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BUSINESS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES
COMMITTEE

Reference: Indigenous education

MONDAY, 26 JULY 1999

BOURKE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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SENATE
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS AND
EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 26 July 1999

Members: Senator Collins (*Chair*), Senators Carr, Crossin, Stott Despoja, Tchen and Tierney

Substitute members: Senator Allison for Senator Stott Despoja

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Allison, Boswell, Brown, Brownhill, George Campbell, Crane, Crowley, Faulkner, Gibbs, Harradine, Hutchins, Mackay, O'Brien and Watson

Senators in attendance: Senators Collins, Tchen and Tierney

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

The effectiveness of education and training programs for indigenous Australians.

In conducting its inquiry, the committee will:

- (a) survey the recommendations arising over the past decade from parliamentary, government, commission and agency reports which deal with Aboriginal education and training;
- (b) assess the implementation, ongoing relevance and efficacy of recommendations which seek to raise educational achievement and to employ culturally-appropriate pedagogy to maximise participation of indigenous Australians in formal educational settings;
- (c) examine the extent to which recommendations aimed at improving indigenous people's educational participation and achievement have been implemented by the relevant authorities, and evaluate the benefits which have flowed from them;
- (d) identify any obstacles to the achievement of participation of indigenous Australians in education and training and make recommendations as to how these might be overcome;
- (e) examine recent initiatives which have proven successful in improving the participation rates and levels of achievement of indigenous Australians in the national vocational education and training system;
- (f) formulate advice concerning the development and management of education and training programs by indigenous Australians for indigenous Australians; and
- (g) provide a comparative account of the levels of resources, both Commonwealth and State, devoted to education and training programs for indigenous Australians.

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Committee met at 4.00 p.m.

DOULE, Mr Ralph, Bourke Language Centre

LOXLEY, Mr Paul Andrew, Principal, Bourke Public School

SALT, Ms Alison Margaret, Teacher, Bourke Public School

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee and welcome all observers to today's hearing. We are pleased to be able to visit Bourke, and earlier today, Brewarrina.

As some background, on 9 March last year the Senate asked the committee to review parliamentary, government and commission reports on indigenous education presented during the past 10 years to assess the recommendations made in these reports, investigate the extent to which action has been taken to address them, and identify any impediments to implementation. The committee was also asked, among other things, to identify any obstacles to the achievement of greater participation by indigenous Australians in education and training and make recommendations on how these might be overcome.

I welcome our witnesses and thank you for appearing before us today. I invite you now to make an opening statement and then we will move to questions.

Mr Doule—I have been employed as an Aboriginal language worker for the past two years. I present a language program at Bourke High School. I also present a language program at Bourke preschool, and I am in the process of establishing a program at St Ignatius Primary School. In the past we have presented language programs in the child-care centre and at Bourke Public School. My role is to develop programs, put them together and present them. Thank you.

Mr Loxley—I have been the Principal of Bourke Public School for eight years. We attempt to be a child-centred community school. This involves a needs based literacy and numeracy program depending on where children are at in their developmental stage. We are supported very well through country area programs, the disadvantaged schools program, and a very supportive Aboriginal student support and parental awareness program.

We have an integrated distance ed centre attached to the school. Apart from literacy, we are trying to look at technology as a major focus. In 1994 we established a core set of beliefs, mainly that all kids can succeed, all work should be directly correlated to each child's learning stage, all teachers and children have the right to feel happy and safe at school and so on. We established personalised beliefs.

Then we attempted to work out a community response to a curriculum delivery which would meet the needs of all of our kids. Our priorities change on an annual basis depending upon the needs of the school and the kids. That is done in consultation with the community and on the basis of agenda, whichever agenda it is—agenda 1998 or 1999.

We received the Director-General's award in 1997 for outstanding teaching and learning programs. The school data that is relevant is that we currently have about 308 children enrolled at the school. Approximately 50 per cent of our children are Aboriginal kids, or are of Aboriginal descent.

Senator TIERNEY—What percentage?

Mr Loxley—It goes from 47 per cent to 50 per cent, but it is approximately half. We have a significant turnover of children due to the itinerant nature of some of our families. I am lucky enough to work with an incredible bunch of people. I have a very flexible staff who will meet the needs of the kids and we attempt to do that on a daily basis. Some days it is easier than others. Thank you.

CHAIR—Ms Salt, do you have anything to add?

Ms Salt—Just to say that I am one of two Aboriginal teachers at Bourke Public School, one of four in the district. There are only four Aboriginal teachers in this district. I am employed this year as an Aboriginal educational resource teacher. I work not only with Aboriginal children but also with children who are having difficulties with literacy and numeracy, or just with class. I take them on an individual basis to do extra work.

CHAIR—Mr Doule, concerning the program you run at the high school, is that running your language program as a language other than English program, or is it a different type of program?

Mr Doule—This year we have a particular program that has been endorsed by the Board of Studies. It is the first time a program at the high school—

CHAIR—You got it on that basis?

Mr Doule—has been endorsed by the Board of Studies. It is seen as an approved program by the Board of Studies.

CHAIR—How is the program running to date?

Mr Doule—We always anticipated some problems along the way. I think we will learn from those problems, being the first time that we have presented this program. It is okay because we have anticipated some problems. I hope we can work around those.

CHAIR—Ms Salt, one of the things that we have considered in a couple of locations now is the difficulty of getting indigenous teachers, the limited number of role models there are in schools, particularly in those schools with a very high indigenous population. Is there anything that you can add from your experience that helps explain the difficulties that are occurring in facilitating or encouraging indigenous teaching?

Ms Salt—I think it is probably very difficult. There needs to be some sort of support mechanism set up within the department. I was only talking about this the other day to Paul, about the lack of support that Aboriginal teachers feel. We are in a system where we are

teaching the system, but our culture always comes into it. We are in a situation where we have two sides to cover—culturally and also educationally. Does that make any sense? We have also got to make these children feel that there is relevance in what they are learning and what we are teaching, and that can sometimes be very difficult.

CHAIR—So is the problem of bridging between your understanding of your community and structures that you do not think are adequate to deal with that, or are relevant to the community?

Ms Salt—Yes, partly. There needs to be some sort of support mechanism set up for Aboriginal teachers. We are few and far between; there are not many of us around. There are only four in this whole district, and there is no networking between us. The fact that we are in the lower positions means that it is a little bit difficult in terms of accepting sometimes what schools do from an Aboriginal perspective, especially in schools with a high population of Aboriginal students.

CHAIR—Do you feel that you need to address that problem at two levels—with the individual children and structurally—in terms of how programs are developed or the institutions operate?

Ms Salt—Yes.

CHAIR—In that sense then you have a twofold need, the networking of resourcing and the support mechanisms, because in some senses you are challenging an orthodoxy. As a one-alone indigenous teacher it must be very difficult.

Ms Salt—Yes, it is. We came to Bourke this year, both me and my husband—he is another Aboriginal teacher—and we feel that our needs are a little bit different to the mainstream teachers, to the non-Aboriginal teachers.

CHAIR—Do you experience a level of racism in areas such as Bourke, more so than in a metropolitan area?

Ms Salt—I do not know. I have never taught in a metropolitan area.

CHAIR—But you went to school, presumably, in a metropolitan area?

Ms Salt—No, Brewarrina.

CHAIR—Okay, sorry.

