
Submission to The Northern Territory Indigenous Education Review

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This submission is in response to the draft Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory.¹ At the outset of this submission, we wish to place on the record that the four week consultation phase for this second phase of the review is totally inadequate. However, given the magnitude of the changes proposed by the review, we feel compelled to respond within the allotted time frame, but are consequently unable to engage with the report to the level of detail we would like. Similarly, the timeline for consultation during phase 1 of the review was grossly inadequate, given the cultural and logistical difficulties such a task involves. The long term ramifications of the recommendations in this review, if implemented, warrant proper and extensive consultation with the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory. This basic tenet should be addressed as a first order issue.

¹ http://www.education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/36205/Indigenous-Education-Review_DRAFT.pdf

GENERAL COMMENTS

The overview of the report begins with a sentiment with which we very much agree –

‘The starting point for this review is that the children now in our schools, and those yet to arrive, deserve better. The review has taken as a non-negotiable that there must be an explicit focus on improving unacceptably low outcomes for Indigenous children’ (Wilson 2014:7).

Indeed, on the face of things, our consistent inability to educate such a small minority of the Australian population beggars belief.

However, we fundamentally disagree with the redress this report proposes, particularly in Chapters Four (2014:30) and Eight (2014:70) and believe it fails to adequately consider the research base or to properly consult and represent the diversity of Indigenous views and aspirations for the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern Territory. In fact, the voices of the Indigenous education community are notably absent in the report.

At a macro level, the report suffers from historical blindness and presentism. It fails to acknowledge the complex relationship between the delivery of education in the Northern Territory and the ideological struggles that have permeated Indigenous Affairs at the national level. The policy environment of the NT has always been directly affected by these larger political battles, and education has been particularly susceptible to their influence.² This has led to constant change at the chalk face and has constantly influenced pedagogic approaches. These systemic failings have been compounded by gross under-funding, which can only be considered as wilful neglect by Territory education providers and all tiers of government. For example, Taylor’s 2010 analysis of funding to the community of Wadeye found that students were receiving approximately half of the funding that was being provided for their non-Indigenous peers in Darwin.³ Similarly, the recent release of a cabinet document in the Northern Territory shows that Indigenous students in remote communities were still being denied access to high school in their own areas, 20 years after the government of the day ignored its own recommendations.⁴ The report makes no mention of the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s Inquiry into Rural, Remote and Indigenous Education Provision* in 2000⁵, and makes selective use of the *NT Education Secondary Review* (Ramsey 2003)⁶, both of which were scathing of the NT governments of the day. The report also fails to acknowledge the *Bringing Them Home* report’s explicit discussion of the role a lack of secondary education provision has had in the loss and emotional turmoil experienced by dislocated Indigenous families (HREOC 1997:485-491).

² See W. Fogarty and R.G. Schwab (2012) *Indigenous Education: Experiential Learning and Learning through Country*, CAEPR Working Paper No. 80, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, Canberra.

³ J.Taylor (2010) *Demography as destiny: Schooling, work and Aboriginal population change at Wadeye*, CAEPR Working Paper No. 64, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, Canberra.

⁴ J. Ferrari (2012) *Indigenous students denied high school in their lands, cabinet papers show*. *The Australian Newspaper*, January 3.

⁵ HREOC, ‘Education Access: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education’ August 2000. Available at - http://www.education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/36205/Indigenous-Education-Review_DRAFT.pdf

⁶ Ramsey, Gregor et al. December 2003. *Report on Future Directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory*. Northern Territory Government and Charles Darwin University.

Furthermore, the report fails to understand the political economy of the NT and where education fits within this. The desire for commonwealth resources targeted to Indigenous students to be redirected or sequestered in the major centres has long been an imperative of successive NT governments. We recommend the 1999 NT education report into the *Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program* review be explored with this in mind.

Worryingly, there is also a complete absence of understanding of the role that kin, identity and country play in the educational decisions and aspirations remote Aboriginal people make. There is no consideration of the vast literature detailing a demonstrative want by Aboriginal people in remote parts of the NT to stay on their lands, learn their own languages and facilitate their own development aspiration. Nor is there an acceptable level of engagement with the evidence regarding the learning that can be achieved by students in their first language (see Fogarty and Kral 2012, HRSCATSIA 2012).^{7 8} Rather, there is an assumption in the review about what is best for people in the 'bush'. History has taught us that such approaches are doomed to failure.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Given the short time we have to respond, we have chosen to make some specific comment on two of the approaches the report recommends: namely, the provision of secondary education and the deliberate creation of two separate schooling systems.

