

1 March 2021

To the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training,

I make this submission as a final year PhD candidate. I have been examining the problem of low adult literacy as a barrier to parents' engagement with their children's schooling across three sites in far-western NSW. I conducted my research alongside the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) an Aboriginal-led organisation which has been delivering adult literacy campaigns across this region of significant, intergenerational labour market exclusion and social disadvantage for almost ten years. Below I summarise my research and findings for the Committee and am happy to provide further detail on any points if required.

I thank you for your time and work on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

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Adult Literacy and its importance – A view from 3 sites in far western NSW

Persistent gap in school achievement = persistent gap in adult literacy

Despite significant effort by governments, schools and communities, the aim to halve the gap in literacy and numeracy outcomes as called for in the Close the Gap initiative has not been achieved meaning that across all states and territories a significant and persistent 'gap' exists between the literacy and numeracy outcomes of First Nations students and their non-Indigenous peers. First Nations communities continue to be 'locked-in' to educational inequality and this inequality becomes more marked, the more 'remote' a community is (Ford, 2013, Goss, 2018). While much attention has been paid to the discrepancy in school outcomes for First Nations students there has been less discussion of what this means beyond schooling. Yet it is clear that in the absence of any post-school intervention, students who fail to achieve the National Minimum Standards as defined in NAPLAN, are at risk of becoming adults unable to manage what the 2006 Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey termed 'the demands of everyday life and work in a complex society'. That is they become adults who suffer from low literacy.

Given that we have long known that 'children need literate parents to be able to learn properly in school' (Lind, 2008, p. 35) and given it is less than 50 years since the segregated school system was dismantled, a system in which First Nations children were taught from a syllabus which only covered the first years of primary school (Fletcher 1989), it should not be surprising that First Nations communities are disproportionately affected by low rates of adult literacy. In fact this problem has long been identified and as far back as 1988 the Aboriginal Education Task Force called for an adult literacy campaign to address the problem (Hughes, 1988). Across the sites surveyed by LFLF, 68% of adults reported low or very low English language literacy (Lin et al, 2020).

The impact of low adult literacy on school education

Children's literacy is affected by seeing family and community members use literacy in ways that are socially and culturally meaningful (Kral, 2009). Children in remote communities are more likely to possess a wider range of literate behaviours if they came from families where a parent or grandparent had better literacy skills (Kral and Schwab 2003). On the other hand, parents with low literacy are less able to role model literate behaviours, share literacy experiences and assist children with school-based literacy tasks all of which influence children's literacy and school success (OECD, 2017). Further, parents with low literacy are more vulnerable to a range of life-challenges including but not limited to, poverty, unemployment and social exclusion (Hanemann, 2015) all of which can also impact on children's education. However my research focuses on another way the schooling of children is affected by low adult literacy, specifically I have found that parents with low literacy are far less likely to attend meetings or events at schools, engage with their child's teacher or otherwise build relationships with schools. Yet the problem of inevitably low rates of adult literacy in First Nations communities is rarely accounted for in discussions regarding educational partnerships.

Educational partnerships policies

Current federal and state policies call on schools to develop partnerships with First Nations families and communities. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (NATSIES) (2015) is organised around a series of principles, including:

Partnerships: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged in decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education services at local, sector and national levels (p.3).

In NSW, point 1.1.6 of the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) commits the NSW Education Department to 'collaborative decision making with Aboriginal peoples, parents, caregivers, families and their communities'. In spite of these policies and a multitude of programs aiming to improve community/school relationships, there is little evidence overall for either improved outcomes for

First Nations students or widespread and sustained improvements in community/school relationships (Lowe et al. 2019; Muller, 2012).

It appears that the extent of low adult literacy amongst First Nations communities is overlooked in both the design and implementation of such policies and the challenges this presents to developing educational partnerships. To be involved in the educational partnerships, people are expected to enter the highly literate environment of the same schools, where parents often feel they 'failed'. Across all my study sites the community members who had relationships with the schools that could be understood as aligning with the intention of the aforementioned policies were, without exception, drawn only from the 32% of the population with better literacy skills. This clearly reduces the potential strength of the community/school relationship and increases the pressure on the 32% of the population with better literacy, many of whom are already called on to play multiple community support roles due to their comparatively stronger literacy skills.

The only contact low-literacy people reported with the school was due to discipline issues. Students in the region are subject to both short and long suspensions at a far higher rate than the rest of the state. When a student is suspended, the school sends a letter home which needs to be signed and returned by a parent before the child is readmitted to the school. Parents sign these letters and their participation in this literacy 'event' leads school personnel to think that effective communication has occurred. However, the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy team leader in Wilcannia commented,

a lot of them (parents & carers) didn't know how to ... read students notes and things and they was just signing, they didn't realise what they was about.

Such comments, and the persistent complex problems which may be contributing to disproportionate suspension rates across the region demonstrate that there are serious barriers to developing the community/school partnerships which policy calls for and it is difficult to see how these can be overcome while such a large proportion of the adult population feel excluded by their low-literacy skills.

