals.

Taking the complexities even further, the fourth section problematises earlier attempts to define what a neighbourhood centre is, and concludes that, while centres share many similarities, as a collective of organisations they are far from homogenous. Overall, the paper actually maps and then *unmaps* neighbourhood centres. This strategy

is useful so that on the one hand the value of these organisations might be acknowledged, and on the other, the differences are kept in play.

Two important observations are made from this mapping (and *unmapping*) exercise. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. The second is that the range of learning possibilities in centres is far-reaching, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation.

## **Background**

### Research project

The empirical material on which this paper draws comes from fieldwork undertaken over a six-month period in 2009. Three main data collection methods were utilised. First, analysis was undertaken of over 200 public documents where the interest was in how various centres across Australia presented themselves—that is, the public identity they projected in the form of 'identity statements'. By this I mean the statements that organisations write about themselves (e.g. 'X centre is ...'). These identity statements serve the purpose of informing others what centres are and what they do. They can be found on the webpages of centres as well as in centres' prospectuses. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 representatives across each Australian State and Territory with the intention of eliciting rich accounts in terms of the scope and breadth of centres' work, funding arrangements and generally what goes on. Over 19 hours of interviews were recorded, transcribed and, along with the identity statements, subjected to thematic analysis. Finally, 15 centres from across Australia were visited, enabling unstructured observations and informal conversations. These visits, and the

conversations occurring because of them, afforded a feel for centres in action.

### Historical context

While this paper is concerned with Australian organisations, neighbourhood centres, or organisations resembling them, are found globally. For instance, Finland's network of *Settlementti*, Vancouver's Neighbourhood Houses, Israel's Community Centers [*sic*], Germany's *Nachbarschaftshäuser*, and Britain's Settlements, are examples of organisations resembling those found in Australia. Some of these international organisations have been in existence for over 200 years (Parker 2009), and have inspired the establishment of similar organisations internationally (International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres 2009).

In contrast to long histories elsewhere, the introduction of neighbourhood centres in Australia is more recent. While a few isolated centres were in operation in the 1960s, there is a general agreement that they amassed alongside the women's movement in the 1970s (Golding, Kimberley, Foley & Brown 2008, Henry 2000, LCSA 1994). This development was fostered by the considerable legislative reforms of the era's socially progressive government. Up until this point, benevolent and charitable institutions (typically faith-based) provided many social services. The Australian Assistance Program, introduced as part of these reforms, served to establish organisations (like neighbourhood centres) that espoused community development approaches.

Community development, then, and organisations like neighbourhood centres that espoused it, presented an alternative to the altruism of faith-based and/or benevolent service provision. What this meant in practice is that these organisations were owned and managed by the very people whom they were said to serve. Self-determination was (and remains) highly prized, and visions of

social justice provided the warrant for the activities the organisations engaged in (or not).

Relationships between the organisations and their funders (that is, the government) have changed since these early days. Like elsewhere, neoliberal policies were embraced in Australia in the early 1980s, and this continues through to the present day. This has seen (among other things) the creation of markets where they had previously not existed (Marginson 1997, New South Wales Council of Social Services 1999). For non-government organisations like neighbourhood centres, the 1980s marked a time where they were re-positioned into purchaser/provider relationships with government, and were expected to participate in market processes. Moreover, for organisations with a history of working collaboratively with each other and with like-minded organisations, this new space presented challenges (New South Wales Council of Social Services 1999: 51). However, this space also presented opportunities to develop new ways of being (e.g. consortia of small organisations producing joint tenders) and of negotiating what was understood as unfavourable conditions in ways that retained their social justice purpose (Lane 1999, Rule 2005).

### **What is a neighbourhood centre?**

So, what is a neighbourhood centre? A first answer to this question is that such a centre is an entity of some sort—a place, building, organisation or association. However, many centres qualify what kind of entity they are. For instance they use terms like safe, warm, friendly and/or fun. Many (like the interviewee below) also point out what a centre is not.

Technically, using the international classifications of not-for-profit organisations as the Productivity Commission uses, [centres are] a locally-based, multi-activity social service and development organisation.