Ms Salt—I come from Brewarrina.

CHAIR—I meant teacher training.

Ms Salt—I did mine through an Aboriginal rural education program. We did a bit of prac down in Sydney, but that was about it. I could not say racism. One of the problems that you face when you come out to these areas as an Aboriginal teacher is that a lot of people

do not think. They still have these attitudes today that Aboriginal people cannot really be teachers, and that comes from the community as well as from within the system.

CHAIR—That is within the system as well?

Ms Salt—Yes. You have always got that idea that somewhere down the track you are not quite as good as the rest.

CHAIR—It has been suggested to us also that Aboriginals might trend more towards different learning styles—for instance, some people are more visual; other people are more auditory. The suggestion was Aboriginal people might be more auditory—in other words, they learn through talking, discussion, stories and things like that rather than reading. Is that your experience?

Ms Salt—Yes, for a lot of Aboriginal children. I think that that is one of the things that makes it difficult as an Aboriginal teacher, that you are trying to teach from this curriculum and the school program or whatever, but sometimes you do not feel it is really adapting to the kids that you are teaching.

CHAIR—Okay.

Senator TIERNEY—I was just wondering if you could explain a little further the work of the language centre in the primary and secondary school. How much time a week, for example, would Aboriginal children have with your classes?

Mr Doule—At present, we do not present a program at Bourke Public. Approximately, all up, we spend around five to six hours a week in those schools, and at the Bourke Preschool and the high school around five hours a week. Sorry, could you just go over your question once, please?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes. You spend personally?

Mr Doule—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—So in, say, the high school, how much time would Aboriginal students have in contact with you, for example, in that program?

Mr Doule—Three hours a week.

Senator TIERNEY—How long has that been going for?

Mr Doule—The program all up has been running for approximately three years or thereabouts. I have been presenting the program at Bourke High for around 1½ years.

Senator TIERNEY—What year levels do that?

Mr Doule—Years 7 and 8. Last year it was year 7. This year we have continued on with that group from last year.

Senator TIERNEY—Ms Salt, I was wondering if you could elaborate a little more on what you said about a particular style of teaching or method of teaching—I assume it is a little more culturally appropriate—that can be given by an Aboriginal teacher.

Ms Salt—Within the system at the moment there is a way that you are expected to teach and a way that the children are expected to act, which is appropriate behaviour. That can sometimes conflict with our way of doing something. You might find you have a group of Aboriginal children that respond more to coming in, sitting down on the floor in a circle, or even going outside now and then and sitting around outside under some trees and having a yarn and discussing things—a lot of two-way talking stuff. A lot of Aboriginal children like that two-way talking stuff. They do not tend to like sitting there and listening all the time—which is a good skill to have. It is not saying that you cannot have that in schools, but there needs to be a weighing up of how we are going to teach, especially with these schools here where there are a lot of Aboriginal children.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned a lack of contact between Aboriginal teachers. Has there ever been any attempt to do that, to link up in some way to have informal discussions?

Ms Salt—The department has Aboriginal education conferences which were supposed to be twice a year, but we have not seen them for a couple of years, but they were going. There is a lady in Sydney now in the process of trying to start an Aboriginal teachers association which would be a branch of the Teachers Federation, but would be our own network, and we could take our issues to the federation, but at the moment there is none.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned that the conferences have not taken place for a few years. Were they western district conferences or were they state wide?

Ms Salt—Yes, they would have them within the district; each district would hold their own Aboriginal education conferences. That was for Aboriginal teachers, AEAs, AERTS and any Aboriginal staff in schools.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you know why they stopped?

Ms Salt—They just have not had them. I do not know what happens. The Aboriginal education consultant from district office usually runs them, but we have not had any for the last two years.

Senator TIERNEY—Mr Loxley, you mentioned the itinerant nature of some of the pupils. What sort of shifting population would you have in your school like that that might move off with family or for other reasons some time during the year and not be there for a period of time during a particular year?

Mr Loxley—Depending on the season or the reason, we could have anywhere from 10 to 15 per cent turnover in any given year. A lot of our kids go to Dareton for the fruit picking on a seasonal basis.

Senator TIERNEY—To where—sorry?

Mr Loxley—To Dareton, Victoria. Some of our kids go to Dubbo; some of our kids go to Bathurst. It depends on what happens. Some of our kids that have—

Senator TIERNEY—Is that seasonal work as well?

Mr Loxley—No, not necessarily. Correctional services has an impact on our kids. Our kids go down to visit their dad or a relative in gaol. They sometimes go for a week and may stay for a little bit longer. It just depends on the reason, but we do have a very high turnover of kids in relation to that. But it is funny; it is cyclic. You may see kids leave this year and come back in 18 months time, or they will go from Bourke perhaps to Narromine to Orange. It just depends on where members of their extended family live or the reasons why they actually moved in the first place.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you have any teachers on your staff that have any specialist training in Aboriginal education?

Mr Loxley—Under the departmental Aboriginal education policy, each teacher in our schools has had to be in-serviced on the Aboriginal education policy. The way that that structure was put in place was that two or three members of your staff go to Dubbo—and did go to Dubbo—for training, and they are taken through the Aboriginal education policy by the Aboriginal education consultant. Then those people come back and take the staff through that policy. That was done through a series of development activities at school.

Senator TIERNEY—That would be on a staff development day?

Mr Loxley—Yes. Actually it took a little bit longer than that. There are a number of modules. We have had support in the past from the Aboriginal education consultant and anyone else within the system that can meet and identify need within the school.

Senator TIERNEY—In terms of pre-service training, obviously teachers have come from a whole range of institutions, but are you aware of any of them having any particular work done on this before they have come into teaching?

Mr Loxley—It has been my experience that, unless you have lived in a community with Aboriginal people, there are very few people that come back out this way within the teaching service. There are three types of ways we have actually got teachers in the past. We have promised people to come out casually and work three days a week in the hope of chasing a job under various employment programs that the department runs to increase their priority date to get permanent employment or go for a targeted casual position. It is now called a permanent employment program where you can apply to actually make certain positions available under merit and casuals can go for them. It does not matter what priority date they have. For instance, the priority date is when you first make an application to get a job within the department, and at the moment the current priority date for a job in Bourke is 93, so there is a bit of a delay from young people finishing university or gaining teaching qualifications to getting a job.

CHAIR—I am sorry. Does that mean if you qualified in 1993?

Mr Loxley—That is right. You would get a job off the system now. You can short cut that by picking up a job under the permanent employment program where certain schools will say that, for a specific reason, they would like to open it to merit. Under merit, it would go to any casual teacher as long as they had the appropriate qualifications. A number of our teachers have picked up permanent jobs that way, but they picked up their experience by coming out here casually first. It is a bit of a catch-22.

To answer your question, I am not aware of any particular university or teacher training organisation doing a lot of work on that. That is not to say it does not happen. I am just not aware of it, although we have had young teachers still doing their training coming out specifically so they can teach in a school with a significant enrolment of Aboriginal kids.

Senator TCHEN—Mr Loxley, did I hear you right? For a graduate teacher to get appointment, he or she has had to qualify in 1993.

