

To: The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

From: Deborah Durnan, Adult Education and Development Consultant

Date: 3 March 2021

Dear Committee,

Last year I was pleased to learn your [Report on Education in Remote and Changing Circumstances](#) recommended an adult literacy campaign be implemented. It was pleasing because despite our status as a first world nation with a well-articulated formal education system, Australia continues to tolerate unacceptably high levels of low literacy within the adult population, but particularly within the most vulnerable and marginalised communities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. It is timely that this Parliamentary Committee is now following up with an *Inquiry into the issues of adult literacy, numeracy and problem solving* especially given in November 2020, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly adopted the "[Literacy for life: shaping future agendas.](#)" This reaffirmed that literacy is

"a foundation for lifelong learning, a building block for achieving human rights and fundamental freedoms and a driver of sustainable development ... literacy is crucial to the acquisition by every child, young person and adult of the essential knowledge, skills and competencies that will enable them to address the challenges that they may face in life and represents an essential condition of lifelong learning."

When we talk about low adult literacy most people here and internationally are referring to those aged 15 years or over, including youth out of school, who are not sufficiently literate in their official language(s) to independently perform basic everyday living tasks. In Australia, we commonly refer to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) to describe adult literacy levels. People who perform at ACSF level 1 or below across most domains (learning, oral, reading, writing, numeracy, digital) are considered to have low to very low literacy. Level 3 is considered to be the post school and workforce entry requirement for most courses and industries in Australia. Whilst there is an absence of comprehensive national data on adult literacy levels, what we can say with confidence is that most First Nation communities carry the bulk of this burden. At least 40% of adults do not have English language literacy proficiency above ACSF level 1. From my experience working in regional and remote Australia, this figure is more likely in those places to be around 60%, which is consistent with studies undertaken in NT and western NSW.

There is much published literature which argues the case for the link between adult literacy and a range of social indicators including citizenship, decision-making and democracy, family health and well-being, success of children at school, interactions with the justice system, employment and income levels, poverty, and women's empowerment. We know literate

adults are less likely to be excluded from participating fully in society as equal citizens with equal rights, responsibilities and obligations.

My contribution to this Inquiry draws on 34 years' experience working as a non-Aboriginal practitioner and researcher in the field of Aboriginal Adult Education mainly in Central Australia, the Kimberley, and western NSW. My roles included classroom teacher, curriculum developer, VET Manager, CEO Remote Health Workforce organisation, and ORAC/ORIC governance trainer for indigenous organisations. Between 2012 to 2018 I was engaged by the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) as the National Campaign Coordinator and in 2019, I worked as the National Campaign Workforce Training & Development Manager.¹

I also spent several years researching and working in Timor-Leste including for UNICEF, and with the Ministry of Education, Non-Formal as part of the evaluation team of its National Adult Literacy Campaign. During this time, I examined Campaigns in Kerala, Portugal, Cuba, Guinéa-Bissau, Brazil, Mozambique and South Africa. In both Timor-Leste and Australia, I produced a Campaign handbook as an implementation guide for staff.

This experience, along with my professional qualifications, equips me to offer some insights into why adult literacy is critical for overcoming inequality; and, what is required for the delivery of adult literacy in marginalised and often isolated communities so it sticks!

I begin with an example from my governance training with Aboriginal Board members running community organisations. There is a general consensus today among policy makers and service providers, particularly in the health sector, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' community control of decision making at the local level is essential for effective service delivery of programs. It is also understood that service delivery is most successful when performed by local people. Yet, the majority of members who have undertaken governance training with me have not had sufficient literacy proficiency in English language to perform their important role. Whilst people without good English language can and do have an essential role on Boards and/or in community organisations it is, nevertheless in the 21st century world, difficult to direct a community organisation without a good level of English literacy. Common challenges faced by those without English literacy at Level 2 or higher include: following the corporation's Constitution, managing finances, assessing risk, negotiating fair and just agreements with the government and other agencies such as mining companies, ensuring accountability of staff, following good governance practices, understanding government policies, meeting legal requirements and oversighting contracts. Too often responsibility for decision-making falls to the non-Aboriginal senior staff or to one or two literate Aboriginal Directors or staff members. Invariably this means many Boards / Directors find it difficult to make decisions with confidence often resulting in a great deal of stress, conflict and sometimes non-compliance. Consequently, community control and self-determination are compromised from the outset with many communities missing out on having a real say in what works best for their community. Both Boards and local staff need to be supported with English literacy education if they are to carry out their duties in a way

¹ I resigned from LFLF in November 2019

consistent with best practice models of decision-making and program provision. Government policy settings and programs such as Close the Gap and Empowered Communities will fail to deliver sustainable results whilst ever people cannot read and write independently.