Terms like not-for-profit, non-government, non-religious and/or non-discriminating are common among the identity statements of centres. The use of these terms flags that centres are purposefully differentiating their organisations from others (for example, those that *are* government, profit-making, religious etc.).

The comment above also draws attention to multi-activities, and most centres' illustrate this via the types of processes they use in their identity statements. There are many processes (material, mental and relational) mentioned and these give an indication of what centres do (or say they do). While some reference is made to mental (e.g. evolve, seek, believe) and relational (e.g. belong to, are, is) processes, the most common type of processes (by far) are material. For example, centres say that they: address, change, connect, create, deliver, develop, improve, initiate, link, lobby, reduce, research, run, serve, stimulate, strengthen, and support etc. The prevalence of material processes in the descriptions of centres suggests that centres are dynamic and active organisations, and this is supported when looking at the programs and activities on offer.

### Funding and focus

Australia's model of federalisation complicates a national picture of neighbourhood centres because centres are generally funded at state level. Centre funding can range from a few million to zero dollars, although the median is a little over 200,000. While core funding may be provided (admittedly in some states better than others), almost all centres rely upon on additional funding for specific purposes as well as from volunteer input and/or from fundraising. In other words, most have multiple sources of funding: an extreme example is a centre with over 40 different funding sources (along with as many acquittal processes).

While the aim of the research was not to compare centres in various states and territories, some inter-state idiosyncrasies are worth

noting. Of particular interest is the way the host states' priorities shape the work of centres and this is seen in the 'tag lines' of funding programs that prioritise: strong, vibrant communities (in Western Australia); community building, community development and preventative health (in Tasmania); and vulnerable groups and those most in need (in Victoria). This means that, while all centres work within federal agendas (e.g. Social Inclusion), differences in state foci influence the work of centres in subtle ways. A poignant example is the situation in New South Wales where a recent shift in funding programs has also seen priorities shift from child protection to building stronger communities.

As earlier noted, another commonality across all states is an espoused investment in the principles of community development. With that said, community development manifests in different ways in centres' identity statements. Some embed community development in their public statements by describing how people 'are encouraged to participate in the running of the centre and to become involved in a variety of projects [...] or in the management areas'; others are more explicit, and an example of this is a centre that states how it is 'committed to social justice principles, believing that people have the right to participate in decisions that will affect their lives [...] and to advocate for a fairer distribution of resources'.

#### Location/place

Centres emphasise the local in their identity statements, and this too is in keeping with the tenets of community development. The emphasis is more than adding an address though. Most centres (regardless of state or territory) explicitly locate themselves using terms like community-based, local organisation, heart of the community and so on. The effect of this signifies a strong identification, or embedding, within a particular geographical area, region and/or community. Centres do not see themselves as

simply existing, or doing. Rather, they exist (and do) somewhere in particular. Location matters! Interviewees concur—as one said, ‘it’s about place’.

Notwithstanding an emphasis on place, it becomes apparent in interviews and observations that centres exceed place. Centres are not merely ‘containers’ where action happens, rather much action happens beyond the boundaries of the actual buildings. One example is a take-away-food shop that a centre established to address social, economic, employment and educational issues of concern to local people. Other examples include a winery, a lawn mowing business and a social action campaign around turtles—all of which occur beyond the bricks and mortar of centres.

Finally, centres stress the importance of people. While a few claim to direct their efforts to everyone, most suggest that they work with everyone within the specific location, community or region in which they are situated. Moreover, efforts are often targeted to specific groups of people (e.g. those on low incomes, people returning to work, vulnerable people, people living with a disability, families etc.). It is here that the importance of safe/friendly places resonates (as exemplified by the interviewee below):

[The value of centres is] in reaching hard-to-reach learners, you know, providing people who would never set foot in anything remotely resembling a school to somewhere that’s a safe learning environment for them to go into and try to re-engage in any kind of education process.