Mr Loxley—That is for Bourke. If we have a vacancy on staff, we will contact staffing in Blacktown in Sydney and they will run it through the A44 or A49 computer system. They rank the next person on the list to get a job as one who has indicated he wanted to go to Bourke or anywhere in the state. At the moment they are working on people who applied for a job in 1993 getting a job in 1999. In some areas of the state, such as the North Coast, it can even go back to 1987. Movement just depends on a number of different circumstances. That, in itself, does create some problems. People that have finished university six years ago may then get a job. They are not up to speed in relation to current curriculum. Some may not have taught. Then they decide to utilise their tertiary qualifications and may get Bourke or Wanaaring or an isolated remote school out this way. They do not necessarily have an understanding of the needs of the communities and what it is like to live in a small, remote, isolated community.

Senator TCHEN—I suppose I had better not comment on the New South Wales education system. Mr Doule, when you teach an Aboriginal in an Aboriginal language or conduct a class in Aboriginal studies in an Aboriginal community, are there internal substantial differences within the community, like tribal differences, that you have to cater for?

Mr Doule—There is some background information on the program and how we got started. The language we are presenting now in the school is not from this area. In fact, it comes from Pitjantjatjara, the corner country of South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. From my experience of being out there in the community, Aboriginal people hold strong views about their own particular language and where they belong and where they are from. In the big picture, our language needs to develop more and we have a little way to go. I would like to see the day when all these groups are catered for. There are strong views in the community. Aboriginal people do feel strongly about their own language and where their group comes from. I have always maintained that this language that we are presenting offers something. It is an insight, an understanding and a starting point. It has developed an interest in language generally in the community.

Senator TCHEN—Ms Salt is from the local community. Are you from the local community?

Mr Doule—More or less, because of strong ties and family. People know who I am.

Ms Salt—I am actually from Brewarrina.

CHAIR—It only took us half an hour to get here, so the distance got contracted. My apologies.

Ms Salt—We have close ties with Brewarrina-Bourke.

Father Elmore—I was born in Brewarrina. I have probably spent more time living here.

CHAIR—Mr Doule, further on that question in relation to the language that you teach, was there a particular rationale for the selection of that language?

Mr Doule—No. This is my tradition; this is my country. I come from here. I have been in language for the last couple of years. My involvement in the language centre goes back four years and it is something I am very much interested in. Over those couple of years, I have developed a reasonable understanding of language issues in the community. I can understand the reason why they decided to go with this language and I think it is sound. The language centre had a speaker. That is important when you talk about consultation advice on a particular language. You have a custodian of the language there. The principles and cultural values are important and need to be adhered to in this type of work and you need to follow them. You will find that type of attitude right across the country. It is important that you have a speaker to go with a particular language. Others were looked at, but there was no speaker to go with those languages.

CHAIR—Is the speaker the person who is teaching the language?

Mr Doule—That person was seen as custodian of the language, as someone who could make decisions about the language, and who gave the language centre permission to work with that language and develop it. As I said earlier, we have a way to go but, hopefully, the day will come when we can cater for all those language groups in the community. We do have quite a few.

Senator TCHEN—The course you are teaching is perhaps better described as a cultural course rather than a language course. Would that be right?

Mr Doule—You have English and French programs in a school; it is based on that. In my opinion, there is the development of a language framework in New South Wales. It still has a long way to go. I do not think it will be there next year or the year after. It needs to change.

Senator TIERNEY—Just for clarification, New South Wales is saying that they have chosen this particular Aboriginal language. Is that taught everywhere in New South Wales?

Mr Doule—No, not one particular language, but the model and the frame in which it is presented are quite similar to that of other language programs within the school. I think you will see that change with time. There are cultural reasons behind that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your appearance today. We understand that this environment is alien to some people as well and we appreciate particularly your participation in the hearing.

[4.30 p.m.]

DIXON, Mr Tony, Aboriginal Liaison Officer, St Ignatius Primary School

ELMORE, Father James Godfrey, School Chaplain, St Ignatius Primary School

FORDYCE, Brother Mark, Principal, St Ignatius Primary School

CHAIR—Welcome. We do prefer that all evidence be given in public, but we will consider any requests for all or part of evidence to be given in camera, which is in private—although I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you now to make a brief opening statement, and then we will move to questions.

Brother Fordyce—On behalf of the school, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you this afternoon. St Ignatius School has a 105-year tradition. It opened in 1896, and has been conducted by the Sisters of Mercy ever since; there is still a Sister of Mercy as a member of staff. There has always been a strong tradition over that time with indigenous people living in what we call the ‘reserve’ part of town, which is that section of Bourke where the school is situated. St Ignatius has a current enrolment of 185 students, of which 89 are Aboriginal students. At this particular time, the whole area of literacy is a huge issue for our school and our diocese. Hopefully, we will be able to elaborate on that a little further.

Father Elmore—I have been involved with the school since November last year as school chaplain. We only arrived here then. I have recently been appointed to the diocesan Aboriginal education board. Like Mark, we also live down the other end of town, near the reserve, and have had quite a bit to do with the Aboriginal community in this town.

Mr Dixon—I have been working in the classrooms and have only just been elected Aboriginal liaison officer.

CHAIR—I am glad that you explained to me that the area of town that we were in when we visited you earlier was a reserve, because it explains one of the comments that was made to us as we left the building—not by anyone associated with the school. It was suggested that if the person was black, things would be different, which reinforces many of the suggestions that we get about the level of unfortunate racism that can continue in communities and areas such as this. Can I clarify the numbers you told me: 89 students of a total of 185?

Brother Fordyce—Yes.

CHAIR—So that is roughly 50 per cent?

Brother Fordyce—Yes.

CHAIR—Was the Catholic Church associated with the reserve? Was it a Christian mission at some stage?

Brother Fordyce—Certainly initially, it would have been seen as much. The difference between the Catholic school at Brewarrina, which was also conducted by the Sisters of Mercy, and St Ignatius in Bourke is interesting. The Brewarrina school, St Patricks, has been seen until only recently as the school for the whites, and most Aboriginal children went to the central school. St Ignatius in Bourke seems to have a different history from that, and I think it may be because of our location near the reserve; the nuns would make regular visitation to the families in that part. When you look at the two Catholic schools, it is interesting to see what a different make-up each school has, coming from different traditions.

CHAIR—In attempting to understand what was happening in Brewarrina, I was curious in working through issues about the original purpose for the establishment of a school. Was it to meet the needs of a Catholic parish or had it more of a missionary orientation? Is that a difference that exists in the histories between the two schools? St Ignatius was set up to meet the needs of a parish—or a mixture of factors?

Brother Fordyce—I would imagine the parish but, once again, Bourke being Bourke and being down what people refer to as ‘that end of town’- you live down that end of town—I think that has a flavouring to it without putting a missionary thing on it.

CHAIR—So the location led to certain factors over time, rather than it being the original objective?

Brother Fordyce—It certainly did, yes.

CHAIR—Father, did you have something to add?

Father Elmore—Just to support what Mark was saying. The twofold purposes of the school were to educate the country people as well. But being located down there, it was very quickly seen as a school for the Aboriginal people.

CHAIR—Where do the other people go to school?

Brother Fordyce—I suppose the public school has always been here and, yes, you just get a sense that there is this part of town and then there is the other part of town—

CHAIR—Who go to the public school.

Brother Fordyce—Yes.

CHAIR—It is almost the reverse of what happens in Brewarrina then if that is the case. We were intrigued in attempting to understand it because we were told that the normal quota arrangements for a Catholic school applied to the school in Brewarrina where their preference is 80 per cent Catholic. We were intrigued about the level of Catholicism amongst non-indigenous residents in Brewarrina because they seemed to have a very high level of Catholicism if they meet the quota.

