

**INDIGENOUS EDUCATION OUTCOMES: Are The Answers In The  
Mainstream?**

**2008 Duguid Memorial Lecture  
University of South Australia**

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## **Acknowledge traditional owners and elders**

I would like to thank Uncle Lewis for his acknowledgement and welcome to Kurna country. I acknowledge my elders here tonight and thank them for their continuing wisdom and leadership. I acknowledge the support of my family both past and present whose unwavering belief in me has allowed me to aspire to reaching my goals and meet the many challenges along the way.

## **Duguids**

I am proud to honour tonight the work of Charles and Phyllis Duguid by continuing their efforts to secure more intelligent and humane policies for Aboriginal peoples. In keeping with my academic specialty, I will discuss current issues relevant to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia.

For forty years, Charles Duguid, and his wife, Phyllis, were tireless campaigners in South Australia for legislative reforms and fairer policies towards Aboriginal peoples.<sup>1</sup> Their respect for Aboriginal culture and society was rare and progressive for the times. I like to think that they would support me in advocating the educational changes that I am this evening.

## **The Gaps**

There is in Australia an increasing amount of formal reporting of the differences between the life outcomes being achieved by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The most recent *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* Report said in 2007:

‘Across virtually all the indicators in this Report, wide gaps remain in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Despite Australia’s world class health system, the life expectancy of Indigenous people is estimated to be around 17 years lower than that for the total Australian population. Despite compulsory education, Indigenous students at all levels experience much worse outcomes than non-Indigenous students. And Indigenous people are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system, as both victims and offenders.’<sup>2</sup>

And in this year’s *Report to National Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2006*, the current Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Julia Gillard, has reported:

‘There were mixed outcomes in Indigenous education and training in 2006. In general, enrolments, retention and employment demonstrated improvement across all education sectors, but educational outcomes tended to be either stable or declining.’<sup>3</sup>

So, I was pleased to hear Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd say;

‘... disadvantage forces too many Australians to live on the fringes of the nation’s economic and social life....Our challenge is to bring these Australians back into the mainstream through a reform agenda of social inclusion.’<sup>4</sup> The Rudd Government is calling for an ‘education

revolution’, with the laudable goal of halving the literacy and numeracy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children within ten years<sup>5</sup>.

Hope should stem from the fact that so many reports and policy statements contain words that promise to improve Indigenous outcomes. But, as experience teaches us, what really counts is how those intentions are translated into action in the communities where Indigenous people live, and in the schools and colleges which their children attend. My concern is that over the years we continue to see the same thing - policies not being implemented in systemic ways by governments, particularly State governments, who manage our public education systems, and programs not being resourced appropriately over the long term, nor evaluated against consistent and comprehensive data that includes input by Indigenous children and communities themselves.

For thirty years or more, Indigenous educators have been describing and recommending a way forward that will help Indigenous children to become emotionally healthy, so they can be ‘better, brighter, smarter’ and can live out their entitlement to a dignified and participating citizenship of this country and the world. For years, Indigenous communities have identified education as a priority. We want our children to succeed in the mainstream; but it seems that the mainstream is not yet ready or able to assist us.

**In tonight’s lecture, I will**

- reflect on the trauma caused to Indigenous peoples by colonisation;
- stress the importance of giving Indigenous peoples a voice in education and acting on that advice, and
- emphasise the need to build a culturally competent education workforce; and
- describe some international developments which are creating a context for change.

Blame is no longer appropriate. There have been continuing calls made by Indigenous educators and communities for schooling to change, but our advice has been either ignored or undermined by the lack of consistent policy implementation and sustained resourcing.

Although the Prime Minister’s formal Apology acknowledged, ‘the indignity and degradation ... inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture,’<sup>6</sup> there is still no sign in his Government’s words or behaviour of requiring education systems to act on the important educational principles and strategies that were set down in policy documents twenty years ago.

By this I mean sound, proven educational principles, like helping children build on what they have, so that they can understand more; respecting the language and culture that Indigenous children bring with them to school – and strategies like employing educators who understand that Indigenous learning systems encourage learning through observation and imitation, they emphasise the global, the contextual relevance of knowledge, they share and maintain knowledge orally rather than through written words. Governments must ensure that teachers understand these pedagogic differences, and have the cultural competencies to engage effectively with Indigenous children. Without this, Kevin Rudd’s ‘closing the gap’ will fall prey to the same fate as John Howard’s ‘practical reconciliation’, where inaction or inappropriate action continues to damage the lives of Indigenous Australians.

While there have been strong words about demanding better performance from schools, there has also been significant amounts of money directed to philanthropic organisations and programs<sup>7</sup> which are not auspiced by any registered education authority, nor assessed by any published research as effective.

This trend is counter-productive. Education of Indigenous children must not be seen as the business of charitable organisations with no credentials or accreditation as schools. Governments must ensure that registered schools receive adequate funding and are then held accountable.