### **Centres and learning**

The comment above leads nicely to the fourth section of this paper, where the focus is on centres and learning. However, this discussion is also complicated by federalisation because there are various definitions of adult community education (ACE) across Australia (Borthwick, Knight, Bender & Laveder 2001, Choy, Haukka & Keyes

2006, McIntyre 2001). In some states there is a visible ACE sector (e.g. NSW, Victoria, SA, Tasmania) comprising entities receiving public funds specifically for the provision of adult community education programs. Some of these entities have succumbed to public policy imperatives to an extent that they resemble vocational education and training (VET) providers rather than the adult community education organisations that most began as (Tennant & Morris 2009). In other states adult community education is a type of non-publically-funded provision, yet recognised as a worthwhile activity and supported via distance (e.g. WA). Finally, in other states (e.g. Queensland) it is difficult to discuss an adult community education sector, which is not to say that adult community education does not occur (Schwencke 1997).

Relationships between neighbourhood centres and ACE are dependent on the host state's definitions. In some states centres and ACE are mutually exclusive (e.g. NSW and Tasmania). However there are examples of complementary relationships between sectors. For instance, state education authorities may fund small projects where centres work in partnership with 'real' providers (LCSA 2001). It is little wonder, then, that the identity statements from these states rarely appear to foreground adult education or learning. With that said, many suggest that they provided opportunities to 'meet new friends, join a group, share a skill or finding out about'. These types of statements imply learning, but do not explicitly foreground it.

In other states the relationship between neighbourhood centres and ACE is integrated (e.g. Victoria, WA and SA). In these states the statutory body responsible for adult learning explicitly supports centres to provide adult education programs (including VET). In Victoria, centres are supported directly through recurrent and increasingly contestable funding. In Western Australia, the peak organisation is funded to support the voluntary ACE delivery of centres but the centres themselves receive little or no funding. In

South Australia, centres receive a quarter of the state's ACE budget, and are able to contest the remainder. In these states, and in particular in Victoria, centres make full use of educational discourses. For instance, centres made clear use of educational discourses and infrastructure in their identity statements, using terms like training, courses, accreditation and registered training organisations.

Finally, in other jurisdictions (e.g. Queensland and Northern Territory) relationships are elusive. This is because one or both sectors are so loosely defined (see Arnott 2003 and Schwencke 1997). For instance, in Queensland there is a broad collective of organisations that works similarly to neighbourhood centres, but a recognisable ACE sector is more difficult to establish. In the Northern Territory both sectors are loosely defined so that any commentary on the relationship between them is problematic.

Overall, less than half of Australia's 1,000 plus centres receive funding specifically for the provision of adult community education. Despite not being funded for this purpose, almost all provide a range of learning opportunities including what might be described as adult community education. This is hardly surprising given that community development and adult community education are closely allied (Tett 2005: 126). However, in a sense (capital) ACE is not a type of learning that is of particular interest here—not because it is unworthy, rather because it has been relatively well documented (McIntyre 2001; McIntyre & Kimberley 1998). With that said, even this funded ACE delivery delivers 'something more'—as an ACE representative explained:

We are very lucky because what the centres can do value-adds to the piddly little bit of money that we have available for the activities ... We're not paying for the real cost, we're paying for a little bit, but all the other services that the centres provide are what makes a success of it. It's not the bit we pay for.

This interviewee draws attention to the additional support mechanisms and services provided by centres and how these add value to funded ACE programs. However, as already suggested, specifically funded learning, while valuable, is only the tip of the iceberg. In other centres, indeed even in the centres that also provide 'real' ACE, there is even more adult learning (Rooney 2007). But this learning comes under the rubric of community development and, at least in some states, there are problems with calling it learning.

To illustrate this last point, an interviewee recounts the response he received from a government agency during a funding program review. The interviewee told of how he included adult education as one of the centre's outputs. The response he received from the funders was that 'we actually can't fund [that]'. What we see here is that while adult education is a legitimate activity in some centres, it is not for all. Moreover, it is not a legitimate (read *fundable*) activity in a state where adult education and community development are siloed.

At this point it is important to reiterate that not being funded to provide adult learning does not also preclude it from being provided. Neighbourhood centres, as generalist organisations, are not limited to providing just one particular type of service (including adult education). Their approach means that there is always a capacity for difference given that geography, demographics and political context in which they are located will also differ. For example, the learning needs of a metropolitan community with large numbers of culturally and linguistically different people will likely differ from those of a regional town with an aging and homogeneous population. With this in mind, the paper turns to introduce the scope and complexity of learning in centres.