Brother Fordyce—Yes.

CHAIR—Are you aware of whether that is the case?

Brother Fordyce—I am not too sure.

CHAIR—Whether the people prefer to make it appear to be the case?

Senator TIERNEY—We worked out the maths for it this morning.

Brother Fordyce—I think the whole world is trying to work out what level of Catholicism is the optimum or the required level at the present time. I think there are lots of burning issues around—

CHAIR—I eventually got to the stage of saying, ‘Where do the non-Catholic, non-indigenous—crikey, all these labels—go to school in that region?’

Brother Fordyce—Yes, exactly. It is a good question.

Senator TIERNEY—Brother, you mentioned that literacy was a huge problem. Could you just expand on that a little further?

Brother Fordyce—I feel very strongly that the country and the government really have to look at other forms of literacy that are more suited to indigenous children’s learning. Yours and our ways of reading text and of looking at a book and putting information together do not work with indigenous students. For example, take technology, say, on the computer screen. An indigenous student could put a drawing there. Such a student would be able to verbalise what has been created, whether it is a Dreamtime story or something in relation to a particular subject; it could be verbalised.

I think this whole technology is going to be a bonus for indigenous education in Australia if we can make it accessible to remote parts of the country. I just see that form of text in my experience in Cairns. The Marist brothers run a big boarding school, St Augustine’s College up there, and a lot of indigenous students, both from the Cape and the Torres Strait, attend that school. I was in charge of bringing them in. As you can imagine, that was a huge step for them to come from remote communities into a huge city of 120,000 and a huge school of 1,000. So, with regard to the traditional forms of learning, if we look at the past 10 years, the success rates and the percentages speak for themselves.

Senator TIERNEY—So what, in a nutshell, is different about a more appropriate form of learning?

Brother Fordyce—I think that where the capacity for Aboriginal English is to be regarded as a form of literacy, we have a tendency to correct kids—for example, ‘where you go’, and Aboriginal phrases. I am wondering whether there should be an acceptance of those as Aboriginal English and a form of literacy. It is not what we in the mainstream have been accustomed to; it is a new form of literacy. Can it be accepted and given credibility among Aboriginal communities in that sense?

Senator TIERNEY—Father, you are on the diocesan education board. That is the diocese of—

Father Elmore—Wilcannia-Forbes.

Senator TIERNEY—Given that covers a vast area of north-west New South Wales which has a high proportion of Aboriginal students compared to the normal balance in the rest of the state, what do you see as the key issues for Aboriginal education?

Father Elmore—In a nutshell, I would say that the basic need of Aboriginal children is a sense of self-worth. If we teach them that, I believe we can teach them almost anything. I would see that any system we use in education, as Mark was saying—anything of their own culture particularly—that can reinforce their worth and the idea that their culture and language are worth learning and their Dreamtime is worthwhile would contribute greatly to increasing their self-worth and hence would contribute greatly to their further education. I think you have only got to walk down the main street here any day to see the number of children. Senator Collins asked the question, ‘Where do the rest of the children go to?’ Walk down the main street of Bourke about midday any day—that is where you will find them.

Senator TIERNEY—Is the lack of indigenous teachers in the system a concern for the diocese and are there any strategies to try and overcome it?

Brother Fordyce—That is a big issue. My experience is that we seem to be getting young people going into the teaching profession, indigenous students. They graduate and they may teach for 12 months, then all of a sudden they seem to oscillate or move towards DETYA positions or into the bureaucracy of indigenous agencies, doing very good work. They have the skills and that is why they have got the job there.

As for the actual role model of teachers, as such, there needs to be a change in attitude. In the case of Tony who has been 19 years in the classroom at St Ignatius—a tremendous role model, a person significant in the Bourke Aboriginal community—should such a person necessarily be a teacher with the qualification on the wall? To me, Tony is a teacher. Tony has been a teacher for 19 years. Once again, it is our expectation and the nice glassed certificate.

The Australian Catholic University has responded to that in this diocese where we have two staff who are participating in a six-year teachers course. Phyllis Cubby is currently away at ACU in Strathfield for her weekly lectures and she has just done a three-week teaching prac at Weilmoringle. So the ACU has responded as far as the diocese is concerned to people in that position. I see Tony, and the four AEWs—Aboriginal education workers—in our school as teachers. I pose the question: do they really need to pursue that piece of paper and the glassed certificate? I am not sure. Certainly, from our point of view, we see them in that role, particularly the role model situation.

Senator TIERNEY—Are there any plans in the diocese to expand the number of Aboriginal education workers in Mr Dixon’s type of position?

Father Elmore—I suppose the biggest question is the question of finance. The opportunity is there to expand the number of teachers if we had, firstly, the teachers and, secondly, the finance to employ them.

Senator TIERNEY—We have improved the financing of public and private schools enormously.

Father Elmore—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—I think you have now got a golden opportunity.

Senator TCHEN—I hesitate to put this to you. This is something which with my background I have some philosophical difficulty with. I am aware that it is not always applicable in all circumstances but, if you say that Aboriginal children require a different structure of teaching, does it not apply that they are actually fundamentally different, that these children are different from the other children?

I am coming from the direction where everyone is the same. There may be cultural differences. Cultural differences can be modified or developed. Basically, education systems should produce children who are fully competitive, regardless of their cultural background—fully competitive, not only competitive in their own little niche. If we are starting to cater for these particular needs, are we not going to develop a little niche for them so that they can only compete in that niche? Do you see that as a problem?

Brother Fordyce—I see what you are saying. I see we might be going a different way, but coming to the same conclusion. Indigenous students that I have taught have a wonderful sense of who they are, much more than someone from a European culture—speaking for myself. I find that indigenous students need encouragement to have a handle on this. I think we have put the bar up too high and we need to bring the bar down to look at another way, another form of literacy that they can go with, so as the bar rises they go with it. At present the bar is up there, and we have a large indigenous group that is really struggling to even look at that bar.

Senator TCHEN—This afternoon you were kind enough to let us talk to some of your students. Unless you picked the brighter students in your class—you might have done that—the ones we actually spoke to, as far as I was concerned, apart from one point, were no different from any other kids. They had no problem expressing themselves. They were not using—as you say—Aboriginal English. The only difference that we found—Senator Collins pointed it out—was when we asked them what they want to be when they grow up, when they are 18, and most of them, in fact, could not come up with an answer. That is because of a lack of a life model, I guess, a lack of expectation.

Brother Fordyce—No, I think for these kids, Bourke is home; Bourke is everything. They go to Mildura to visit family or to Narromine. That is the indigenous world. It does not surprise me that they are not able to say that. For them, this is their whole world.

Senator TCHEN—We have an education system which assists or encourages them to develop in that environment. Do we not condemn them, in fact, to a future in Bourke?

Brother Fordyce—Yes, I think we have to have something that is achievable—something they can see that they can achieve.

Senator TCHEN—In Bourke?

Brother Fordyce—In Bourke. Boarding school is a huge issue here. Sydney is too far away for them. Yes, we have Abstudy and we have government support, but the kids find it incredibly hard to move to Sydney for, say, a further education—as you say, to broaden their horizons and that sort of thing. I think we do need some form of education process for them where they feel they have control of it, and that is where I think computer technology and information technology can be a real bonus. It is something where we can bring the world to them. They do not have to go away from their family and experience homesickness and go through all those things that I have seen other indigenous kids struggle with.