Closing the education gap must be a joint venture that is undertaken with Indigenous peoples and their children. The cultural arrogance that has damaged Indigenous Peoples in Australia for more than 200 years is unacceptable. Ideas that ‘white is right’, that non-Indigenous people know what’s best for Indigenous peoples, that an intervention can be imposed without consultation, are out-dated and will not close the gap.

As an Aboriginal man and an educator for 30 years, I contend that recognising the importance of culture to Indigenous wellbeing, and making systemic education changes based on that recognition, are the keys to closing the education gap.

And on that basis, I suggest that there are four major systemic changes required of mainstream education if Indigenous children are to enjoy success. These are:

- Engagement of Indigenous peoples in the governance of schools, to secure our active participation in school-based decision making;
- Inclusion of cultural competency studies in pre-service and in-service training for teachers and education workers, to ensure the knowledge and skills required for building positive relationships with Indigenous children and their communities;
- Training of more Indigenous Australians to be employed in teaching and support roles at all levels of care and education, and establishment of career paths and award structures which recognise their value to the learning process of Indigenous students, indeed, for all students;

and

- Establishment of a national council of Indigenous educators, to provide professional, pedagogical advice to Governments and education systems on the learning needs of Indigenous children, and to be involved in regular evaluation of the efforts being made by politicians, administrators and schools to apply that advice.

These ideas may sound familiar to many of you, but clearly, there is a need to keep re-iterating them!

Before elaborating on these points, though, I want reflect on what it means to be Indigenous, whether in Australia or anywhere else in the world, as this has a huge bearing on the kind of changes that are required to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous children.

A United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1995 stated:

‘Indigenous or aboriginal peoples are so-called because they were living on their lands before settlers came from elsewhere; they are the descendants...of those who inhabited a country or a

geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived, the new arrivals later becoming dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means.’<sup>8</sup>

There are important words in here which are significant for any plan to remove the disadvantage now suffered by almost all Indigenous peoples around the globe - words like ‘different cultures’, and ‘dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means’.

It is estimated that of the world’s current population of 6.6 billion, 300 million are Indigenous, and while many belong to what are now minority groups, even those who make up numerical majorities (like those in Bolivia, Ecuador and Guatemala) are frequently marginalized in terms of power and wealth.<sup>9</sup>

Though far from homogenous, what Indigenous peoples have in common is the domination of our respective cultures by powerful conquerors and colonisers. We have all been dispossessed of our land and our way of life, of our right to control our own lives, and, particularly, our right to educate our children in the way we believe to be effective.

There is increasing recognition of the trauma suffered by dispossessed Indigenous peoples<sup>10</sup>, by those who have been directly discriminated against, and by the children who have been raised in desperate conditions of racial discrimination and poverty, often accompanied by alcoholism and violence.

Michael Halloran, Lecturer at LaTrobe University School of Psychological Science, described the necessity for cultural respect when he wrote:

‘Culture is a significant contributor to psychological stability: by providing meaning and value to life, culture protects people from basic human anxieties... Factors that severely and continuously suppress or undermine culture would be expected to produce cultural trauma, which is likely to result in anxiety-based maladaptive behaviours amongst its members. This [analysis] ... provides a number of insights that are pertinent to understanding the situation of Aboriginal Australians since European invasion.’<sup>11</sup>

He then goes on to say ‘Although various approaches have been implemented to address the situation of Aboriginal Australians, the most promising measures are those that reinvigorate Indigenous culture and life-ways.’

When governments deal with the symptoms of cultural trauma with crisis action such as we see in the Northern Territory, they worsen the situation by overlooking the root causes of the social disintegration. They see the statistics, but they fail to deal with is the reality which creates those statistics, for that reality is the outward manifestation of cultural trauma. This will not be resolved by moving in with the army, giving the impression that every Aboriginal man is a child abuser and every Aboriginal family has no capacity to manage welfare payments constructively for the benefit of their children.

Such behavior makes even those who are managing well feel once again discriminated against and powerless. It reminds them how quickly a government can mobilise to remove a family’s self-management and to take comprehensive punitive action, and it leaves them wondering why such comprehensive action cannot be mounted to implement positive

changes. And, worst of all, it encourages them to once again doubt the sincerity of the many fine words spoken about making life better for Indigenous people.

If Governments really want to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children, they should consider three questions and what the answers to those questions mean for action on education.

First: Is the purpose of mainstream Australian education for Indigenous children still assimilation?

Second: Is the failure to achieve literacy and numeracy mainstream outcomes a failure of Indigenous children and their innate lack of ability, or is it a failure of the system?

And Third: Do Indigenous people have the right to be Indigenous and to make decisions about their lives?

Current Commonwealth and State government policies and guidelines for Indigenous education enable us to answer Question 1 with a No, schools are no longer aiming to assimilate Indigenous children, to make them white. One of the written policies states:

‘All Australians have the right to an education which allows them to be strong in two ways: to be strong in their own cultures, and to be strong in the skills that allow them equal choice from the same range of opportunities and futures.’<sup>12</sup>

In regard to Question 2, I and many others like me are living examples of the fact that the answer No, it is not the fault of the children, they are not innately less capable than any other children. And then Yes, if the children do have innate learning abilities, maybe we need to examine why the system is not fostering those abilities.

