

R.G.

KOORI COMMUNICATIONS AND TRAINING PTY LTD

## **Peter Cooley's views regarding the inquiry into high levels of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system**

I grew up in an Aboriginal mission at La Perouse in Sydney's southern suburbs.

My community as a young person was a great place to grow up in. Our parents and elders passed on lots of valuable traditional knowledge and practical skills and they always did things with us. Sadly over the last 25 years this practice has slowed to a point where it has almost become extinct and social & health problems and issues have risen dramatically.

Social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, gambling and criminal activity among young people are high in many aboriginal communities and the numbers of young aboriginal people completing school should be higher.

I've seen the impacts that problems such as alcohol and drug abuse can have on families and individuals. I also believe that gambling has just as big an impact on people and families in Aboriginal communities as drug and alcohol does.

For every person living in society there is a financial responsibility whether it is for necessities to live or for fun and games. Living comes at a high cost which climbs all the time. This is an enormous barrier for many aboriginal people to break as most grow up in a low socio-economic environment where there is high unemployment and social issues.

Reduced input from elders combined with low family income means many young aboriginal people are growing up in an environment where crime is an option as a means of participating in a society that is perceived as unaffordable to them.

I started my own company to develop and deliver programs that engage young Indigenous people in skill building activities, whether that is in schools or in their community. I concentrate on Indigenous youth and youth at risk as I want to pass on the bug that struck me when I was young – the bug of learning.

We all need to look to our own experience and relationships to give something back to the community we come from. I'm promoting *respect* as a way to achieve my vision as that's what I learned from my own upbringing as an Aboriginal person.

Many people ask why my youth programs work and my answer is simple, "Respect" – it works both ways.

I get results from youth because I'm strict and demand respect, good attitudes, and attendance at school. I also respect them back for rising to the challenges I set them. I've found that youth are more accepting of the rules laid out for them if you respect them for

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giving it a go. They realise that my uncompromising attitude towards their learning and behavior at school is because I want them to succeed.

I am not a person who thinks young people deserve breaks or special treatment just because they may be disadvantaged; this kind of attitude is not going to get them ahead in today's world.

I do show people however, that the Indigenous youth they consider 'disadvantaged, disruptive or troubled,' can learn as long as they're taught skills in a way they can understand and enjoy.

I've had to think outside the square to develop programs that keep youth engaged in education and skill-building, and I'm always searching for new ideas to help keep them focused. I'm not afraid to say – 'hey that was a failure or didn't go well,' because you have to recognise what made it a failure in order to build a success.

It can be hard selling your vision. I still find that many people who are trying to get youth on the right track would rather pay for a program that just occupies time rather than investing in a program that teaches them skills and values over a period of time.

Since I started my business I have developed, taught and evaluated a wide range of programs for primary and secondary school students, including fishing, surfing, golf, bicycle building and sailing. I have also developed and delivered programs for young people outside school through Police and Community organisations. All of these programs are aimed at engaging young people in skill building and education so that they ultimately have a wider range of life choices.

### **Racing to the Top (R)**

In early 2004 I developed a program called *Racing to the Top*, to teach Indigenous young people the Principles of a 2-Stroke engine and how to build and maintain remote control, petrol driven race cars. My students were those at risk of leaving school early or who habitually truanted; a condition of receiving their finished car was to have attended school everyday all day for the entire program.

The Racing to the Top program is designed around the concept of enabling students to 'learn how to learn', is focussed on assisting participants to develop skills that will enable them to be successful in education, and utilizes vocational style delivery techniques focussed on the construction of a remote control racing car. Students learn about vehicles, safety, and administration through the formation of a racing club. This learning is linked to school subjects to demonstrate the relevance of school-based education.

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Students also learn about proper conduct in the learning environment, cooperating with peers, interacting positively with teaching staff, respect for themselves and each other, and the relevance of theory to practical work.

Whilst participating in the Racing to the Top program, students undergo intensive monitoring of their attendance, participation, and behaviour in every other class at school to ensure that they maintain and improve these aspects.

Racing to the Top has been proven to address multiple barriers experienced by students through outcomes demonstrated as they progress through the program. Student's behaviour, attendance, school experiences, social issues and self-esteem are all addressed within the program, through the regular engagement in a desirable, positive small group activity.

School achievements, literacy and numeracy are improved through the program, which delivers a sense of achievement to the student as they complete each task by following written and graphic instructions, and overcome issues they encounter in the process of building their car. Students begin to make decisions about their future study and career options through exposure to vocational style teaching and learning. Participants who complete the Racing to the Top program are more likely to remain in education through to the end of the school year, return to school in the following year, and have high success rates in transitioning into vocational education.