Senator TCHEN—Within that framework, would it be better not to lower the bar but to raise the take-off point?

Brother Fordyce—That is a very good question, Senator.

Senator TCHEN—All right, let us leave it at that.

CHAIR—In part, I think Senator Tchen was right but perhaps approaching it from a different angle in this discussion—that it is a lack of role models. It is not so much role models, but opportunities, because where are these jobs in Bourke? How does the Aboriginal girl I was talking to become a shopkeeper in Bourke? Does she know any Aboriginal shopkeepers in Bourke? Do you know any Aboriginal shopkeepers in Bourke? She eventually said to me that she wants to be a doctor. Is there an Aboriginal doctor in Bourke?

I deliberately tackled the question in quite a deliberate way. I did not say, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ I said, ‘How many of you have older brothers or sisters?’ ‘How many of them are around 18 years?’ and ‘When you’re as big as them, what do you think you will be doing?’ That was where the real difficulty was—just imagining themselves in 10 years time and what they might be doing. It is that lack of opportunity in regions such as this.

Father Elmore—I was going to say that, sure, it is that lack of opportunity, but it is a lack of confidence in themselves as well that they can achieve that.

CHAIR—But confidence is also a measure of opportunity. There is no sense putting out these kids with the world’s greatest confidence, but finding that, as soon as they try to do something, they continually fall flat on their faces.

Father Elmore—That is where education has to try to help them.

CHAIR—But education has to match opportunity too.

Brother Fordyce—One of the things is absenteeism. In Tony’s role as Aboriginal liaison officer he talks with the families to assess just where kids are to try to keep a momentum

going to keep them in our situation of primary school focus. Things are very basic in Bourke. We are looking at very hands-on sort of stuff. Nutrition is a big issue. We have a breakfast program for our students. We find that that keeps them awake for most of the day.

CHAIR—Is that for all students?

Brother Fordyce—Yes, it is open to all students.

CHAIR—One of the girls raised the ASP—the Aboriginal Studies Program. We asked her what the program was and what it involved. It was about some factors of Aboriginal culture, but it did not go to some things which, in other schools, tend to become more obvious, such as, ‘We’re the special kids who have breakfast.’ So there is no differentiation in that.

Brother Fordyce—No, that is open to both. We also have a school nurse for half a day each day, and there are lots of health issues involved with some of our kids as well. We find that, with those sorts of basic necessities, once they are met, our absenteeism over the last three years has gone from 60 per cent to 75 to 80 per cent attendance in any one day. So, as I said, there are a lot of basic things put in place to bring the kids through the gate.

CHAIR—I agree with you in relation to the earlier discussion you had with Senator Tchen about different ways of achieving the same outcomes because I think you are about the third or fourth person who has said to us that there is a difference in indigenous learning styles and our traditional system is counter to that difference in style. I suppose one of the examples I like to relate to people is that our past Prime Minister, Paul Keating, hardly ever read anything. He absorbed everything through oral briefings and there are some people who are just like that. That does not mean that they do not reach the same outcomes.

Brother Fordyce—For instance, an indigenous child is quite fearful when handed a sheet of maths or a lot of words, but it is different when somebody is beside that person to guide them through. The knowledge is there, but it is just finding out different ways. I think that information technology area has lots of possibilities.

Senator TCHEN—I am not disputing that.

Brother Fordyce—Yes.

CHAIR—I thank you for appearing today.

Brother Fordyce—Thank you.

[5.00 p.m.]

CHAPMAN, Mr Michael David, Principal, Bourke High School

O'MALLEY, Mr Desmond John, Relieving Superintendent, Department of Education and Training

PAYNE, Mr Douglas, Aboriginal Teachers Aide, Bourke High School

SULLIVAN, Mr Phillip John, Community Member

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the staff of the Bourke High School and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although we will consider any request that evidence be given in private, or in camera as we call it. However, such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you to provide the committee with opening statements and then we will follow with questions.

Mr Chapman—I will give you a background to Bourke High School—a snapshot of the school at the moment—and some written documentation. Bourke High School has 160 students on the books of regular attendees, and 52 per cent of them are Aboriginal. The school offers a mixture of traditional academic subjects and vocational courses. The vocational options that we run are things like part-time work placement. We have a work education program in years 9 and 10 and a series of TAFE courses from year 10 upwards. We have dual accredited vocational education courses in hospitality, rural industries, and building and construction. These are all offered from year 9 upwards.

We have a drop-out rate around age 15, which affects roughly five per cent of our students. We have a further drop-out rate of around five per cent at the end of year 10. We would also have a leakage of students from year 8 and 10 going to larger schools in larger centres. We have very high mobility amongst a section of our student population. In the first two terms of this year, we had 78 movements in and out of the school.

CHAIR—Of the total students?

Mr Chapman—Of the 160. They are not all individual students; a lot of them are the same students moving in and out on a more frequent basis. Many of those are short-stay students whose education is continually interrupted. Last year, we formed the Bourke Education Council which encompasses the preschool, the primary school, the high school and Bourke TAFE. It has representatives from the AECG, the ASSPA committees from all schools, and then there are employer representatives. The idea is to try to coordinate our activities so that anyone going through school in Bourke moves through a coordinated group. We are trying to target jobs so that the kids going through—and at whatever stage they leave—will have some sort of job or somewhere they can go or the skills which will enable them to find the jobs. We cannot guarantee to place all kids—that is stupid—but we find that the kids with skills are able to fit in with those things. I will leave it at that for the moment and address any issues that come up.

CHAIR—Mr O'Malley, did you have any comments to make?

Mr O'Malley—Yes, I have a number really. I have in the past been an inspector of schools—covering this area for a number of years—and chairman of the country areas program, which embraced a whole lot of schools and was involved with the dislocated schools program from its inception. I have seen many programs put forward to assist students and, in this case, Aboriginal students quite often.

I was interested in a comment made by the teacher from the Catholic school about self-esteem. I have been involved in funding many programs that were supposedly to do with the self-esteem of Aboriginal students, be they hairdressing programs or a whole range of things, and the one thing that I am convinced of is that nothing does more for an Aboriginal student's self-esteem than being as good at reading, writing and arithmetic as all the other kids. I firmly believe that this is where we should be concentrating our effort.

My day job is currently principal of one of the largest schools in the state. It has an Aboriginal population of 130 students, which represents about 12 per cent. You would probably be aware that the academic standards of Aboriginal students, in our state anyway, where we have basic skills testing and literacy learning assessment in secondary schools, can only be described as abysmal, if not disgraceful. Aboriginal students are somewhere down there, and non-English speaking background 1 and 2 are there. Then there are the boys and then the girls. It is a terrible gap. I am proud to be able to report that the Aboriginal students in my school in the last cohort in year 3 and year 5 exceeded performance for girls and boys all-up in New South Wales. So it can be done. This is something that sometimes does not make me popular with some of my peers.