What changes with the Yes I Can campaign

Other submissions to the Committee provide more detail of the adult literacy campaigns which have occurred across the region. It is important to understand that instead of running as a discrete program, the campaign engages with many community organisations through the 'socialisation' of the campaign. Schools have been involved with the adult literacy campaign through assisting with launches and graduation ceremonies, providing resources and engaging with the post-literacy program of structured learning and work experience. The following changes were observed by school staff:

the literacy levels of our parents have direct impact on the valuing of education and the literacy levels of our students... I know all of the people that are involved (with the YIC campaign) have been interacting very positively with the School. And I know comments from our students about their pride in their parents who are doing the project, or relatives who are doing the project, have been a very good outcome for us (Principal, Wilcannia Central School).

We started getting requests for homework, which we'd never had before – and it was being done. It was clear the kids were getting help with it but we didn't mind. Also, the kids' reading levels didn't drop over the summer holidays (Principal, Enngonia Public School)

Significant changes in people's confidence are experienced and observed following the campaign. Such changes clearly have important ramifications for developing more authentic and sustainable community/school relationships. Campaign participants and teachers in Wilcannia made the following comments:

Well I was a very shy girl and now ever since I done the Yes I Can! I talk to anyone now and I go and I just speak up real loud now.... It gives you a lot of confidence, you know and builds the self-esteem up in all of us. We're quiet people out here and ever since we've done the YIC! program we just open up to everyone. You know we just speak out on behalf of our kids.... We've done a lot and its done a lot for us too.

People built their confidence to actually have a voice so to see people change from not having a voice and you think they didn't have a voice before and now they're speaking up more.

The significance of family members as role models in education was very evident when community members reflected on the impact of the campaign as follows:

The good thing about it is it once they got the certificate, the parents, they encouraging their kids you know, "I've got mine, so you can do yours". Encouraging them. Encouraging them more to go to school and get educated cause they learn ... Cause they learn you can come home to mum and dad and they'll be able to read and write to you and tell you and help you where before they wasn't able to do that so that's why it's important to have the program... It's important to keep this program going so we can learn our mothers and fathers how to learn to read and write so they can teach their kids you know help them at least help them. And that's a big thing you know a little help goes a long way. (YIC facilitator, Wilcannia)

If kids see their parents or aunties or uncles.... Sitting down learning what they're learning ... because ... they've gotta learn to read and write. They see their parents doing it, it encourages them to go to school to do it as well. (YIC coordinator, Enngonia)

The enlarged understanding of family that exists in First Nations communities and the fact that many grandparents and other family members play significant child-rearing roles amplifies the importance of family literacy within First Nations communities and the acquisition of literacy by a grandparent or other extended family member (or the lack of literacy skills in family members) may have a greater impact for a First Nations child than may be understood by those who are accustomed to the often more nuclear family organization of non-Indigenous Australia. A community leader in Brewarrina commented:

I've seen grandparents taking an interest in their grandkids' schooling. They're often the carers as the parents are off on the piss and don't or can't care. These grandparents can now read to these kids and help with their homework. So, it's had a contribution to family. Also, the fact that people in their 50s and 60s are participating, feeling part of a learning circle.

Literacy – everyone's right, everyone's responsibility

Prior to the literacy campaign, people tended to hide their literacy problems from more literate community members and this may facilitate the persistence of deficit discourses such that First Nations families 'don't care' about education. In fact my research, along with that of many others, demonstrates that First Nations families care deeply about their children's education however the disproportionate life-challenges including that of low-literacy can prevent this care being demonstrated in ways that are understood by the school.

Meanwhile those of us who have already acquired literacy are often blind to the near-impenetrable barriers faced by those with low literacy for whom “simple” tasks such as grocery shopping or paying bills are anything but simple, let alone completing a Working With Children Check to volunteer at the school. The Russian saying ‘the fed don’t understand the hungry’ helps those of us who are literate, understand our own blindness in terms of how the world appears to people with very low literacy. By working with community members who have courageously stepped up to learn literacy as adults, my research provides a hopeful insight into the changes that may be possible when communities approach the problem of low literacy not as a ‘failing’ on the part of those with low literacy but as a responsibility of the entire community to address. Indeed after experiencing intergenerational failure and trauma associated with schools, the literacy campaign appears to provide people an opportunity to redefine themselves as successful learners, described by one of the campaign coordinators as follows,

They no longer think ‘I failed school’, but ‘school failed me, then I went back and learnt with YIC!’.

While there has been a shameful failure by past Australian governments to address low rates of adult literacy amongst First Nations communities, the Yes I Can campaign and associated research demonstrates that when adult literacy is addressed, communities and schools can move forward together. Children need literate parents who have more stable, empowered lives, are better equipped to help their children develop literacy skills and more able to engage with schools and build the educational partnerships necessary for educational success.

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