INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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Submission to Inquiry of the NSW Legislative Council Social Issues Committee into: Closing the Gap - Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

Aiming for Advantage: Education, Acceptance and Belonging

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THIS SUBMISSION:

The authors of this submission welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to have input. Both Dr Edwards and Dr Bartel share professional concern and interests in Indigenous education, in early childhood, tertiary and adult education. Dr Edwards is Chair and Dr Bartel is Secretary of the Minimbah Foundation whose purpose is to raise money to support, promote and further the educational and related purposes of Minimbah School in Armidale. Dr Edwards has a range of experience in early childhood and adult education and has collaborative research links with Ngallingnee Jarjum, Kulai and Minimbah Aboriginal Preschools. Dr Bartel teaches in Geography, Planning and Environmental Law and Policy. Dr Bartel is concerned that Indigenous ideas surrounding environmental management will not enter into the 'mainstream' unless more Indigenous students attain tertiary qualifications and join the professions and the academy, and that this will not occur unless more Indigenous students benefit from the health and educational advantages of their non-Indigenous peers. Dr Bartel also has a professional interest in quality education and a Masters of Higher Education.

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION:

This submission contains a one-page Key Summary, a five-page discussion and a three-page reference list. This submission has used Plain English and has deliberately avoided the use of jargon and pedagogical terminology etc. The plural term Indigenous peoples and cultures has been used deliberately in order to signify the diversity which exists in Australia and the Torres Strait Islands and therefore in New South Wales. For further reading and references for this submission a list of publications is provided at the end. As the Committee will be well aware the extent of the research literature in this area is large and previous inquiries of a similar nature will also have extensive reference lists. Those listed here are but a small selection. Should the Committee wish to contact us in future we would welcome further communication on this submission.

Aiming for Advantage: Education, Acceptance and Belonging

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KEY SUMMARY

The recommendations of this submission are:

1) That the Committee recommend a focus on education and acceptance (belonging) as major ways to facilitate advantage;

2) That Indigenous peoples must have a central role within policy formulation, implementation and evaluation of any measures recommended by the Committee;

3) That any measures recommended by the Committee to address Indigenous disadvantage provide communities with the necessary supports for effective implementation (including evaluation) in terms of skills and resources for Indigenous peoples; thus enabling improvements to be sustainable and self-supporting and avoiding a compound of the problems by handing over responsibility without such support;

4) That the Committee utilise the programmes currently operating in several NSW Indigenous schools as models to be further enhanced, supported and promoted throughout the state;

5) That significantly more Indigenous people be trained and employed in educational positions throughout New South Wales, including at tertiary level; and

6) That the Committee recommend the development of anti-racist education programs across all non-Indigenous communities, and focus on building acceptance and belonging by addressing institutionalized racism.

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CAUSES OF DISADVANTAGE

The causes of Indigenous *dis*advantage are many and most are historic in origin. They include colonisation and oppression. The magnitude of the inequities and their impact on overall quality of life and wellbeing amongst Indigenous peoples in New South Wales are very serious. Major indicators such as life expectancy, educational participation and employment levels suggest that not only do these inequities continue, but in many cases have become worse over the last few decades. It is important to recognize that Indigenous disadvantage does not only harm Indigenous peoples but all in the community. Inequity and injustice in our society must be addressed for the benefit of all; for the potential of Indigenous Australian to be realised and for all Australians through full participation in society.

Past, and some current, measures aimed at addressing Indigenous disadvantage have compounded the problems. It is a great injustice to disempower a people, to dismantle their society, destroy their histories, cultures and languages. Further injustice occurs when power is returned under the label of enfranchisement and self-governance, but without sufficient **support systems in terms of skill provision, education and resources to perform tasks necessary to the requisite standards and with external interference which undercuts Indigenous initiatives**. Such measures appear to be set up to fail. For example, Indigenous schools in New South Wales are funded at levels that pay teachers salaries, but provide little to cover administrative costs and student resources.

Effective policy development, implementation and evaluation is at the core of successful organizations and service provision. Some past and current policies have been aimed at benefiting Indigenous peoples, but implemented and evaluated in racist ways. These have resulted in perverse outcomes due to a lack of understanding, and lack of desire to include Indigenous peoples and

their cultures. In future we must: **support, enable, include and empower Indigenous peoples within policy formulation, implementation and evaluation at all levels**.