I have had people come to look at what we were doing as a result of those really outstanding results. The first thing that they ask is, 'What Aboriginal programs have you got?' The reality of it is that we do not have any Aboriginal programs. All that we have got is good teaching programs for all kids. There is a school not far from here at Enngonia that I could recommend to you. Robyn is still here; she was the aide out there for a number of years. At that school, two outstanding teachers have been able to get standards in that school, where there are lots and lots of really disadvantaged students, to a very commendable level. It can be done. There are a few things that we should be putting money into to make it happen, but I can leave that if you like until—

CHAIR—No, I am hearing 'It can be done' and I agree with you. My question is: how? Are you simply saying by traditional methods, or are you saying that a good teacher with enough flexibility to identify and work with the specific needs of all their students can do it?

Mr O'Malley—That is right, yes.

CHAIR—Continue please: tell me how.

Mr O'Malley—The first thing is that we have to have children as competent readers and writers by age six, or at the latest by age seven. If we have not done that and they get into primary years they will progressively get further behind and you can forget it—you are throwing good money after bad. We must concentrate on those early years—kindergarten,

first class and second class. There is a program, Reading Recovery, which works exceptionally well for Aboriginal students. It works well for all students but it works better for Aboriginal students than any other targeted program in my experience.

I pay for, out of school funds, largely, five Reading Recovery teachers. In four successive years now we have not had a child at the end of first class, aged six, who has not been a competent reader and writer. It did not matter whether they were black, white, blue, brindle or polka dot.

CHAIR—This is Reading Recovery for grade 1 students?

Mr O'Malley—Yes, a New Zealand Maori scheme from New Zealand. Not all Aboriginal students need to go onto it but those who do seem to respond very, very well to the one-to-one situation and the variety of inputs under an extreme pressure cooker arrangement for 35 minutes every day. It works.

CHAIR—A program like that I would describe as a special program akin to the primary school offering breakfast to all students, but with a particular focus on ensuring that each student, predominantly indigenous, has had an adequate nutritional supply for the day. In your case you are saying this is a specialist Reading Recovery program available to all students but really targeted at picking up those students, predominantly indigenous, who have not had the same reading background as some of the others.

Mr O'Malley—In our case it is not predominantly indigenous, of course, because they are only 12 per cent of the total.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr O'Malley—That is one thing that is very, very important, but it is underfunded, unfortunately. We could do a lot more if we had more of it.

Another thing that works particularly well is the homework centre. My teachers come back on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. This is the only restricted program that we have got. It is for Aboriginal students only. They sit down with teachers and do their homework and get it out of the road at a quality level. The reality is that a number of those children are going into homes where there are lots of visitors and people coming and going and little brothers and sisters who do not look after their books, all sorts of things. If we are going to have homework then it has to be available to the indigenous students equally with the rest or otherwise the gap widens. I am convinced that money spent on homework centres is money very, very well spent.

CHAIR—Why do you make them indigenous only?

Mr O'Malley—It is funded through DETYA and that is one of the rules.

CHAIR—So if the funding was not that way you would probably make it available for all students who felt the need?

Mr O'Malley—I do not know that you could ask people to come back and work for nothing two afternoons a week from 3.30 p.m. until 5.30 p.m.

CHAIR—No, I am saying if it was funded better then you would probably make it available for all students?

Mr O'Malley—Certainly. We have lots of requests from non-indigenous students and their parents saying, 'Please, can our children be involved?' Sometimes we can find a slot or two, but because it is money for indigenous education we have to be careful. That is an important program.

I was interested in the comments about technology, about computers. Yes, Aboriginal students are just as good, competent or otherwise on computers as anybody else. I would like to relate to you an incident of a few weeks ago when I was taking a computer class. There was an Aboriginal student there who is in the top four or five of her year cohort and is qualified for placement in the opportunity C class. She has a 127 IQ. She is a wonderful child and a great student, and self-motivated.

With 10 minutes to go I said to the entire class, 'You can knock off now.' They were doing *T Taps*, a self-paced typing program. I said, 'You can knock off now and do something else.' Everybody did so except this little Aboriginal girl and she kept going. I said, 'You can knock off if you like,' and she said, 'No, I don't want to knock off, I want to be a touch typist before I get to high school, but I don't have a computer at home. These other kids that are on the same level as me have all got computers at home that they can practice on. The only chance I get is in my *T Taps* typing lesson here at school.' She did not want to knock off. Not every student has got that sort of motivation.

I would suggest that by way of submission of some kind we might consider supporting, not all, but appropriate Aboriginal students, having loan access to things like a computer and printer if that was going to give them a leg up. Her family just could not afford that sort of money.

Mr Chapman—I think that point that Des has just made there was probably pre-empting a little bit something I was going to say later. A lot of the funding that comes into schools, be it for Aboriginal programs or any other program in a school, is a tied grant, and they are too narrowly tied. They do not leave enough flexibility for us to be able to say, 'That's the need, let's do it,' unless we take funds from some other school program to do it. However, if there was a general purpose grant that came in where we could then say, 'Okay, this is the need in Dubbo,' or wherever, then we could apply that to our local need. It would then not be the case that we have to have it specifically spent on this, so much on this, so much on that. We find that very, very restricting.

CHAIR—It varies from school to school. Some homework centres have computers for precisely that purpose.

Mr O'Malley—Yes. We use computers in the homework centre. That does not give them seven-day access like the A grade students they are competing with.

One other important thing that I would bring to your attention, and we have heard about absenteeism, is that we cannot teach them if we have not got them. It is as simple as that. There is another issue that is concerning me greatly at the present time, and also my staff. It was not until recent times that we had all of our students tested for 'glue ear'—otitis media. Of the first 35 students who were tested we found that 27 of them had from moderate to severe ear problems. That absolutely staggered my staff and me. We have gone into a program now of alerting staff to those children who have this problem and they are much more aware. Like Paul Loxley has done, we have wired teachers for sound and we have four speakers in the corners of the rooms.

It is important to make teachers more aware of what otitis media is and make sure that children have been tested. It is important that we are aware of the problem by perhaps putting a little blue dot, as we have done, beside every child's name on the roll who might have this problem. The problem can be there today and disappear for a fortnight. It must be a terribly difficult experience for children who really cannot hear very well what is going on to try and learn. Certainly, we can and should be doing more in that medical-educational setting.

Mr Sullivan—I would like to comment on cultural aspects. I agree with most of the stuff that the two gentlemen just spoke about. I think one of the problems that the children have faced in the last 20 years, or even more, is that the cultural aspect is not being taught in the schools from an early age, as they were saying. I think that is where it needs to start: from a young age and brought through. One of the biggest problems that we have in education is that we can teach them as much as we can at school, but then everything happens back at home.

You cannot take education away from where the kids live; you have got to bring it together. When you go back to wherever you go back to, they are the sorts of things that you have to talk about: the level at which you give Aboriginal people more responsibility and more say in how their children should be educated. At the moment, that is not happening. You can talk about AECGs and about all the things that you have put in place, and you can put all the programs on the table but, as the man said, they do not work.

The responsibility has to go back to the family. You cannot take education away from the family because it is all in one, which is very important. It is where the problem starts. That is why you get children who have deaf ears, because learning how to blow their nose is not being taught at home; they are doing other things. So it is the basic living skills that maybe should be taught at school, to bring the children up to a standard where they can go out into society and say, 'Yes, I can live here without being educated and still get on with people.'

In the end, when you talk about Aboriginal people, it is all doing things and not actually sitting down. It is a doer; there are doer things. They can get out and do things, and not so much sitting back and writing things on paper. They like getting out and doing things and being more proactive than sitting back and doing things on paper. There was something else I was going to say but I have forgotten.