And if our schools are no longer aiming to assimilate Indigenous children, then the answer to Question 3 must be Yes, Indigenous people do have a right to be Indigenous and to make decisions about their lives. Non-Indigenous people are not required to surrender their spiritual and belief systems, their language their culture to live equitably in Australia, and Aboriginal children should not have to surrender theirs either.

### **Cultural Competency**

So, the first step towards achieving educational equity for Indigenous students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be to develop a culturally competent education service. By this I mean an education workforce that understands and respects the culture, language and values which each Indigenous child brings to school and that has the skills needed to build a relationship and a learning process with each child from that base – a workforce that embraces the importance of Indigenous culture as the basis on which Indigenous children form their sense of personal identity and their self-esteem.

While not all scholars agree on definitions and conceptualisations of ‘cultural competency’, and there is not yet a national policy about the role and status of cultural competency training for teachers, non-Indigenous teachers who have worked with Indigenous students and members of Indigenous communities know that interacting appropriately and effectively with people from different cultural and language backgrounds calls for knowledge and skills which most members of the dominant Anglo or Western culture group do not possess.

Non-Indigenous teachers do not need to know everything about culture that Indigenous people know, but they do need to know enough to respect the local culture and to be skilled in engaging with Indigenous parents and communities and finding ways of incorporating the students' home language and culture into the school. 'What is needed is a focus on meaningful curriculum materials and culturally appropriate ways to teach and motivate students that build on the cultural knowledge students bring to school.'<sup>13</sup>

Education systems must not operate on the idea that failure is a student-centred problem. A blame-the-victim or their parents approach is not effective, and ignoring the importance of the local culture alienates rather than motivates learners, creating distress for both teacher and learner. Working with the culture helps parents and children feel valued, and it enables teachers to build relationships with learners that enhance learning.

For this reason, all State and Territory education systems must, as a matter of priority, provide in-service and professional development opportunities for all school leaders and practising teachers and education workers likely to impact the schooling of Indigenous students – and that includes everybody, from the Chief Executive down.

At the same time, all tertiary institutions must accelerate their inclusion of cultural competency training in all undergraduate courses preparing students as service providers. This is particularly important for those who will work in education, but also for those in health, social services and justice portfolios.

The need for cultural awareness and the development of competencies to enable teachers interacting in cross-cultural situations is not a new idea in Australia. During the past thirty years, many practising teachers working with Indigenous children have tried to make themselves aware of and sensitive to Indigenous cultural issues; but the professional development provided to them has too often been inadequate, and their awareness has often not translated into practice. Nor have the most committed individuals been able to address the systemic issues that continue to disadvantage Indigenous students, issues such as inadequate facilities in remote locations, insufficient personnel with the relevant sensitivities and skills, insufficient Indigenous co-workers, insufficient relevant teaching materials, and inadequate system-wide monitoring and evaluation of various methodologies.

Individuals can make a difference for a time, in particular places, but across Australia Indigenous children will continue to fail if education systems fail to identify what's working and to systemically apply the successful approaches.

A recent review of Victorian Indigenous schooling revealed that the absence of system support for proven methodologies resulted in individual teachers trying a wide range of approaches with Koori children, so that now,

'So many different ways of doing things have been tried that few, if any, have been tried for long enough with enough people to see if they make a difference. Even if they did make a difference, we would not necessarily know it because the systems are not in place here, or anywhere else in Australia, to implement, monitor and evaluate long term programs.'<sup>14</sup>

Education systems must engage with Indigenous educators to establish processes for identifying effective methodologies, and to evaluate their impact over time.

Across the nation there has been minimal resourcing of relevant and on-going professional development towards building cultural competency amongst teachers and education workers, and to date there has been no declaration by the Commonwealth Government that closing the gap will require a meaningful commitment to building this capacity.

Instead, the Commonwealth Government intends to mimick the *Teach for America* experiment, recruiting ‘the most talented graduates to teach in the most challenging schools and communities’<sup>15</sup>. While the nation’s most talented graduates would certainly be welcome in teaching, this is an experiment our children cannot afford! To be of value to Indigenous students, all teachers must be both teacher trained and culturally competent.<sup>16</sup>

In the interests of Indigenous children, Governments must collaborate with universities across the nation to require cultural competency studies by all undergraduates studying human service provision. And they must ensure that for those who take up teaching, they provide appropriate incentives and reward structures to retain and reward those teachers who display the competencies.

I was shocked and disappointed to read the claim made recently in *The Australian*<sup>17</sup> that before releasing the report of the review into the Northern Territory Emergency Response, the Indigenous Affairs Minister, the Hon Jenny Macklin, arranged for the removal of recommendations that all government officers working in Indigenous communities should receive cross-cultural training, even though the Commonwealth’s own research has demonstrated the educational benefits of ensuring cultural links between home and school.

