



Response to the Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010 - 2014

By Adult Learning Australia Inc

Adult Learning Australia Incorporated welcomes the opportunity to comment on this important draft Action Plan and commends MCEEDYA) for its commitment to the COAG) targets and the six principles for the delivery of programs and services to Indigenous Australians agreed under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. We also commend the inclusion of action around school and community partnerships, family literacy and Youth Connections case management for young people who have left school early.

Inclusion of Adult Learning Goals

Although the draft Action Plan is focused on school aged children, we believe that the interrelationship between the learning experiences of parents and that of their children is supported in such strength by current research, that to minimise its significance in this Action Plan is to undermine the chances of achieving many of its important goals. (Sylva, Evangelou & Brooks 2004, Kral and Falk 2004, Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabate's 2004, Evangelou & Sylva 2003, Brynner, 2001), Brooks et al 1997)

There is a significant capacity building challenge for the Australian government to ensure that Indigenous parents and other adult Indigenous community members have the skills that they need to partner with schools, service providers and government to close the educational outcomes gap for their children. The targets in the draft Action Plan will require a coordinated, holistic and concerted effort that has not thus far been achieved in most Indigenous communities. While some of the administrative instruments of this partnership (signed school and community agreements) are mentioned in the Action Plan, there are no specific adult learning goals. We would contend that these are essential for real partnerships to be built and sustained and for school and community agreements to be meaningful in order to result in the improvements in educational outcomes outlined in the Action Plan.

For community cooperation to be successful, adults need to be supported to engage with systems which may be foreign, complex, and in some instances associated with poor practices of the past. While research is limited into adult Indigenous learning and attitudes to schooling, Kral and Falk (2004) in their study of adult literacy practices in Central Australia found low levels of understanding of the purposes and potential of schools within the communities. Further that:

People have accepted the notion that formal schooling is important but, ...are not yet acting as agents of control, or discerning consumers. That is, they have difficulty determining whether the schooling system meets their individual needs, or the aims and aspirations of the community as a whole. (Kral and Falk, 2004 pp 27)

While the draft Action Plan acknowledges that Indigenous children don't learn in isolation from their families and communities, there is a gap between this acknowledgement and a set of adult learning targets which will ensure that Indigenous parents and community members will have the necessary support to be “agents of control” and “discerning consumers” of the education offered to their children.

The Adult English Language and Literacy Challenge

The draft Action Plan makes enormous demands on Indigenous parents and communities to engage with and lead learning plans, engage with school and post-secondary education systems, train as teachers and school leaders in greater numbers etc. These challenges require a range of specific literacy skills which many Indigenous adults cannot be assumed to have developed either because their own participation in schooling was interrupted or because of the unequal relationship between their own parents and the Western educational systems in which they engaged as children. While the action plan is commendable in its desire to work cooperatively with Indigenous parents, a long term, whole of community approach which recognises the intergenerational nature of educational advantage and disadvantage is not strong in its targets.

Patrick Dodson, amongst others, has pointed out that education and training is a key area where Indigenous communities can exercise a higher level of control of their economic and social development than other areas such as political participation or market engagement. However he also cautions that the task is complex and long term.

“Communities can invest in their human capital through their socialisation practices, and by actively engaging in education and training. But the process of socialisation has been severely disrupted in many Indigenous families. Moreover, the structural, funding and health obstacles to full engagement in education and training are entrenched, and the payoffs of engagement can take generations to appear.” (Dodson and Smith, 2003, pp10)

Like all areas of Western civic society, the schooling system comes with its own set of literacies. It can't be assumed that Indigenous adults with strong general English language and literacy skills will be conversant with the literacies of the schooling system, much less those Indigenous adults for whom English is a second, or third language. As Beddie and Forster point out:

An individual's capacity to engage in civic society can be constrained by inadequate skills in some literacies. This is not confined to those with limited reading and writing ability. Particular circumstances—for example, making a major financial decision or a legal matter—may require people to master more specialised literacies to enable full participation and understanding. (Beddie and Forster, 2005, pp 4)

Nor can it be assumed that schools and other educational systems have the language and cultural knowledge of Indigenous literacies to overcome this divide. Adult Learning Australia would like to see goals and targets around this adult learning challenge.