Acceptance across Australian society remains an extremely significant support system that is sadly lacking for Indigenous peoples. Acceptance is the opposite of racism and it underpins belonging. Racism causes and compounds disadvantage. Racism against Indigenous peoples occurs on an individual to individual basis and structurally through socio-economic processes, including governance and institutionalised racism. Indigenous peoples in Australia have long been cast by Europeans as the "other" in their own land. The "othering", stigmatisation and stereotyping of Indigenous peoples (and Indigenous cultures) begins in early life, continues throughout school and in every public domain. Low educational outcomes at school are almost ensured where low expectations are the norm. Beyond the school gates racism can ensure that few succeed and even the capable lose hope. Racism on such a scale causes internalization of negative stereotypes, so that even Indigenous people may come to believe that they themselves are at fault.

Disempowerment, alienation, failure, loss of hope, and racism form a vicious feedback cycle, since one feeds on the other, as negative stereotypes reinforce the disadvantage of Indigenous people. It is vital that racism be reduced by every means necessary, and change can be positively reinforced using the same feedback mechanism to destroy negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes will be created by Indigenous peoples gaining advantage and becoming sustainably empowered. *Sustainable* empowerment is vitally important to address Indigenous disadvantage and its achievement can be assisted through the principle cause of advantage: *quality* education and training, combined with the removal of obstacles such as racism and perverse policies.

Sustainable empowerment is self-supporting and is not susceptible to policy changes, changes in government, or changes to personnel. Quality education can assist in ensuring Indigenous peoples have the depth of advantage that others in the community take as a given. It can also ensure that Indigenous people are accepted, through education of non-Indigenous peoples.

CAUSES OF ADVANTAGE

There are many proposed solutions to Indigenous disadvantage, but **the primary *cause of advantage* is education and the earlier this starts the better the outcomes**. This has to be *quality* **education of *both* Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians**. All too frequently in the

past education has not been quality, has not been inclusive and has excluded Indigenous peoples and cultures: both explicitly and implicitly. The programs offered to Indigenous students in many schools have not been tailored to meet the range of learning styles brought to the classrooms, thus impacting on student interest levels and attendance, particularly in high school. Worse still, experiences of exclusion, bullying and alienation can lead students to hate learning.

Quality education of Indigenous (as for non-Indigenous) peoples has obvious outcomes: it provides improved employment prospects and higher incomes, improved housing options, stronger and more stable social networks, better diet and nutrition, better health and wellbeing, as well as longer life expectancy. The strongest predictor for higher life expectancy is level of income and the strongest element of higher income is education. However for education to work to achieve these results requires that Indigenous peoples feel accepted and supported in their endeavours, both in and outside the classroom. **It is not only helping hands that are required; it is the removal of obstacles.** Someone who feels excluded, who is unfairly treated, who is made to feel "less than", who is denied the support systems that many Anglo-Australians take for granted, is not going to experience the same educational and health outcomes as those who do. For example, Indigenous Australians should be able to walk into shops and browse without being suspected of shoplifting; present at an interview and not worry about being stereotyped.

Acceptance and belonging can be established within the classroom, through *quality* Indigenous and non-Indigenous education. Minimbah Preschool and Primary School in Armidale is an example of Indigenous education for Indigenous children, where Indigenous children form the majority of the student body and the school is run by Indigenous people who are mentors for other members of the community. At Minimbah,[1] Indigenous dominance helps to ensure children are accepted and are not confronted by feelings of exclusion, stigmatization and low expectations. In this environment Indigenous children can develop confidence in themselves and their abilities without being demoralised by others. **The opportunity to experience success, acceptance and**

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[1] Mrs. Dianne Roberts, the school's co-founder, has received the Order of Australia for her work at Minimbah and her contribution to Indigenous education. Mrs Roberts was appointed the first Aboriginal Director and Principal of the school in 1987. In 2006 a Montessori classroom opened at Minimbah with assistance from the Montessori Children's Foundation "Indigenous and Remote Communities" programme. Advantages of Montessori include education beginning at three years of age, mixed age classrooms, small group and one to one teaching. Abstract concepts are introduced through concrete, tactile materials. Children have structured freedom of movement and are taught responsibility for their own learning, environment and interactions with others. Although by no means the only educational system delivering quality outcomes recent comparative work suggests that it is successful. However other resources at the school struggle to maintain viability through lack of funding (such as the nutrition centre, the library and bursar support).

respect at school is essential for securing attendance, retention and quality educational outcomes of Indigenous students. At St Josephs Catholic School[2] in Walgett similar results are achieved by teaching the Yuwaalaraay language to all students. The Indigenous children can walk with dignity and pride in their school, which provides an enjoyable and rewarding experience rather than exclusion, bullying, alienation, and failure to learn.