In a study in 2000 coordinated by the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), DETYA established a large project entitled, *What Works? Explorations in Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Students*. Analysis of performance data from 60 sites highlighted key factors leading to improved Indigenous educational outcomes and the first of three contributors to improved learning outcomes was the recognition, acknowledgement and support of culture.<sup>18</sup>

### **Languages other than Standard Australian English**

As part of respecting the culture which each child brings to school, I want to stress the importance of Indigenous languages to improving literacy in English.

Culturally competent teachers understand that for a large number of Indigenous children, Standard English is a second (or third) language, that their first or home language is either a traditional language or a dialect of Indigenous English. Hence, when learning Standard Australian English, most Indigenous children are positioned as ESL learners, learning English as a foreign language.<sup>19</sup> Why then, do our education systems not support Indigenous children in their learning of English in the same ways that they support non-Indigenous ESL learners?

Indigenous students’ languages reflect their culture, their identity and their self-esteem, and they must be the starting point for new learning. Attempts to close the education gap will continue to fail if they do not value the languages children bring to school as the medium for initial instruction and the foundation for the learning of English. Whether they speak a traditional language or Aboriginal English, most Indigenous children in their first years of

schooling cannot successfully adopt Standard English at the same rate as their non-Indigenous peers who have using Standard English since they first learned to talk.

The ignorance of educational research<sup>20</sup> on this issue, and the flip-flopping of Government policy must end! It is punishing Indigenous children and perpetuating the literacy and numeracy gap!

Support must be given to literacy programs and teacher development which respect the language which Indigenous children bring to school, and thus preserve their confidence as learners. Indigenous children must be supported at least as extensively as other children who attend school without Standard English as their home language. Both trainee and practising teachers must be supported to understand how important a child's language is to the formulation of their identity, their sense of self and their place within their culture and community. Pre-service training and in-service professional development must skill teachers to build teacher-learner relationships on this understanding. If teachers are not equipped to apply these principles of learning, Indigenous children will continue to face difficulties which limit their literacy in Standard English and result in continued poor outcomes.

### **Commitment to Early Childhood Education Programs**

As a step in the right direction, I welcome the Rudd Government's current commitment to early childhood education and the recent decision by the Council of Australian Governments to fund the construction of the first thirty five Children and Family Centres across Australia to deliver integrated services that offer early learning, child care and family support programs.<sup>21</sup>

In 2006, the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Child Health Survey revealed powerful evidence for an urgent major overhaul of Aboriginal education.<sup>22</sup> Chief Investigator Professor Steve Zubrick said:

'It is clear that it is a matter of too little too late. Many of the programs to support Aboriginal children start in late primary or high school, by which time the gap in performance between Aboriginal children and others is simply too great. The focus needs to shift substantially to the early years of child development to help Aboriginal children be ready, socially and academically, to learn at school.' He went on to say that the data shows that not only are Aboriginal students starting well behind non-Aboriginal children, the gap widens the longer they are at school.

The 0-8 education process is the key to success for future generations of Indigenous children, and it will be essential that the Children and Family Centres and the pre-schools employ culturally competent staff, skilled in making the Centres welcoming places for Indigenous people, and skilled in conducting programs which respect culture and language as essential to maintaining the confidence of Indigenous learners.

The importance of appropriate programs in the early years of a child's life has been increasingly recognised as an understanding of the importance of brain development has increased. In 1999, McCain and Mustard reported that, 'Brain development in the period from conception to six years sets a base for learning, behaviour and health over the life cycle'<sup>23</sup> and, 'there are critical periods when a young child requires appropriate stimulation for the brain to establish neural pathways in the brain for optimum development. Many of

these critical periods are over or waning by the time the child is six years old. It is during these early years, particularly conception to age three that the neural framework of the brain is established.’<sup>24</sup>

In view of this research, it will be important for Children and Family Centres to not only focus on health and nutrition, programs but to also include the best features of earlier programs, such as education programs for pregnant mothers and for parents of babies and infants, the inclusion of all babies and infants aged between 0 to 5, parent, carer and grandparent participation, guidance for parents and carers in the effective use of play, toys and reading as a stimuli for cognitive development, and the training of Indigenous Australians as classroom assistants.<sup>25</sup> More effective engagement with Indigenous families and provision of quality learning experiences in childcare and pre-school settings will create learning foundations for achievement in later life and make the investment well worthwhile.<sup>26</sup>

I hope too that implementation of the Government’s early childhood revolution for Indigenous children will reflect lessons from experience, making greater efforts to ‘address articulation between early childhood services across the health, welfare and education sectors, and to ensure that parent education and enrichment programs in the first years are effectively harmonised with preschool programs.’<sup>27</sup>

### **Indigenous employment**

Children and Family Centres are the ideal place in which to foster the skills of Indigenous Australians who want to work with children. Governments must encourage their involvement, support them with appropriate training opportunities, and retain their services by offering career paths and award structures which recognise the value of their work for Indigenous learners.

