

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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The Director
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Sydney NSW 2000
By email

Dear Director

Re: Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage. Interim Report

I would like to thank the members of the Committee for their excellent report.

I would also like to take the opportunity to brief the Committee on a matter which is relevant to the Inquiry, but which has been dealt with only in passing.

This is the question of adult literacy. Having worked as a community development worker and adult educator for three decades, mainly with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and having conducted research in Australia and overseas on the impact of literacy on development, I think a number of things could be said on this issue in the Final Report.

Almost everything written in research and policy about literacy (including the Interim Report) pertains to children and students in schools. Yet, internationally, literacy is primarily discussed as a characteristic of adults, defined as people aged 15 and over. Certainly, improving participation and outcomes in schools does, over time, raise adult literacy levels; but it is not sufficient to eradicate illiteracy, or even reduce it substantially, because the children of people of low literacy tend to be the ones who do not make it through the school system. The only way that 100% functional literacy can be achieved in a large population is when action is directed towards adults, as well as children.

Data on adult literacy levels is not good enough to say with any certainty what the level of literacy is in the Aboriginal adult population. But a recent ABS national survey found 40% of all Australian lacked sufficient literacy for effective functioning at work and as citizens. If it is this much of a problem in the mainstream population, it is almost certainly even worse in the Aboriginal population, for all the historic reasons that are now well known. My own experience, and that of many other people working in communities, supports this conclusion.

In all the analysis about why particular governance arrangements prove inadequate, whether the focus is the performance of Aboriginal organizations or of government departments, this literacy issue is rarely raised. But anyone who has taught governance, as I have, in Aboriginal organizations, knows what a huge challenge it is for most adults to deal with the highly literate world of the bureaucracy. It is generally accepted that literacy is a major factor determining how effectively people interact with health services, but in my experience, this is true of all services – housing, employment, schools, justice system, and so on. However, because the problem is rarely named as such, ‘training’ programs, even when they are provided, are often totally inappropriate for the people who most need them. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the TAFE/VET system is usually given the job of providing training, and this system has systematically over the last two decades, moved away from ‘community education’ – which is the most effective form of literacy provision – to a competency-based training model which primarily measures the acquisition of instrumental vocational skills.

The literacy which is needed to negotiate and form partnerships with government is a very specific form of literacy – it is ‘critical literacy’, the ability to understand how different interests are negotiated, through language, in situations of unequal power. The best method for acquiring ‘critical literacy’ is through **popular education**, a long tradition within adult education which focuses on working with less powerful and more marginalised communities and peoples. Latin America has many successful examples, as do most countries of the Third World. This way of working is less well-known in the west, but there is no reason it cannot be adapted to the situation of Aboriginal communities in NSW. For example, it has been proved effective in governance training in WA’s East Kimberly, which is sponsored by the Commonwealth Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.

I would be happy to brief the committee further on this, if they think it would be helpful. I have attached a brief c.v. which sets out my professional and research background.

Yours sincerely

Bob Boughton
July 14, 2008

Dr Bob Boughton is a Director of the Centre for Aboriginal and Multicultural Studies (CRAMS) and Coordinator, Adult Education programs, at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia. Prior to joining UNE, he worked for over two decades with Aboriginal community-controlled organizations as a community development worker, adult educator, policy officer and research officer. He has worked in Alice Springs for Tangentyere Council, the Institute for Aboriginal Development, and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress; for Tranby College in Sydney; and for the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers in Canberra. Between 1997 and 2001, he was a Research Fellow on several CRC for Aboriginal Health projects including a two year fellowship examining links between education and health in Aboriginal communities. Since 1997, he has authored over thirty monographs, book chapters and journal articles on adult education and development issues, of which a significant number reported research undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal organizations. He was a member of the research consortium which evaluated Australia's national Indigenous vocational education strategy, *Partners in a Learning Culture*, and has been an adviser on governance training to the Commonwealth Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations. He currently holds an Australia Research Council grant to work with the government of Timor-Leste, advising them on their national literacy campaign and the development of a national adult education system. His major research interest is in the links between adult literacy and development in marginalised, disadvantaged and post-conflict communities. Some recent relevant publications and reports include:

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Boughton, B. (2000). *What is the Connection between Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Health? CRC ATH Occasional Paper Series, No. 2*. Darwin: Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health