Principles such as respect and inclusion are universally applied in quality teaching and learning environments and would be beneficial for any student. Non-Indigenous students assume and it is taken for granted that they and their culture will be respected. In most cases they are the dominant group inside the school gates. There is no identification of deviance from the norm because they are the norm. Proactive responses must be made to address current deficiencies in the education system for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Many Indigenous parents, guardians and carers of current school-age Indigenous children have had negative school experiences. Indigenous schools, as have been provided here as examples, can play an important role in re-educating disenchanted adults about the positive places that schools can be. Associated community extension programmes can also improve home nutrition, health and wellbeing and raise school attendance. Such community run programmes would help to address historic injustices though educating Indigenous people who have been forcibly separated from their people and their land about their culture. This would return something which was stolen from their ancestors by colonisation and forced separation. To reverse past injustice requires the doing of justice.

Both Minimbah and St Joseph's are struggling to survive in New South Wales and have precarious existences. Instead of barely surviving these Aboriginal schools and programmes, and several others like them, should be supported and enhanced. Then these models can be promoted throughout New South Wales as examples of quality education. **Education spending should be targeted at achieving the outcomes that these schools are aiming towards.**

The most recent Australian census figures, taken in 2006, indicate that Indigenous children attend preschools and primary schools at a rate quite similar to non-Indigenous children. For example, some preschools in the north of the state, such as Tabulam's Ngallingnee Jarjum, Coffs Harbour's

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[2] As featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald* March 29-30, 2008 (p 31), the St Joseph's programme is highly dependant on continued government funding and appropriately qualified educators.

Kulai Aboriginal Preschool and Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool at Armidale have excellent participation rates. Appropriate policies and programs need to be put in place to engage Indigenous students at high school and tertiary (vocational and university) levels of education, where current participation rates are well below non-Indigenous levels. As part of addressing this issue significantly more Indigenous teachers and lecturers must be trained and employed within our educational institutions.
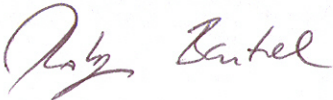
Acceptance and belonging need to be established outside as well as within the classroom, throughout society and in social systems including within broader socio-economic processes and systems of governance. Present systems carry vestiges of their (even) more racist histories. Racism may manifest in the form of institutionalised racism (such as aspects of the criminal justice system including criminalization of offensive language) or in the numerous documented perverse outcomes of Indigenous policy. Examples of the latter are self-governance attempts that have granted power but have not granted the necessary supports in terms of skills and resources. Such an approach appears set to ensure failure and entail blame for those who have "failed", when really it was (all be they well-intentioned) policymakers who failed. Tragically, it ensures that Indigenous disadvantage continues and is in some cases made worse. Damage accumulates and cumulative damage can be greater than the sum of parts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Education is a key way to address Indigenous disadvantage and to *cause advantage,* but it must be *quality* education and has to occur in the context of whole-of-life support in terms of sufficient resources, appropriate systems of governance and broader social acceptance. All of us need acceptance and approval: we require our "place", that feeling of belonging, in society, in order to experience the heights of health and wellbeing. Those lucky enough to have simply been able to assume our place in society would not know what we were missing till it was gone. In this country, their own country, Indigenous peoples are frequently made to feel like they do not belong, that they are outside the norm, below the average, not worthy and that they are not accepted by others in society. Experiencing injustice upon injustice results in alienation and loss of hope. **Quality education of Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous people therefore is the key, alongside a more holistic examination of how the social and economic structures within society and**

governance systems may cause disadvantage, and can be turned around to cause advantage, for Indigenous peoples.

Yours faithfully,

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