1. SECONDARY EDUCATION PROVISION

We certainly understand the unique demographic and geographic challenges the Northern Territory faces in providing a successful and high quality secondary education for Indigenous students in remote areas. We also understand that there are scarce resources with which to provide these services. We also concur with the report's assessment that the education being provided contemporaneously is not good enough. However, we seriously contest the thinking behind the statement that 'it makes little sense to go on throwing scarce resources at the unequal struggle to provide secondary education in bush schools with tiny numbers of attending secondary students' (Wilson 2014:76). The redress to this situation is not to withdraw services to areas where it suits the system to provide them. There is a perverse logic to such thinking and it comes as a result of not engaging in the socio-political history surrounding the provision of education in remote parts of the NT. The belated provision of remote secondary education in the last decade is, in systemic terms, in its infancy. It has struggled against a plethora of constraints and challenges, yet the failure after such a short time, for what is surely an intergenerational project, to turn around decades of neglect and deeply seated socio-cultural differences, is hardly surprising. Perseverance, better resourcing and pluralism in practice with real engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is the only way forward. The withdrawal of services to provide for fictionalised educational futures is certainly not.

⁷ The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Affairs, Canberra, 2012 'Our Land, Our Languages - Language Learning in Indigenous Communities' http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=/atsia/languages2/report.htm

⁸ Fogarty W. and Kral I (2011), Indigenous Language Education in Remote Communities http://caepr.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/topical/TI2011_11_Fogarty_Kral_language.pdf

In this regard, one of the report's key mechanisms of redress is the establishment of residential facilities. The review is to be commended on noting that its -

'analysis and data gathering has demonstrated that while some boarding options have generated a degree of success, there are continuing difficulties with student attendance, engagement and retention. There were many anecdotal accounts of students from bush locations being overawed by their first contact with a large school. They quickly felt lost in its social and educational environment, and either reacted against the school with behaviour that schools find difficult to manage, or choosing to leave the school early in their time there' (Wilson 2014:77-78).

The report also acknowledges boarding school and residential college options for remote Aboriginal people work only for a very small percentage of students. However, the report chooses to ignore a plethora of evidence, stretching back to the 1960s, that demonstrably shows that this approach is not a developmentally, educationally or socially productive model for the majority of Aboriginal students from remote regions (see, for example, Sommerlad 1975).⁹ While time precludes a great deal more comment on this, the key point is that the choice to access residential and boarding facilities as an educational option should be exactly that: a choice. Furthermore, such a choice should be made as an educationally and socially informed decision by parents and community members. It should not be mandated by what education administrators believe is the best for Indigenous students, nor should it be made as a result of the withdrawal of alternative services. The report's recommendation that the use of residential facilities become a core component of education for Indigenous students should be subject to *serious* public and academic debate before being implemented. There is no engagement in the report with the following question: if students are not currently attending local secondary schools, how will they be persuaded to attend boarding schools. And if they do not, what then? Are they to be consigned to a lesser educational model based in Vocational Provision? Is this acceptable? If so, to whom?

2. THE (RE)CREATION OF TWO SYSTEMS

We would also like to make some specific comment on Chapter Four, which begins by noting that 'One of the striking outcomes of the review's analysis is the understanding that Government schooling in the Northern Territory consists, in effect, of two education systems.' (Wilson 2014:30). However, the report fails to adequately situate this statement in its proper socio-political context, as discussed above. If it had done so, perhaps the recommendation would be to *end* the structural disadvantage that has been perpetuated by the intergenerational failure to provide adequate education for Aboriginal students in the 'bush'. This would begin by *ending* any situation that allowed for a lesser or double standards of service provision for these students. However, the report has chosen instead to recommend the (re)creation of two distinct systems of education in the NT.

The deliberate creation of two distinct education systems in the NT is a dangerously short-sighted initiative. The poor cousin of mainstream education, a maths and English driven community school, will *never* receive the attention of mainstream northern suburbs administrators that it deserves, nor will it engender any real community support. Furthermore, the evidence that such an approach will not work can be found in the fact that it has been tried before. The deliberate creation of two systems of schooling can be seen to have existed in the 1960s throughout the Territory. As Harry Guise noted in 1967:

⁹ Sommerlad, E. (1975). Kormilda, the way to tomorrow? A study in Aboriginal education. ANU, Canberra.

