

## **SUBMISSION TO HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

*Note: For convenience, I have addressed issues in indigenous education using the areas of interest suggested in the letter sent to me. Clearly, the topic is much wider and requires far more detailed research. I hope that this submission provides the committee with a hands on understanding of the situation as it exists at the moment.*

### **1. Access, participation and different models of indigenous education**

It has been experience of the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation over the past 25 years that the best form of participation and the most success access has been in culturally sensitive models of tutoring. It is well known by educationalists that one to one tutoring is by far the most successful form of teaching (it is still used as the base model at Oxford and Cambridge Universities). Wherever possible, we strive to provide individualised tuition for our participating students. In the past this was facilitated by the support from the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) which provided one to one tutoring both in the home and also at school. Prior to the closure of the scheme, Monash University had undertaken a study comparing the ATAS model with other forms of tutoring (particularly in classrooms) and found on average a 12-15 month reading age improvement over three years compared with the classroom model. Failing individual tutoring, we have noted considerable success with our "literacy heritage model". We aim to provide indigenous friendly classes and tutoring. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has commissioned a number of text books that are sympathetic to indigenous culture. Initially, this involved re-writing existing English text books, providing themes familiar to Aboriginal children (wide family, culture including funerals and coming of age, food, animals and the travelling lifestyle familiar to most young indigenous Australians). We also employed artists to provide illustrations featuring Aboriginal children and adults. Following the research of Apple and Peters (London Institute of Education, 1987 and 2002) where it was found that in the UK and US children responded better by adults of their own regional cultural, racial and social groupings. For this reason

wherever possible, we have tried to employ indigenous mentors and tutors. This of course is extremely difficult, so we run a course for our non-indigenous tutors emphasising cultural niceties and traditions. We have enjoyed some spectacular successes using this methodology. Our recent publication, *Six Days to Better English*, was launched at the World Literacy Summit in 2014 (Oxford, UK), and has been taken up in several African countries. We found that an exclusively indigenous group on an intense six day literacy program, using our described methods, could improve their reading age on the Schonell Scale by up to two and a half years. The average being 1.6 years. We also followed up with tests six months later and found that 80% of the students had maintained their improved reading skills. This follows a theory of learning gaining some credence that we in fact learn on plateaus followed by short, spectacular improvements (Mirabella, LaTrobe University and John Wilson, Department of Education, University of Oxford, 2006).

## **2. Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas**

We have found that the withdrawal of the ATAS program in 2003 has had a strong adverse effect on indigenous students living in remote areas. It should be noted that in much of Victoria and New South Wales, with the closing of the one and two teacher schools (particularly in Victoria where 200 rural schools were closed between 1994 and 1999) it could be argued that the majority of rural and regional indigenous students are living in "remote areas". It was found following the closure of these schools that the average distance a non-town, indigenous primary student was required to travel to school was 42 kilometres (a round trip of 84 kilometres, five days a week, approximately 500 kilometres per week and costing more than \$100 in petrol). It is hardly surprising that rural and regional indigenous students have a far higher truancy rate than their non-indigenous peers. Prior to the closure of ATAS, this problem was addressed by ATAS registered tutors who might visit a family to tutor and leave work assignments one a week. Following the closure of ATAS, at least 2000 students in Victoria, that we are aware of, ceased to have any form of education. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has attempted to address this problem by organising volunteer tutors and holding monthly "literacy heritage camps" based at regional centres (Ballarat, Shepparton, Mildura, Albury, etc). While this

helps, it does not face the main problem and the result is reflected in the recent NAPLAN test results and the 2014-15 ABS Statistics, indicating that the "gap" between indigenous and non-indigenous students regarding literacy has not altered in the past decade.

### **3. Best practice models for Aboriginal education, domestically and internationally**

I have already indicated that a culturally sympathetic model of Aboriginal education has worked well for our students. It should be noted that aspects of this model have been adopted internationally. In 1997, with support from ATAS, the Koori Outdoor Education (KODE) model was established in Mildura (Bill Carroll and Tony Cree). This model emphasised the syllabus and minimised classroom attendance, the theory being that just as Plato, at his school in Athens taught under a tree, so indigenous students could sit on a river bank or in the shade of a Wattle and achieve just the same academic results. In support of this model, the first complete laptop syllabus was developed for primary schools. With a laptop which provided a full curriculum for each primary year plus teacher support, it should be possible to operate a school with minimum outlay. Following the International Teacher Education Conference in Chicago in 1999, the KODE laptop model was taken up and is now used in 15 African countries. It should be noted that recent governments have wound back the government school version of the KODE schools and most indigenous children are now back in the classrooms, which is in keeping with government policy to provide a universal education for all Australian children.

### **4. Models in the transition to further education and employment**

It has been identified by both Centrelink and recent University based research (D'Area and Green, Monash University 2015) that one of the prime reasons for indigenous Australians not undertaking further education in the form of TAFE, Apprenticeships or Traineeships has been a tendency to leave school early (43% of indigenous students complete Year 12, compared with 89% of non-indigenous

students). It is clear that an important factor in early school leaving is an inability to maintain the academic level required in secondary school. The recent NAPLAN tests (and earlier ABS figures) indicate that the "gap" between literacy standards of indigenous and non-indigenous students has not improved over the past decade. The "gap" at the end of primary education (Year 6) is an average of 2.3 reading years. This would indicate that the typical indigenous student is attempting to undertake secondary education with Year 3 reading skills. Not only does this provide a huge academic challenge for school and pupil, there is also an associated stigma attached students unable to cope in class. To some extent, the now defunct ATAS Program, and its various subsidiaries, addressed this problem, but this is no longer the case. It is extremely unlikely an indigenous student with Year 3 literacy skills who dropped out of school at 14 years and 10 months (average age for non-metropolitan, indigenous school leavers) will be able to enter TAFE or obtain an Apprenticeship/Traineeship. It is clear that there are outstanding indigenous students, many of whom the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation has tutored at school and helped to enter TAFE or University. However, the vast majority of Aboriginal students do not have adequate literacy skills, do not receive support and are unable to enter the workforce outside the closed employment provided by co-operatives and government programs. Even in these circumstances, when employment has been obtained for nothing more than OH&S concerns, our organisation is frequently approached to provide literacy support for indigenous employees. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation "Literacy at Work Program" now supports more than 100 indigenous employees in the Melbourne metropolitan area with weekly tutorial support sessions in the workplace.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the present situation is unsatisfactory with regards to indigenous literacy and education generally. As I have indicated earlier, the loss of the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) has had an extremely negative effect on outcomes for indigenous students. This factor combined with the closure of small country schools has resulted in a backwards step in indigenous education. Social factors also contribute in a way not perceived in earlier years. Drug use by young indigenous Australians who are outside the education system is now endemic. It is quite usual for one of our tutors to report that a successful student in primary and early secondary has now left school and taken up with a peer group that has introduced the student to a sedentary lifestyle often involving substance abuse of the most dangerous type. Such individuals within the education system can seek or be given help and support, outside the education system, they are extremely vulnerable and the opportunity for a productive and happy life is greatly reduced. I hope this does not provide the committee with too negative view of Aboriginal education but I think it is an accurate account of a situation that exists at the present time. The Aboriginal Literacy Foundation is entirely privately supported charity, and we can achieve a lot with quite small financial support (between \$600,000 and \$1,000,000 per annum). However, we cannot possibly replace the work undertaken by the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme which, at the time of its closure, was costing the tax payer approximately \$30million per annum. I suspect that the long term economic consequence of its closure would be considerably more than this sum.