#### Scope and complexities of learning in centres

Learning in centres takes many forms. Some of these are easily identified as learning and capture attention within the educational

purview. For example there is an array of formal accredited, vocational education programs offered in centres, as well as many non-accredited, pre-vocational courses that aim to support learners to take the next step into accredited, vocational programs. There are formal English language programs as well as informal groups where participants can practise their English. There are also training programs for the sector's many volunteers.

However, there are other forms of learning activity offered in centres that are not so easily captured in public accounts of learning. For instance, there are informal leisure-learning courses (e.g. craft, cooking). These groups may have a teacher, or the role of teacher can be rotated among participants. There are many programs that focus on health (e.g. gentle exercise, managing diabetes). There are workshops and one-off activities that address common concerns (e.g. recycling, parenting teenagers) that may be led by experts. There are leaderless groups that support members who experience a common hardship (e.g. amputee, divorcee). There are social groups for people who share a characteristic (e.g. older men, recent arrivals). And finally, there are social action groups formed because of a need to address a local issue of concern (e.g. the placement of a new freeway, a new bus route). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it begins to demonstrate the diversity and scope of learning in centres. Moreover, a similar diversity and scope is seen in the outcomes of these activities.

#### Outcomes of learning in centres

The outcomes for participants of these forms of learning are many and varied. For some, like vocational programs, the outcomes may seem clear (e.g. a job or some progress along the path to obtaining one). However, the outcomes of learning activities may not be as clear as might first be assumed. Take the comments of a participant in a quilting group for example:

Well, I always wanted to do quilting. I started doing that—so the women in the quilters' group, we all swap books and things. Until I joined I hadn't read the sort of books that they're into though, so it's picked up my—what I read now—and that's part of the quilters group.

First of all, the centre's justification for providing this group may be in order that isolated people make friends rather than merely to increase women's quilting skills. While the participant may indeed make some friends, she describes a quilting group that doubles as a reading group—where she has 'picked up' her reading. It is unlikely that a quilters' group would be considered as a literacy program, moreover it might be unlikely that she would join a literacy program. Yet, this brief example begins to illustrate all these possibilities of learning provided by organisations for which education is not the prime purpose.

One way to think about the complexities of learning in centres is provided by Schuller (2004). He illustrates a range of outcomes of learning using a triangular model of interrelated human, social and identity capitals. The acquisition or development of knowledge and skills that enable people to 'function effectively in economic and social life' are encapsulated in the dimension of human capital (p. 14). The (above) quilter's capacity to read, or people receiving some sort of qualification, would constitute an increase in human capital. But it is the other two capitals that are more interesting in relation to centres and learning. Identity capital refers to 'the characteristics of the individual that define his or her outlook and self-image' and 'includes concepts like self-esteem and sense of self' (p. 22). Reports of learning in centres are replete with references of increased identity capital (LCSA 2001), and it is likely that the quilter has a new sense of self because of her achievements in reading. Finally, social capital refers to the relationships between people (p. 17) and this constitutes the third dimension of Schuller's model. This third dimension is another way of thinking about the community that is central to community

development work. Again, it is likely that the quilter developed relationships between herself and others.

The value of Schuller's model is the acknowledgment of the inter-relationship between its various dimensions (2004: 22), rather than focusing on just one. The model draws attention to how a person's identity capital (sense of self) will impact on their capacity to develop human capital (skills) and/or social capital (relationships with others). This is not necessarily a new idea, but in a milieu dominated by economic concerns and a mistrust of others, it is worth emphasising the relationship.

A final vignette of a centre volunteer serves to illustrate this relationship further. The centre where the volunteer works is located in a region where there is a low-security prison. The users of the centre include prisoners and their families. The volunteer recalls how his work brought him in contact with people he considered different to himself:

I thought that was just something that happened to other people—it happened in the news, and then all of a sudden you have contact with these people. It's not just the person in jail that suffers—you have the family and it's not their fault either. [It] makes you ask why they did it. There's always two sides to every story [but] you only ever get [the] news—the criminal—the police side.

It seems reasonable to surmise that this volunteer has developed empathy and may now understand himself in relation to others differently (identity capital). Moreover, with a better understanding of the people with whom he lives and works (social capital), he can perform his role as volunteer even better (human capital). The point is not about the truth of this conjecture, but more about how the development of each capital is reliant on the development of another.

