

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Parliament of NSW Legislative Council: Standing Committee on Social Issues

Inquiry: 'Closing the Gap - Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in NSW'

Opening comments

Indij Readers welcomes the opportunity to provide input and ideas to the NSW Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Issues, for consideration in this inquiry into addressing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We are pleased that the scope of the inquiry is broad enough to consider the impact of health, education, employment and housing on Indigenous disadvantage and thus on the life expectancy gap.

It is also valuable at this time to conduct an audit of current policies and programs operating in NSW aimed at closing the life expectancy gap. The NSW Government and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon Paul Lynch MP are to be commended for having the foresight to commission this inquiry. With the new Rudd Government intent on addressing the same issues federally, there can be very valuable progress made in all aspects of life for Indigenous Australians by the two governments working to address Indigenous disadvantage. The poor circumstances of Australia's first peoples have been a blight on Australia nationally and internationally for far too long.

We at Indij Readers believe that the work we have been doing for the last fifteen years, focusing on Indigenous literacy issues, and our current project, a Community Writers' Kit (CWK), can contribute to the broader work being undertaken by the NSW Government and the Rudd Federal Government and make a significant positive impact along with other agencies' initiatives, in the larger plan to improve life and options for Indigenous Australians.

Indij Readers' input to this inquiry will be restricted to our area of expertise, ways to engage Indigenous students and communities in the literacy process as a fundamental requirement to address disadvantage and develop community cohesion. We are not equipped to offer suggestions or advice on wider issues related to the terms of reference of this inquiry, nor do we feel that we should.

About Indij Readers

Indij Readers is a not-for-commercial-profit educational publisher. We develop and publish authentic, contemporary Indigenous stories, accompanying lesson notes and audiovisual materials that help Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of all ages, in schools across Australia, learn to read. Our target audiences are 'little fullas' aged five to seven years, and 'big fullas' aged eight to fourteen years plus.

Indij Readers has DGR and ITEC status, and a majority Indigenous board. Profits generated from our business activities support literacy and cultural activities in Indigenous communities. Our business

operations - sales, marketing and administration - are in a sound financial position, demonstrating long term sustainability.

Specific funds are raised for new book development, research and on-going evaluation. Additional costs related to community involvement, capacity building and up-skilling are budgeted to run in tandem with story and book development. Indij Readers authors and illustrators are all Indigenous Australians.

The work of Indij Readers began in 1993 in Cootamundra, New South Wales, by Margaret Cossey, and was originally known as The Aboriginal Book Project. Margaret was a special needs literacy teacher for over 20 years and the literacy needs of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students she taught have informed the project from the beginning. The company Indij Readers Ltd was established in 2002. To date we have published three series of stories comprising 29 books, three teachers guides, six big-format books, an audio CD and a 10-minute DVD.



Stories developed in Indigenous communities and published by Indij Readers to support its school-based literacy program. A teachers' guide accompanies each series of books.

Through all our materials we aim to address culturally relevant issues and themes that have a universal resonance: contemporary Australian literature that meets some of the needs and challenges of Indigenous Australians and helps to advance literacy standards and cultural awareness among non-Indigenous Australians. We also believe that if a book is not an interesting read for a child, it has no place in the reading resources of a classroom. Contrived readers that meet artificial reading scheme levels distort the true purpose of reading - to seek information, or to enjoy and be uplifted by a good story or poem.

Indij Readers is different from other educational publishers. Our stories are mostly developed with first-time authors and illustrators; we work with each author and illustrator through all steps to develop the book; our creators are paid a fee in lieu of royalties; and we focus on the quality of the publishing experience for each author and illustrator, and the further employment opportunities this can create for them, as well as the ultimate outcome - the book itself.

Our stories and accompanying lesson notes have been well received by students and teachers alike. Approximately 15% of all schools in Australia are using them in their libraries or as part of their classroom literacy resources. We anticipate this percentage will increase as more schools become aware of Indij Readers.

We have developed partnerships with peak literacy organisations such as the Primary English Teachers Association, Dare to Lead, the Australian Literacy Educators Association and the Premier's Reading Challenge as well as the Smith Family, the Fred Hollows Foundation and other large support organisations.

The company accesses expertise in important business areas through strategic partnerships. Clayton Utz advises on and conducts all legal matters. Price Waterhouse Coopers recently became our accountants/auditors.

Associate Professor Robyn Ewing (Acting Dean, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney) is our academic adviser. Dr Ewing evaluates the work of Indij Readers and takes a personal interest in the ongoing development of our organisation.

Respected Indigenous and non-Indigenous literacy academics, among them Dr Rhonda Craven (University of Western Sydney) Paul Chandler, Dean of Education (University of Wollongong) Professor Jo-Anne Reid (Charles Sturt University) and teachers across all departments of education are part of a community of advisers and supporters.

The Indij Readers board has expertise and skills across the spectrum of business and education, plus close links with Indigenous communities all around Australia. Charles Davison, chair of Indij Readers, is a former president of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the peak Indigenous education advisory group in the state. Currently Charles is a senior manager at NSW

Health, with responsibilities in the area of new Indigenous health initiatives. Mark Ella, an Indij Readers' director, is a respected Indigenous businessman and former Wallaby with close connections to business leaders and Indigenous leaders, Australia-wide.

Leah Purcell, widely acclaimed author and actor, is the patron of the company. Ambassadors include NSW Governor, Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AM, director of the Woodford Dreaming Festival, Rhoda Roberts and Sydney Swans footballers, Adam Goodes and Michael O'Loughlin.

Former and current ministers in the NSW Labor Government, including Andrew Refshauge, Ian McDonald and Linda Burney have supported Indij Readers with funding, mentoring and advice over the years.