CHAIR—Maybe if we move to questions and, if you think of it in the course of the discussion, we can come back to it.

Mr Sullivan—Yes. If you look at the primary and convent schools and look at some of the children who actually come through the system, they are really smart children. But once they get to secondary school, high school or TAFE, they tend to drop out in a big way. If we look at our statistics over the last 20 years of Aboriginal children who have actually pushed through to year 12 and on to university in this Darling River region, if we can pull out a statistic now, you would probably find that 10 in the last 20 years have gone through that whole system. Really, for the education department, that is disgusting. What should have happened is that instead of the one going through, it should be back the other way with nine people going through and one falling out.

CHAIR—You are not the first person to say that the problem seems to be at the transition stage from primary to secondary school. Although I wonder whether, after listening to Mr O'Malley's comments, it is partly the situation that the gap in, for instance, basic reading skills just becomes more obvious by the time you are in secondary school whereas it is perhaps not so obvious in the later years of primary school—whether that generates the gap, or whether there are other factors as children go into secondary school that you think are important.

Mr Sullivan—I could not understand the question, sorry.

CHAIR—Mr O'Malley identified earlier that one of the biggest problems is that if children in the early years of primary school—years 1 and 2—do not get their basic reading skills, then that is what generates the problems further down the track. You are also suggesting that the problems become most obvious when children move from primary school to secondary school. I was suggesting that that might be just because that highlights the lack of basic reading skills, for instance.

Mr Sullivan—That could have happened, yes.

CHAIR—But are there other factors that you think come into play when kids go to secondary school?

Mr Sullivan—I think it goes back a step further. You cannot take education away from home life because, if you really look at it, your family life teaches you about 80 per cent of what you really need to know: how to say please, thank you, yes and no, and all that sort of stuff.

CHAIR—But what is so obvious about secondary school?

Mr Sullivan—Can I finish please?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Sullivan—When you go to your primary school, they more or less chip away at the edges through to secondary school, but what I think has happened is that the stuff that gets

taught in the primary school is not being taught back at home. Do you understand what I am saying?

CHAIR—Yes. It is not being reinforced at home.

Mr Sullivan—A teacher can teach me three plus three at school, but when I go home that is not being taught there. Either the parents do not know how to add up three plus three, or they are not reinforcing that. From an Aboriginal point of view—and I am talking about Aboriginal people now—home is where you have got to beat it. Back home is where everything starts; it is everything. Otherwise, when you come to primary school you learn your basic stuff but, as you are saying, the majority of kids do not go through. You do get the odd child who will go through the system and come out at the end, but it all starts back here.

The reason for this—which is why I talk about the cultural side of it—is that the system we have at the moment does not suit the majority of Aboriginal children. It is only suitable for one type of person. I hate to be like this, but it is only suited to a Western European person. It is your system and you created it, whereas an Aboriginal system is different. When they learn, they learn from the different angle of how to survive. The system you have at the moment revolves around money, whereas an Aboriginal system revolves around survival.

That is the conflict you will get for the next 20-odd years or 30-odd years. Until you rectify it back here, you will still get only one or two people coming out at the end of year 12. You can sit down and talk about money and all that sort of stuff, but it really comes back here. That is where you start. You go to the boil and bust it there. You do not try and chip away at the top of it: you have got to get to the heart of it, and that is where it starts.

Senator TCHEN—Mr O'Malley, you said that in your experience nothing raises self-esteem except achievement in a general field. That may be true for people with an IQ of 127, who are naturally competitive, but earlier we heard other suggestions about raising self-worth and creating self-worth in people's minds by teaching them about their own cultures. Basically, do you say that is rubbish?

Mr O'Malley—No, I would not say that is rubbish at all. I would like to think that one of us around here today had the answer, because we are going to have to find one. What we are doing currently is pretty poor.

If that works, so be it. Try whatever you like. What I was saying was that I have seen no program implemented that did more to enhance the self-esteem of Aboriginal students than one which has them achieving at their ability level, as well as other girls and boys are achieving. For example, I have a little girl who was written up in magazines all over the countryside. In 11 weeks she progressed from level 3 on Reading Recovery and graduated at level 18. We never, ever had another child from any cultural background who achieved that much in such a short period of time. She was written up for her achievements, and she has never looked back.

CHAIR—What were the barriers that she overcame?

Mr O'Malley—She was virtually a non-reader. In the Reading Recovery program, in a one-to-one situation, daily, with a highly trained and competent operator, she just clicked. And she jumped, and jumped, and jumped. It was one of those wonderful things you see every now and again. Normally a child would take 20 weeks—25 weeks maybe—to achieve that, and she just happened to achieve it in 11 weeks.

Senator TCHEN—Supposing you had a child who could only achieve that in 20 weeks, would you say that, in addition, the effort could be put in by way of teaching that child their culture and background, to give them the idea of self-esteem?

Mr O'Malley—No. Well, I would not do it. I will come back to Mr Sullivan in a minute. What we are doing is recognising that we have the children in our care for 6½ hours of prime time per day. Certainly, we have Aboriginal educational assistance and ASSPA committees and cultural inputs and all those sorts of things, and I would like to think that my Aboriginal students feel pretty proud of the fact that they are Aboriginal. But in the first instance the main thrust for us is to make sure that those children can read and write, that their base literacy skills are as good as everybody else's. If we can't get that right, then somewhere along the line they are going to fail, and their self-esteem will go down the gurgler. So that is our prime area of interest and responsibility. And I don't think that changing the way we do it would do any good at all. I think we have got it just about right.

Senator TCHEN—This is heavy duty remedial work, and that is different from what you normally do, isn't it?

Mr O'Malley—Yes, because normally we have one teacher to 25 to 30 kids. You can't do it, because of restrictions on staffing.

Senator TCHEN—So, basically, you still require a change of method?

Mr O'Malley—Yes. In two ways, though. You have the intensive reading program, and quite a number of the indigenous students don't need that. They are reading and writing very well, thank you very much, as it is. But the strategies that are used in Reading Recovery are now embraced across the school in the multiple inputs every day and in every lesson, so that the flow-on is not just in the remedial part of the program but in the strategies that it embraces for better teaching everywhere.

There is no substitute for good quality classroom teaching. I am blessed because I am in a big city in a premier school where people want to be, and I have a very, very talented and experienced teaching staff. They can make it happen. One of the drawbacks of some of the country places is that we tend to get less experienced teachers coming in.

Senator TCHEN—In a situation where the department cannot guarantee that sort of 100 per cent effort at all levels, would it be better to provide opportunities for local schools to provide flexibility?

Mr O'Malley—Could you expand on that?

Senator TCHEN—In their approach.

Mr O'Malley—I don't think that schools are limited in the amount of flexibility they have. In fact, what happens in the school on that corner doesn't necessarily bear any great resemblance in New South Wales to what happens over there. No, there is plenty of flexibility. If anything, I would like to see a little more structure.

Senator TIERNEY—Except where the flexibility is resource based, of course. It is going to cost you a lot more money to do it.