Indeed, Indigenous workers should be supported to work in all roles at all levels of education. The Commonwealth Government has declared its intention to halve the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within a decade,<sup>28</sup> so it would make sense to work towards this by investing in increased Indigenous employment at all levels of child care and education.

Sadly, current Government promises to increase the numbers of Indigenous workers in schools are not being fulfilled. Here in South Australia, as an example, the promise to increase Aboriginal Education Worker time between 2005 and 2010 from 1 worker to 50 Aboriginal children to 1 to 30, has not yet begun!

And why, I ask, does a school’s entitlement to this time require that there are at least 30 Aboriginal children in a school before there can be one full time Aboriginal worker, available to children and staff throughout every day? Aboriginality is not a costume our children wear only part-time!

A culturally competent administration would know that Indigenous children are enrolled in most South Australian schools and that their chances of success at school will be increased by the emotional support of an AEW in the school at all times. Not to mention the importance of non-Indigenous children seeing Indigenous workers as important members of education teams at every level of schooling. Here in South Australia there are less than 5 Aboriginal

teachers in leadership positions in schools, and current policies are failing to recruit and retain those who are qualified as teachers. This has to change.

With all that said, I want to stress the **Importance of Listening to Indigenous Educators.**

Indigenous educators and elders have been recommending these approaches to Governments for many years. They were first recorded in the 1970s when formally-appointed Indigenous Education Advisory Committees or Groups in each of the States advised State Ministers and Departments of Education. Their advice was then repeated through the National Aboriginal Education Committee, and drafted into education policy statements and guidelines which were endorsed by all Ministers for Education in the 1980s and 1990s and detailed the needs of Indigenous learners and the importance of non-Indigenous teachers learning about and welcoming Indigenous culture in schools.

This outstanding work produced guidelines for schools which remain sound and acceptable to Indigenous people today. Although they have been applied in some places, however, they have never been adequately resourced and implemented system-wide with appropriate continuity, monitoring and evaluation. Although the education systems have made the advice available, it has been applied spasmodically, only where committed individual school leaders and competent teachers have cared to apply it and where individual educators have recognised the strength of local Indigenous leaders, and involved them in the decision-making of the schooling.

I cannot speak too highly of the tenacity of the educators who continue to advocate these principles in an attempt to apply them in schools, despite the failure of mainstream education systems to support them in a meaningful way. I won't go into the reasons why there is this continuing failure to genuinely support the things that work and to apply them systemically and sustainably.<sup>29</sup> But I will say that too many non-Indigenous politicians and decision-makers do not yet understand the extent of the damage caused by colonisation and its thorough dispossession of Indigenous Australians.<sup>30</sup> Nor do they understand that the gap will not be closed if advice of Indigenous educators is not sincerely acted on.

Across the globe, Indigenous peoples are crying out for their governments to support culturally relevant education programs in the same way as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educators are doing in Australia. Many have been successful in establishing representative bodies to relate to mainstream Governments, as the Inuit have in Canada, and some have even signed self-government compacts with the mainstream Government, as several native American groups have in the United States. All are seeking to enact their right to decide how their children are educated; all are claiming an equal place at the table, alongside mainstream Governments and bureaucrats, so their voices will no longer be ignored and their children continue to fail.

The important Indigenous education advisory committees established across Australia in the late 1970s and 80s were representative of Indigenous community wisdom, and they should not have been dissolved. They were abandoned at a huge cost to Indigenous children, because in the wake of their demise, State education systems have not been implementing their recommendations in ways that give them a fair chance to succeed.

As you know, Indigenous people in this country now have no representative forum through which they can advise Governments on Indigenous-specific issues. Even the Rudd

Government, which has been promising to revolutionise Indigenous education, is abandoning the Indigenous-specific Indigenous Education Branch of its Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, and in doing so, is denying the importance of the expertise and advice of Indigenous educators.

To increase the nation's chances of closing the gap, Governments must once again seek advice about educating Indigenous children from a national Indigenous education advisory body, and involve that body in the design and execution of monitoring and evaluation processes that ensure accountability. There are numerous, highly-qualified, Indigenous educators who have extensive pedagogical knowledge as well as life experience of Indigenous culture and aspirations. Their input as professional advisers at the Government and systemic level will complement the efforts culturally competent teachers at the school level as they encourage increased local participation by Indigenous communities. And their scrutiny of funding and policy implementation will hopefully result in sustained effort by education systems.

Now let me ask, **Are the Answers in the Mainstream?**

The mainstream is where power resides, where non-Indigenous people and processes exercise the privilege of deciding policy and allocating resources to implement policy. The mainstream is where the training of teachers and other service providers occurs, and where the quality of day to day health care and schooling for Indigenous children is determined. Standard Australian English is the language of the mainstream, and literacy in that language determines what's on the agenda, what's decided and what gets done.

Indigenous people must look to the mainstream for a better future.

But they must not be asked to abandon their Indigenous identity in the process.