## **Ummapping**

Despite having presented a brief mapping of Australian neighbourhood centres to address the question of what is a neighbourhood centre, this part now moves to conclude with a twist. The twist is that most interviewees found the question problematic. As one claimed, 'it's the barbecue stopper, because you can't answer it'. Another suggested, 'people can't define community development, they can't define [a] neighbourhood centre [...] that is a weakness as a sector'.

The task of answering what seems an easy question is more difficult than first realised because the *modus operandi* of centres means that they are continually shaped and re-shaped by socio-political contexts as well as by their community development work. The idea of people 'taking action on issues affecting them' (Tett 2005: 246) leaves the door open for an almost unlimited range of issues. Five examples of issues where people 'came together' include:

- A regional town, with little local infrastructure, whose local take-a-way food store closed down. This meant that not only could locals no longer purchase take-a-way food, but also that tourists no longer stopped over—which further impacted on the local economy.
- A metropolitan suburb where it was noted that there was a high proportion of people with a mental illness and few local services.
- A suburb where a growing number of young people were causing anxiety by hanging around the local shops during school hours. These people were too young for 'official' youth programs, and action by school authorities was seen to be inadequate.
- A noted increase in violence perpetrated by men in a housing department estate where there were marked increases in unemployment of men (most of whom were low-skilled).

- A regional area where increased salinity in the local river resulted in turtles being covered with scales.

Community development approaches to these issues resulted in the local centres morphing into a take-a-way food store, café, lawn-mowing business, winery, and a social action campaign. These local solutions resulted in modest economic gains: for example, increasing the capital of local infrastructure (e.g. through maintaining local tourism, provision of goods and services) and securing additional funding sources for centres (e.g. sustainability). Moreover, potential outcomes across these examples would also include increased human capital. For instance, several provided accredited training resulting in increased qualifications. Several also resulted in people gaining work experience and some local people gained meaningful employment. These are indeed valuable outcomes and likely to be lauded by educational authorities.

However, returning to Schuller's (2004) model, there are even more possible outcomes, some of which increase social capital and identity capital as well. For instance, the people involved in planning develop new understandings of their communities and broader society as they research how to set up and manage what ostensibly are small businesses (e.g. wineries, cafés, lawn-mowing etc.). All involved may develop new understandings of difference, and of issues faced by people with a mental illness, men, and/or youth etc. Such activities have the potential to develop trust between various segments of community and between people and organisations, like the volunteer people involved may learn to know difference differently. These 'spillover' outcomes have potential to contribute to the social fabric (capital) of communities. Furthermore, the people involved can develop new understandings about themselves and in so doing, experience increase in self-worth. Lonely people may make friends. Others may develop strategies for getting along with people whom they consider different. In other words, this activity builds identity capital as well. All these capital gains made possible because five

small organisations were 'nimble and flexible' enough to respond to local needs (LCSA 2002)—not because these five centres *were* but because they were *able to become!*

### **Some concluding observations**

The mapping, and *unmapping*, work of this paper provides the basis for two concluding observations. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. This suggests that the capacity to provide bespoke activities, services and responses to local issues is better achieved when activities and services are not prescribed from the onset. In the examples provided here, local solutions were created to address the idiosyncrasies of issues in ways that universal solutions could not. So that even while an inability to define centres and their work is seen by some as a weakness, the ambiguity can also be understood as a strength. Freedom from the constraints and boundaries associated with robust definitions afford neighbourhood centres substantial fluidity in developing appropriate organisational identities.

A second observation is that the range of learning possibilities in neighbourhood centres is broad-ranging, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation. Underpinning these activities are concerns that extend beyond learning alone. This results in outcomes of learning in centres that are also broad-ranging. While the outcomes may well contribute to important economic priorities, they also make a significant contribution to the individual, social and human capital of participants, and communities, and ultimately the Australian nation. These contributions and learning invite further consideration.

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## Endnotes

- 1 These organisations are known by different names in different Australian States and Territories. However, the term 'Neighbourhood Centres' is used here (unless otherwise stated) in the service of clarity.

### **About the author**

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