A second example relates to citizenship education. A fundamental pillar of liberal democracies is an adult's right to vote in elections and on referendums. Yet we know many First Nations people do not participate in State and Federal elections. The reasons for this vary but poor literacy is a key explanation. The majority of low literate people with whom I have worked do not have a working knowledge of the Australian 3 tier system of government. They struggle to read political party campaign material, AEC documents and newspaper analysis. But literacy goes beyond reading. Literacy enables one to develop critical thinking, the capacity to analyse and synthesise information to make choices and solve problems. Hence too often the low to very low literate are excluded from deciding who will best represent their interests.

Currently the Commonwealth government is funding a significant community consultation process about the co-design of a First Nations Voice to Government/Parliament from the local to national level. This is a complex issue which in turn relates directly to Constitution Reform for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Australian Constitution. For 40% to 60% of the First Nations' population living with the lowest levels of English literacy, the task of making an informed decision is daunting. Literacy empowers by giving voice and enabling citizens to participate as equals in our governance system. It is incumbent upon we who ARE literate to ensure all citizens are able to exercise this fundamental right to have a say, to vote, through the delivery of appropriate quality adult English language literacy education irrespective of where you live.

Fourteen years ago, in 2007 in Timor-Leste, I undertook intensive training to learn how to implement a mass adult literacy campaign using a highly innovative and successful model known in English as the YES, I CAN! adult literacy campaign developed by pedagogues from the Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba. I later joined a team of Timorese and other Australians from UNE (University of New England) to evaluate the rollout across Timor-Leste over 4 years. Subsequently in 2012, Jack Beetson and I worked under the direction of a National Aboriginal Steering Committee in partnership with the Lowitja Institute and UNE to adapt and pilot the model in Wilcannia, NSW. The model proved to be highly appropriate with outcomes beyond both community and staff expectations².

The key question is, why does this mass literacy campaign model work so well when so many other literacy interventions do not achieve such positive and sustainable outcomes? There are seven features of the Mass Literacy Campaign model critical to its success and which make it a highly appropriate approach for First Nations communities.

² See publications written by Beetson, Boughton, Durnan, Lin, Ratcliff, & Williamson, documenting the model and its impact as it rolled out across NSW since 2012.

Namely:

1. The Literacy Campaign is owned and controlled by the local Aboriginal community from the beginning until the end e.g., household literacy survey, staff & student recruitment, local Campaign Working Group;
2. local people who share the lived experience of the students are employed as a Campaign Coordinator and classroom Facilitators and are provided with intensive pre-training followed by professional development on a daily basis for the duration of the Campaign;
3. a qualified professional educator works onsite to train and support staff, to monitor and undertake continuous quality control of delivery and student assessment;
4. the model is flexible enabling customisation to each local context e.g., public launch and graduation events, delivery days & times, use of local words, explanation of positive messages, place of delivery, catch-up sessions;
5. the model uses an action-reflection process whereby staff and students continuously examine their own practice, progress and problem-solve issues;
6. Phase 3 curriculum is co-designed by the community according to their identified development priorities;³ and lastly,
7. the model uses a concurrent participatory action research methodology involving all stakeholders including students, community members, staff, funders, to independently evaluate implementation. The results are fed back to the onsite teams and management allowing problems to be resolved and best practice strategies to be shared.

In conclusion I wish to return to the UN and it's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes Sustainable Development Goal 4:

"...ensuring that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030".

It is hoped that this Inquiry provides national leadership on this pressing issue and that by 2030 the Commonwealth of Australia is able to report that it has made substantial inroads in reducing the current high levels of low literacy within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. LFLF has done the hard work of testing and adapting a proven model for addressing First Nations adult literacy. Now is the time to get on with this task wherever there is a need across the nation.

Thankyou for your consideration of my views.

Attachment 1: Durnan, D & Boughton, B (2018) Making It Stick. The Post-literacy Phase of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign

³ For detail account see attached paper: Making It Stick