Racing to the Top has been extremely well received by students, staff and parents in every school that has accessed the program. Many more schools and community groups have expressed interest in hosting the program, and referring students to the program, after witnessing the positive results for previous participants.

Racing to the Top is a highly appropriate option for Indigenous young people who are at risk of disengaging from education, as well as being a very attractive incentive for students to perform well at school. Racing to the Top also has the potential to grow beyond it's current format, to deliver extended programs with exciting additional content, and to be tailored to meet the needs of particular student groups

My strict attitude to attendance and course requirements ensure that those who graduate do so with great pride in their achievements. Students not only have to fulfill the requirement of *Racing to the Top* but also improved their all round achievements.

My vision is focused on the long-term engagement of these young people in their communities. Building racing cars is only a first step. My vision is for state-wide race meets, giving students not only the incentive for car maintenance and repair but also the excitement and satisfaction of competing, together with the benefits of social interaction and networking.

Interestingly enough, Racing to the Top is experiencing around 95% success rate at keeping students at risk of disengaging from education engaged in schools, but around 98% retention rates with Aboriginal youth. It has also had a high success rate in special needs schools where students are placed because of behavioural issues. I believe that Racing to the Top would be an extremely powerful program if run in remote communities.

### **Chip N Putt**

Building on this success I have offered the local schools a range of opportunities. For example, his *Chip N Putt* golf program has operated in several High Schools and Primary Schools, with many, mostly aboriginal, students being given the opportunity to learn golf with a professional teacher.

### **Catch N Cook**

*Catch N Cook* is a fishing program that I developed for young Indigenous people and their families. Each student is provided with their own fishing rod and tackle for which they are responsible for and get to keep if they complete the whole program. I teach them the skills needed to competently use and maintain their equipment. Once they have completed the program students have the opportunity of mentoring future students and developing their own fishing club.

Part of the reason I developed this program is that so many Aboriginal communities live near water, and I personally, spent a lot of my childhood fishing. This was an enjoyable but cheap activity that also provided a healthy food for the family table. But again, I had noticed that the elders were not passing on their knowledge to younger generations and that many young people did not fish anymore.

The Commonwealth Government funded this program to run in 10 Indigenous communities around Australia and it was mostly run as a 5 day school holiday program and if it wasn't full the first day it was always full the second. It was always taken up by local communities as there seemed to be a lack of school holiday programs for the kids to participate in. I find it hard to understand why there aren't more structured school holiday programs funded in Aboriginal communities as this is always the time when the police complain that young Aboriginal people are getting into trouble.

I have run this program with the local police on three occasions now, the last of which the Police found funding for themselves, as they believe this program is so successful at engaging youth at risk of offending, and also young offenders. The Police work with the boys to teach them new skills in a positive learning environment. Though some of the boys are also now skilled in this area so they teach the police how to fish, which also creates a situation of two way respect.

## **Aboriginal culture**

Another activity that I run is building cultural knowledge in Aboriginal youth. Many youth grow up in communities with little or no knowledge of their culture, and much factionalism and conflict caused partly by conflicting tribes claiming traditional ownership of the land.

I now run didgeridoo making, traditional Aboriginal shell-work and bush tucker walks for young people. I always use skilled Aboriginal elders to run these workshops, thus creating a situation where young people are learning from their elders about their culture, as once was the common means of education.

I have also taken urban Aboriginal youth to the Garma Festival in Arnhem Land where they are surrounded by traditional aboriginal people who speak their own language and practice traditional cultural crafts, dancing, painting and story-telling. Next year I will be running tours for these youth to other Aboriginal festivals where this type of cultural tourism is also practised as the increase in pride of their culture, when surrounded by these activities is amazing to see in these youth.

## **Conclusion**

I firmly believe in taking practical steps to provide the motivation, skills and knowledge required for engagement in education and community building. My programs have had a big take up rate by organisations that deal with Aboriginal youth in out of home care and organisations such as the Police, who deal with young offenders. I have had little support from government for my initiatives. They seem to prefer paying for short term activities like sending kids to the zoo for the day, then longer programs that aim to build skills and respect.

My Racing to the Top program, which is in so much demand in schools due to its success in keeping youth at risk at school, is not supported by the government, but is funded instead, by the Freedman Foundation and also, KARI Aboriginal Resources Inc. for Aboriginal youth in schools.

All of these programs are transferrable and could be run in any community - urban or remote. I also get local aboriginal community involved in the programs so they understand how these programs work and can run them in the community themselves.