Non-formal Learning.

The Plan confines itself for the most part to formal learning through school and post-school systems. The exception is the important inclusion of the role of Youth Connections. However, people with minimal school education and poor literacy and numeracy skills often lack confidence in their ability to learn in formal settings and can, consequently become disengaged from learning. Informal and non-formal learning options for young people and their parents can often play an important role in maintaining English language literacy skills while young people are outside the formal schooling system and can increase the chances of re-engagement.

“Disengaged learners may have useful skills but are unable to articulate them and build on them. Informal learning can be a potent means for re-engaging disengaged learners. For the disengaged learner and worker, less formal means of skills development can be an effective route back to education and training and can lead to building sustainable skills.” (Halliday-Wynns and Beddie, 2009 pp 4)

There are a wide range of organisations and practices that have been identified through research as sites of adult learning and therefore, nurturers of intergenerational literacy. Libraries and neighbourhood houses are obvious primary examples, the provision of which should be considered in any Indigenous education plan. In addition, Golding and colleagues identify community organisations such as Men’s Sheds, football clubs and volunteer fire brigades as primary sites of adult learning for men in regional locations. (Golding, et al 2007), while Kral (Yr) identifies youth centres, media centres and arts projects in remote Indigenous communities as primary sites of adult learning for Indigenous young people. Arnott suggests that an unfortunate side effect of the development of the vocational education and training system in the Northern Territory was the reduction in provision of community based non-formal adult education (Arnott, 2003).

We would contend that community based adult learning which skills adults for civic as well as vocational participation is essential to creating communities of both children and adults with high levels of English language literacy alongside Indigenous cultural literacies. And further, that this combination is a pre-requisite to closing the gap between Indigenous educational outcomes and those of non-Indigenous Australians.

Infrastructure

Finally, there is no mention of the provision of physical infrastructure in the Action Plan. Haberkorn and Bamford (2000) mapped the distribution of a wide range of services across Australia including education: primary schools, secondary schools, TAFE and universities. They found that services were significantly more likely to be missing in objectively remote locations and communities where Indigenous Australians comprised a significant proportion of the total population. Those states

where remoteness and lack of education services overlapped most were Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. (These three states also happen to have the most limited provision of adult and community education.)

As recent confirmation, Golding, Brown, Foley & Harvey (2009) in a major study of men's learning in Western Australia for the State Department of Education and Training found evidence that the significant learning and wellbeing needs of communities with large, adult male, Aboriginal populations were not being appropriately provided. They concluded that 'It is shameful that in 2009 the only public access computer available in the large and relatively isolated city of Carnarvon is for limited or paid use within a public library or tourist information centre.' (Golding et al, 2009) Their other 2009 research for National Seniors Australia found a similar situation in Ceduna in South Australia.

Conclusion

Indigenous children's learning is inextricably linked to that of their families and communities. English language literacy, civic, wellbeing and vocational skills are as much social as instructed practices. While we commend much of the Draft Action Plan, a stronger commitment to lifelong learning principles and the inclusion of lifelong learning targets would strengthen families and communities to support their children to achieve the important targets of the Plan.

Complex, whole of government approaches to whole of life questions are not easy. However, if ever there were a challenge that required a concerted cooperative effort from policy makers, the education of the next generation of Indigenous young people would have to be it.

Recommendations:

- 1) That the Indigenous Action Plan includes a review of the adult learning opportunities in communities with high numbers of indigenous school aged children, followed by substantial investment in community based adult learning in key areas.
- 2) That the Indigenous Action Plan includes a review of the educational infrastructure in areas where Indigenous young people learn, followed by investment in the physical infrastructure required to bring schools and learning centres up to an acceptable standard.
- 3) That the Indigenous Action Plan includes investment in community learning infrastructure such as libraries, adult learning centres, youth media centres, men's sheds, etc
- 4) That a national adult learning program that can be locally customised be developed to support Indigenous adults to take active part in school systems.
- 5) That Indigenous communities be supported to develop localised cross cultural awareness and Indigenous literacy induction programs for all staff working in

schools with substantial amounts of Indigenous students and that completion of the program form a pre-requisite to employment in such schools.

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