To permit both identity and success for Indigenous children, mainstream education must reflect in its practice an understanding of the trauma of colonisation, and the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia to maintain their culture. Our schools and education bureaucracies must respect the culture that nurtures Indigenous children, recognising that it is inhumane to expect us to abandon our culture, for culture is the foundation of our being. We are ready for the mainstream, but the mainstream still seems unready for us.

### **International Developments**

To illustrate that I am not a lone voice in the wilderness on these issues, I would like to refer to the emerging international context within which I am suggesting to mainstream politicians and education administrators that engaging with the first Australians as equal partners is the only option for the future.

For example, in Canada, the constitution recognises three groups of Indigenous people - Indians (called First Nations by their US counterparts) Metis and Inuit. Since the 1980s, a consensus building process has been underway in Canada,<sup>31</sup> resulting in agreement on the constitutional recognition of an inherent right of self-government, and in 1995, the Government declaration of an 'historic new partnership with Aboriginal peoples designed to implement the Inherent Right of Self-Government.'<sup>32</sup>

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The plan is to use negotiation as a means of ensuring that ‘Aboriginal peoples have greater control over their lives... to restore dignity ... and empower them to become self-reliant.’

The intention is that, and I quote, ‘Aboriginal people, through their governments., will safeguard and develop their languages, cultures, identities, institutions and traditions and develop, maintain and strengthen their relationship with their lands, waters and environment so as to determine and control their development as peoples according to their own values and priorities and ensure the integrity of their societies.’<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, in the United States of America, four native Indian nations have been negotiating long-term Self-Government Compacts with the United States Government, hoping to regain the right to self-government they once enjoyed.<sup>34</sup> The central purpose of those Compacts is to improve the government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States in the areas of planning, funding and program operations.

Indigenous groups across the globe have been working for years to secure ‘systems of education which reflect, respect and embrace Indigenous cultural values, philosophies and ideologies: the same values, philosophies and ideologies which have shaped, nurtured and sustained Indigenous peoples for tens of thousands of years.’<sup>35</sup> Improved student outcomes have been achieved through ventures such as Hawaiian language immersion schools, the *Te Kotahitanga* project and Effective Teaching Profile in New Zealand, and the *What Works* project in Australia, – but all continue to be limited by inadequate numbers of Indigenous people employed in education, inadequate professional development of non-Indigenous teachers, and inadequate financial and systems support for the preparation of culturally-relevant curriculum materials.

While some groups take hope from the self-government arrangements they can secure with their mainstream governments, many are disillusioned by the ease with which governments can remove human rights just by amending laws, and they have therefore applied their energies to the international arena, in the hope that international recognition of their rights to self-determination, self-government and even sovereignty will pressure the governments of nation states to change their attitudes and practices.

In September 2007, the twenty year debate in the international community concerning evolving standards for the rights of Indigenous peoples came to fruition with the United Nations General Assembly adopting a *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.<sup>36</sup>

The vote in favour of adoption of the Declaration was 143 to 4 (with 11 abstentions), and sadly Australia was one of the 4 states to vote against it – perhaps because its actions in the Northern Territory fly in the face of the principles embodied in the Declaration.

Notwithstanding this, the Declaration now forms part of the international human rights regime, and, as the President of the Inuit peoples’ representative body said at the time, ‘the world’s governments and peoples are better positioned to judge the laws, policies and behaviours of all countries against the principles and standards set out in the Declaration.’<sup>37</sup>

Although the nation states of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand voted against adoption of the Declaration, it is anticipated that the pressure of standing aside from it will mount, and ultimately lead those nation states to negotiate with their respective Indigenous

nations a resumption of the self-governing sovereign status they once had, and to accept that Indigenous nations can co-exist with an existing sovereign nation state without threatening the dismemberment of that existing state.

I fervently hope that in Australia we will soon identify and support leaders who have the vision and talent to create a new partnership for the future between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – leaders like Barrack Obama, who said last month:

‘I’ll appoint an American Indian policy adviser to my senior White House staff to work with tribes, and host an annual summit at the White House with tribal leaders to come up with an agenda that works for tribal communities. That’s how we’ll make sure you have a seat at the table when important decisions are being made about your lives, about your nations and about your people. ...It also means guaranteeing a world-class education for all our children. I’ll work with tribal nations to reform No Child Left Behind and create opportunities for tribal citizens to become teachers so you can be free to educate your children the way you know best. We’ll increase funding for tribal colleges. And I will make Native language preservation and education a priority.’<sup>38</sup>

In this context of international change and increasing global pressure towards self-government and sovereignty for Indigenous peoples, Australian leaders should be working together to develop a formal statement recognising the integrity and autonomy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and agreeing the terms of a new relationship with current governments in which all parties are valued equally. At the 2020 summit, I called for constitutional reform, which would formally grant the autonomy that has been denied for so long.