Mr O'Malley—We could also do a fair bit more with the money we have, if we had a little more flexibility, perhaps. This is what Michael said earlier. There is a lot of money floating about, but it has to be spent on this or that. If the educator, like Michael Chapman at Bourke High School, could say, 'I have a budget of X dollars, and I and the teachers and my community have determined that this is the way that we would like to spend that money, and we would like to provide 10 of our Aboriginal students with a computer and a printer and Internet access and somebody to work with them very closely,' that would be wonderful. But they can't do that, because the money is always tied to something else under guidelines.

Senator TIERNEY—So you want to operate financially like private schools, in other words? Because that is exactly how they operate.

Mr Chapman—With their money.

Senator TIERNEY—With their own money, yes. We are all dying to know what school you are principal of.

Mr O'Malley—Dubbo South Primary School. We have 860 students.

Mr Chapman—As I said earlier, talking about structures and things like that, the big limiting factor in a secondary school is the curriculum we have, which is bound by two major exams. That sets a lot of what we can and cannot do. It is something we have been struggling with at Bourke High School now for the 18 months I have been there. With Denise Burke, who is my English head teacher, we are going through a process of completely restructuring our curriculum. Basically, we are saying that what the Board of Studies is saying we have got to teach does not suit our kids, and so we are disregarding it.

We are taking the approach that this is where our kids are. It is no use teaching them this or this or this. This is where they are. This is where we are going to teach them from and where we are going to take them from. The biggest problem is that unless we do that we are failing our kids. If we adhere to the curriculum we are failing kids. We can't afford to fail our kids, as Phil was saying. This is the only chance they get in education.

CHAIR—Mr Payne, did you have a comment you wanted to make?

Mr Payne—Just listening to the evidence and to some of the senators talking, the question coming through my mind is this: when we talk of indigenous education, what is in your mind? What image have you fellows got? Are you trying to mould this group of people into your image, to fit into your structure? Are you trying to mould them into something that they might not want to be and that their parents and families might not want them to be?

Even though we know education is needed, some Aboriginal families don't see an education as the number one priority in their lives.

Senator TIERNEY—I think we are actually suggesting the reverse, that we have a very Anglo-Celtic model of teaching, and that we would assume that if what we were doing were more in sympathy with Aboriginal culture the outcomes for Aboriginal children would be a lot better. We are trying to discover what that way of teaching is. It is not only what you teach, but the way you teach.

CHAIR—Some of our questions are more designed to try to tease out issues, rather than to reflect what is in our minds. The point I raised earlier—that education has to match opportunity—says a lot. If the opportunities people want or that are available to people don't match your educational outcomes, you have problems too. But the most obvious thing behind this inquiry is that we have an educational system in which indigenous people must participate until the age of 15 but, judging by what pretty much everybody says, the indigenous population is not getting much out of it. That is what we are looking at.

Mr O'Malley—In the light of what these two gentlemen have just said, I would like to make a comment. A few years ago Bourke High School wanted to implement modified courses. They weren't only for Aboriginal students but also for students who, it appeared, were never going to make year 12. It was so that those students could have meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences and so on, while they were at school, in the sequential and developmental curriculum.

CHAIR—What happened?

Mr O'Malley—It was hit on the head by the Aboriginal parents. The parents said, basically, 'We don't want any mickey mouse courses for our kids. We want our kids to do mainstream courses so that they come out at the other end with mainstream opportunities and outcomes.' The high school couldn't bring it in, because there was so much resistance from Aboriginal parents who wanted to ensure that their kids were doing the same as other kids everywhere else.

Mr Payne—I wasn't there when that happened, and all the families have changed since then.

Mr O'Malley—Do you think you could introduce a modified curriculum fairly easily now?

Mr Chapman—We are. We have moved into workplaces and things like that.

Mr Sullivan—One of the things to talk about is that it has to be done from an Aboriginal point of view.

CHAIR—Can you tell me what happened with the modified TAFE course? We were told that two years ago a TAFE course was designed for Aboriginal children who weren't actually in the current school system. They were taken off the street into the TAFE course. The course only lasted for three months.

Mr Chapman—That happened last year. All I know is that there was a course running, and some of the people tried to get kids who were school-age students. They were under 15 and legally they are not allowed to go anywhere but school. The TAFE system isn't allowed to touch kids until they are 15 or over. I think the kids were going to get a TAFE introductory certificate program. There was a mixture of cultural activities, literacy and numeracy courses and those sorts of things.

I don't know exactly why it folded. I know some school-age students were withdrawn from it because they weren't able to be involved in it. One of the reasons I was concerned about it—and I was concerned about the program—was that one of the people who was very heavily associated with it was someone who had failed a probity check and a police check on character and wasn't allowed to be near young people. I don't want to say any more on the exact reasons for that. But, as far as I know, that program didn't continue because TAFE did not fund it.

Mr Sullivan—That was one of the main problems.

CHAIR—Mr Sullivan, you mentioned earlier that you wanted to add a comment. Do you want to go back to that as well?

Mr Sullivan—No, I will just comment on what he was saying. I know this fellow does not know how to use a computer very well. If I got him at his age now and stayed in front of a computer and said, 'Douglas, do a proper report,' he would not know how. It is the same with me. Honestly, you really have to go back. You have to go back to the kindergartens, right back home, because otherwise we are still going to work with the children that are in it. But for Dougie planning to go and learn how to use a computer, he has to go back to the start and learn the basic stuff. It is the same with the students when they have done this course. One of the problems was money.

They are not going to go out and learn a lot of stuff about culture because it is not even there. They want to go out and learn rap music and how to speak 'Hey, man' and all that sort of stuff, because that is the way they have been brought up. You have to start back here and teach kids from there. That is the key back here—preschool and primary school. You can put on all the programs; you become top-heavy. You have to go to the roots and work your way up. That will take a long time, but the children will come in the end. That is where you have to start.

CHAIR—Unfortunately, we have gone a fair bit beyond time, so we need to close this session. Thank you for appearing before us today.

Mr Chapman—I come back to just one thing that you asked about when you were talking to Paul Loxley about teacher training: I think teacher training at the moment is something that is particularly poorly done. Most of the people who come out here do not have any conception of what they are getting into. Most of the people who are involved in training young teachers coming out are not anything other than classroom refugees for the greater part. Most of them have not been near a school or a kid for yonks and most come from very affluent middle class backgrounds. They have no understanding of living in an isolated town or educating and working with Aboriginal people or white people in a

community like this. Until we do something about that, we are going to have lots of places like this.

CHAIR—Is that teacher training or teacher selection? Is there any point in forcing some of these people to go out to communities like this?

Mr Chapman—There needs to be some means whereby current practitioners are involved in teacher training. The so-called professors of education who worked with me when I was doing my masters degree and read my thesis had not been near a classroom in 20 years. They have to come out and spend years in a classroom, and in places like this, to find out what is going on.

Mr Sullivan—From an Aboriginal point of view, Aboriginal people should go and see what these teachers are like, like you were saying, Michael. It is no use putting a fellow out here who has 100 per cent of his education at university because he has 100 per cent. He needs to come out here and spend a bit of time and get to know people.

Senator TIERNEY—What about an intensive induction course before they come here, knowing they are coming to Bourke or Wilcannia?

Mr Chapman—That would be fantastic.

Senator TIERNEY—They could do four or five intensive weeks on Aboriginal education.

Mr Chapman—It would be fantastic, but it is something that we should be getting to people like Phillip and the custodians in these areas.

CHAIR—Thank you, gentlemen.

Committee adjourned at 5.40 p.m.