Links between Low Functional Literacy and Disadvantage

We currently have a submission for funds, being considered by federal treasury, to implement our CWK in areas of NSW, highlighted as areas of high national priority by Professor Tony Vinson in his 2007 report *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*.

In our submission we propose a long term approach to address illiteracy and poor literacy in the most disadvantaged communities in NSW (and Queensland and Victoria). It is informed by the Vinson Report and ALP education policy and has at its centre training in and implementation of our CWK.

We believe the need to improve literacy outcomes in locations of entrenched and significant disadvantage is paramount. Limited general education which is almost always the result of illiteracy or poor literacy is at the top of the list of principal recurring features of disadvantage.

Our profiling of Australia's most disadvantaged communities using social, health and economic indicators highlights the central importance of limited schooling in triggering and sustaining concentrated local disadvantage.

Professor Tony Vinson, 2007 ('Dropping off the Edge' report)

Other research lists illiteracy or poor literacy skills as the primary factor in low school retention rates. The most recent MCEETYA figures (2005) reveal a worrying percentage of Indigenous boys and girls leave school without adequate literacy skills to get a job, function effectively in the community or have real choices in life. The latest OECD figures suggest the gap between the high and low achievers is widening.

Difficulties in acquiring functional literacy levels occur for many reasons including community social disadvantage. Other factors relate to illness at critical times, issues around chronic otitis media (inflammation of the middle ear), regular absenteeism, poor or unhelpful teaching, lack of understanding by teachers of the special needs of some students, family dysfunction, plus a myriad other circumstances and conditions.

Children who can read age- and grade-appropriate material are more highly motivated, have better school attendance, are less likely to miss school with minor ailments, blossom in other academic areas, are less likely to have interactions with the police, and are more often a cohesive force in school and community activities.

It is therefore an economic consideration as well as a 'fair-go' fundamental, that we as a nation give our best efforts to the goal of 100% functional literacy for our citizens.

This goal is achievable and the Vinson Report shows us how and where public policy initiatives can be best applied to overcome long-term disadvantage.

Indij Readers' Community Writers' Kit project as a culturally appropriate initiative for implementation in Indigenous communities of high national priority

The Community Writers' Kit (CWK) development is premised on the fact that subject familiarity, a feature of local stories, engages children and motivates them to enjoy the process of becoming literate. A critical mass of stories about the local footy team, neighbourhood, well-known community members, school swimming carnival and so on, support children and their teachers, as they negotiate the skills and concepts of reading and writing. We are sure that subject familiarity helps students to achieve reading success.

The CWK will enable a community to generate and publish its own culturally relevant, interesting and authentic reading resources at the school and community level. The process of making the stories in the community will be as powerful and capacity-building as the end result, the stories themselves, being used by children in the local school as part of their reading resources.

The CWK will incorporate user-friendly software to support the story-making process for Aboriginal education assistants, teachers and community members. The CWK will be provided online and will come with training.

We sought opinions from a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous advisers about the efficacy of our CWK idea, and were assured that it was pedagogically sound and an important project to complete.

We approached Dr Robyn Ewing of the Education Faculty at the University of Sydney, to advise on and evaluate the process to develop the project.

Throughout 2006 and 2007 we worked on all aspects of research for the Community Writers' Kit. The work took place at two sites in Melbourne, at Dareton in far south-west New South Wales, at Mt Druitt in western Sydney and at two sites in the Northern Territory. The input from participants at each site has ensured that the components of the CWK will be relevant and meaningful to Indigenous communities, and will be useful for the long term.

The specific objectives of the CWK are to:

- improve the literacy outcomes of Indigenous students from disadvantaged communities
- support and showcase emerging Indigenous authors and illustrators
- include the literacy needs of other students within disadvantaged communities
- create materials that inform all Australians about contemporary Indigenous culture
- engage in the Reconciliation process



Aboriginal education assistants and teachers take part in a pilot study to develop the Indij Readers Community Writers' Kit.

Closing comments

Indij Readers has developed strong enduring relationships in many Indigenous communities around Australia, especially in those communities where stories have already been developed. It is a well-respected cultural organisation that endeavours to represent an Indigenous perspective in education in the wider community.

The Indij Readers goal is to address disadvantage. We believe that supporting Indigenous students to become literate is an effective way to achieve that goal. Our initiative will help ensure current students and those who will enter the schooling system in the future, experience literacy success from the outset.

We are aware that many initiatives to address low literacy rates in areas of high disadvantage have been implemented in the past, that large amounts of money have been expended, and that for the most part, rates of illiteracy and poor literacy have not diminished significantly.

Our current project is informed by knowledge and understanding of entrenched disadvantage as well as how literacy can be acquired in those communities; by the Vinson Report, the most comprehensive research undertaken into the location and indicators of entrenched disadvantage; and by our ongoing evaluation of the success of our work to date.

The Indij Readers literacy project reflects the recommendations of the Vinson Report as they relate to general education. It is predicated on the knowledge that other indicators of social disadvantage have to be addressed in tandem with our work in literacy acquisition. To that end in the process of implementing our Community Writers' Kit we will network with and support other agencies in communities. We will make every effort to establish and maintain an inter-agency group in each community.

Finally, the history of Indij Readers for the last fifteen years demonstrates an ability to stay the course. As Dr Vinson states,

'Disadvantage entrenched over decades cannot be turned around in a few short years ... what is needed is persistent effort nearer to seven or eight years ... as happens to good effect overseas ... rather than the Australian norm of two or three years
(Speech in Parliament House Canberra, 28th February 2007)

Indij Readers would like this inquiry into addressing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to consider our Community Writers' Kit initiative as part of a mix of long term initiatives in the final recommendations.

Margaret Cossey
Managing Director, Indij Readers Ltd