This does not in any way relegate the importance of dealing with the immediate social issues facing our communities and families today. Constitutional change and immediate, appropriate action on the ground are complementary, not mutually exclusive. And so, regarding the future management of education, I repeat my opening remarks, calling upon mainstream education leaders in Australia to advocate and resource the four important changes:

- Engagement
- Cultural Competency
- Training and Employment of more Indigenous Australians, and
- Establishment of a national council of Indigenous educators.

About 40% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia is under 15 years of age.<sup>39</sup> If mainstream education doesn’t act now, for them, the gap will widen not close. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians must join together in the struggle to ensure that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the first Australians will not continue to be the last Australians.

We must look to the mainstream to build the capacity to deliver on the necessary outcomes. I will continue to believe, and to persist in educating and challenging the mainstream to work with our communities in a mutually respectful partnership.

And, to quote the President-elect of the United States of America, ‘...where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.’!<sup>40</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Horner, Jack *Seeking Racial Justice*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Government Service Provision, 2007 Report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, Foreword, Canberra 2007- Overview

<sup>3</sup> *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training*, 2006, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Rudd, Kevin *Speech Address to the National Press Club*, Canberra 27 August 2008

<sup>5</sup> Australian Labor Party, *Labor's Plan for Early Childhood*, Election 07 Policy Document – Labor aiming at “Halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement within a decade; Repeated in Council of Australian Governments *Communique*, 2 October 2008 [http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2008-10-02/index.cfm](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2008-10-02/index.cfm)

<sup>6</sup> Rudd, Kevin Apology tabled in Australian Parliament, 12 February 2008. Reported by ABC News at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/events/apology/text.htm>, accessed 12 November 2008<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gillard, Julia, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Social Inclusion, Deputy prime Minister, Media Release, *Closing the gap in Indigenous literacy and numeracy*, 8 October 2008

<sup>8</sup> General Assembly The United Nations, 1995 - as on website of World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium <http://www.win-hec.org/?q=node/112> on 24 November 2008

<sup>9</sup> *Indigenous Education: International Perspectives*, seminar organized by Commonwealth Department of Education Science and training and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Cairns, May 2007

<sup>10</sup> When on 29 August 2000 the Hon Tariana Turia, Associate Minister of Maori Affairs in New Zealand, spoke to the NZ Psychological Society Conference at Waikato University, Hamilton, she referred to writings on this topic, saying ‘Psychologists, Emeritus Professor James and Professor Jane Ritchie, likewise link colonisation with violence. Native American Psychologist Eduardo Duran suggests in referring to Native Americans that the colonial oppression suffered by Indigenous people inevitably wounds the soul. He also says that for any effective therapy to take place the historical context of generations of oppression since colonial contact needs to be articulated, acknowledged and understood. Professor Mason Durie identifies the onset of colonisation and the subsequent alienation and theft of the land as the beginning of Maori health issues that manifest themselves today. Issues, that have as a result of inter-generational systemic abuse, become culturally endemic. My challenge would be for the few Maori psychologists amongst you, to lead the discourse on that analysis. Following are some indicators of the results of post colonial trauma:

- Have a poor self-image.
- Have a tendency to self belittle.
- Tribe deprived of land by government dishonesty and theft.
- Parents/grandparents beaten for speaking their mother tongue.
- Members unable to identify with tribe.
- Identity now based on where they live (urban) and not on genealogy and ancestry.
- Fearful of imprisonment unless cousins are also incarcerated.
- Subjected to personal, institutional and cultural racism.
- Beat up spouse, children and siblings.’

<sup>11</sup> Halloran, Michael, Cultural Maintenance and trauma in Indigenous Australia, Paper presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Australia and New Zealand Law and History Society Conference, Murdoch University, Western Australia, July 2004; as on <http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v11n4/halloran114nf.html>

<sup>12</sup> (Australian) Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs Taskforce on Indigenous Education *Discussion Paper Achieving Educational Equality for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, April 2000

<sup>13</sup> Reyhner, J., Lee, H., and Gabbard, D A *Specialized Knowledge Base for Teaching American Indian and Alaska Native Students, Tribal College: The Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, Vol 4 No.4, 1993

<sup>14</sup> Buckskin, P; Hughes P; Teasdale, B *Connecting Cultures – Review of Victoria's Indigenous Education Strategies: Supporting Indigenous Students Through School*, January 2008

<sup>15</sup> Gillard, Julia Minister for Education, *John Button Memorial Speech*, Melbourne, 18 July 2008

<sup>16</sup> Farrah Tomazin, *The Age*, September 8, 2008, reporting that “ the Australian Council of the Deans of Education has warned that shortening teacher-training courses and recruiting underqualified graduates could do more harm than good.”

<sup>17</sup> Toohey, Paul *The Australian*, 15 October 2008

<sup>18</sup> McRae, David; Ainsworth, Geoff; Cumming, Jim; Hughes, Paul; Mackay, Tony; Price, Kaye; Rowland, Mike; Warhurst, Joan; Woods, Davina; & Zbar Vic. *What Works: Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students*, 2000, Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Canberra

<sup>19</sup> Queensland Department of Education, *Reading Recovery – Indigenous Text Research Report 2003*

<sup>20</sup> Toohey, Paul, *The Australian*, October 15, 2008 – asserts that Minister Macklin authorised the removal from the draft report reviewing the Northern Territory Intervention of a recommendation regarding respect for Indigenous languages. Research relating to Indigenous languages includes UNESCO, *Education in a Multilingual World: UNESCO Position Paper*, UNESCO, 2002. Also, the Alberta Education website displays research showing “promising practices” with First Nations, Metis and Inuit students, saying ‘ There is considerable research indicating the positive effects of Aboriginal bilingual and immersion programs on FNMI students. Several case studies in Alaskan communities with schools offering bilingual or bicultural classes revealed satisfied parents, excellent student attitudes and exceptional test scores (McBeath, McDiarmid, & Shepro, 1982). Stiles’ study (1997) of four Indigenous language programs in New Zealand and Hawaii also

demonstrated similar results. Students developed a greater sense of their heritage and identity. There was a decrease in student dropout rates and students performed better on tests. 'Schools that provide meaningful language and cultural programming for their FNMI students capitalize on a valuable positive practice supported by current literature. It is also evident in the literature that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined and school programming should reflect this reality.' In Australia, Dr Christine Nicholls and David P. Wilkins and many others attest to the many benefits of the bilingual approach, and Misty Adoniou, President of ACTA, the peak body for professional associations for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages is reported as saying 'We express profound dismay at the actions of the Northern Territory Minister for Education, Marion Scrymgour, to effectively end bilingual education in the Northern Territory.'

<sup>21</sup> Council of Australian Governments Communique 2 October 2008 -

[http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2008-10-02/index.cfm#child](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2008-10-02/index.cfm#child).

<sup>22</sup> Zubrick, Professor Steve, *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* undertaken by researchers at Perth's Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, March, 2006 <http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/media/481>

<sup>23</sup> McCain, M and Mustard, F, *Reversing the Brain Drain: Early Years Study*, Ontario Children's Secretariat, Toronto, 1999

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Teasdale and Whitelaw, 1981 – cited on pg 23 of Buckskin et al *Connecting Cultures*, 2008 cited above

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Buckskin, P; Hughes P; Teasdale, B op cit

<sup>28</sup> Brendan O'Connor, Minister for Employment Participation, *400 extra skilled Indigenous workers*, Media Release, 17 November 2008

<sup>29</sup> Gray, Dr Jan and Beresford, Dr Q, A '*formidable challenge*': *Australia's quest for equity in Indigenous education*, Australian Journal of Education, Vol 52, No. 2, 2008 – describes a range of interacting factors that undermine the sustainability of policies in Indigenous education.

<sup>30</sup> Gray, Dr Jan and Beresford, Dr Q, A '*formidable challenge*': *Australia's quest for equity in Indigenous education*, Australian Journal of Education, Vol 52, No. 2, 2008 - describe the trans-generational trauma that is the legacy of colonisation and its implications for the education of Indigenous children

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, Doug, *Towards Aboriginal Self-Government: an Update on Canadian Constitutional Reform*, Aboriginal Law Bulletin 1992

<sup>32</sup> Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Canada, *The Government of Canada's Approach to Implementation of the Inherent Right and the Negotiation of Aboriginal Self-Government*, Ottawa 1995 as on <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/al/ldc/ccl/pubs>

<sup>33</sup> Sanders Doug, op cit

<sup>34</sup> Ryser, Rudolph C, Centre for World Indigenous Studies, *Resuming Self-Government in Indian Country: From Imposed Government to Self-Rule Inside and Outside the United States of America*, ELAW Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law Vol 2 No. 1, April 1995 <http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v2n1/ryser21.html>

<sup>35</sup> *The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education* – a document prepared by a Taskforce commissioned by the National Organising Committee of the 1993 World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education to act as a stimulus to discussion by participants in the conference.

<sup>36</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,

'The UN Declaration was adopted by a majority of 144 states in favour, 4 votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and 11 abstentions (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Samoa and Ukraine). The Declaration establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of the world's indigenous peoples. The Declaration addresses both individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity; rights to education, health, employment, language, and others. It outlaws discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own priorities in economic, social and cultural development. The Declaration explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between States and indigenous people.'

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/declaration.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Simon, Mary President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), a representative body for Inuit people in Canada, speech tabling the ITK 2007-2008 Annual Report

<sup>38</sup> Obama, Barack, *A full partnership with Indian country*, published October 24, 2008 on <http://www.indiancountrytoday.com/opinion/33211544.html>

<sup>39</sup> *Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet*, 2007

[http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html\\_keyfacts/faq/faq\\_population/faq\\_population.htm#3](http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html_keyfacts/faq/faq_population/faq_population.htm#3)

<sup>40</sup> Barack, Obama, Acceptance Speech in Chicago, United States of America, as reported by the *Washington Post* on [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110500013\\_5.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/05/AR2008110500013_5.html), 5 November 2008