*'Aboriginal education is seen as part of a phased program, with students moving from the special schools of settlements, missions and pastoral properties' into hostels with other children for post-primary education, for apprenticeships, for special training as a teaching or health assistant, or into a foster home, or... attached to an employer as a ward-in-training'. The third stage was seen as working 'in the community', 'to earn his living in his chosen vocation, working and living side by side with white Australians... Now he faces the full impact of our society as an integral economic and social unit in that society.' With 'the assistance and encouragement of the community and of welfare officers, [he should]... be ready... for the full exercise of his responsibilities and duties as a citizen.'*¹⁰

It would seem to us that a recommendation that would see a deliberate (re)creation of such an approach would likely have similar results to the contemporaneous outcomes that the report is so eager to redress.

An alternative to this is to acknowledge the need for extra support in these extremely difficult and complex environments. Resourcing issues and service provision problems need to be tackled systematically through staged rebuilding with commonwealth assistance. The NT / Federal relationship needs to be the platform for redevelopment rather than accepting that 'we don't have enough and can't do it!' There is a palpable need to recreate a functional and honest relationship with the commonwealth based on what is needed, to provide proper education in the bush. This should include, as a starting point, a real and lengthy consultation with the people this will affect most – the remote Aboriginal population of the NT.

CONCLUSION

We acknowledge that our comments at this point in time are necessarily broad, and that the issues the report raises require in-depth consideration. Indeed, there are very many aspects of the report we have been unable to fully comment upon due to time constraints. This includes some aspects of the report we consider to be well done. With this in mind, we offer the following initial recommendations for the review team's consideration:

¹⁰ Giese, H.C. (1967) The Native Welfare Programme in the Northern Territory, typescript, Appendix 3, NTRS 1043/P1, Box 3, Northern Territory Archives Service.

1. That a proper consultation period be recommended and properly funded;
2. That the report recommend that the Indigenous Affairs Minister, through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, completely review funding need and relationship between commonwealth and NT;
3. That the demonstrative need and right of communities to have the option to educate children on their own lands and in their own language be acknowledged in the report;
4. That a sophisticated cultural induction model for teachers be recommended;
5. That a proper policy history be included in the report;
6. That the review recommends a completely revised timeframe for the execution of its original Terms of Reference.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR WILLIAM (BILL) FOGARTY

Dr Bill Fogarty is a Research Fellow at NCIS. Bill has a PhD from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at The Australian National University, on the topic *Learning Through Country: Competing Knowledge Systems and Place Based Pedagogy*, and a Masters in Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) from the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences. Dr Fogarty has lived and worked in remote communities for over 15 years and has extensive experience in research on Indigenous education, employment policy and service provision. He has qualifications in anthropology, communications, social research methods, education and applied development. He has worked on projects with a diverse range of organisations concerned with Indigenous Australia such as the Northern Land Council and the Northern Territory Government and Prime Minister and Cabinet. He has been a recipient of an Australian Research Council scholarship and has conducted high level research on Indigenous policy development, employment, education, land and sea management and equitable service provision. Bill has a particular interest in the relationship between Indigenous and Western knowledge and the development of sustainable education and employment pathways in remote communities, as well as the role of education and knowledge in society more generally.

PROFESSOR MICK DODSON

Professor Mick Dodson is a member of the Yawuru peoples – the traditional owners of land and waters in the Broome area of the southern Kimberley region of Western Australia. He is Director of the NCIS at The Australian National University and Professor of Law at the ANU College of Law. Mick Dodson was Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner with the Human Rights Commission. He served as Commissioner from April 1993 to January 1998. From August 1988 to October 1990, Mick was Counsel assisting the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. He is Chair of the ANU Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Committee and a member

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of the Board of the Lingiari Foundation. He served on the board of Reconciliation Australia and was, until recently, its Co-Chair. He was also a founding member and chairman of the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre. Professor Dodson has been a prominent advocate on land rights and other issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as a vigorous advocate of the rights and interests of indigenous peoples around the world. He was the Co-Deputy Chair of the Technical Committee for the 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous People and was chairman of the United Nations Advisory Group for the Voluntary Fund for the Decade of Indigenous Peoples. He served for 5 years as a member of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Indigenous Voluntary Fund and, in January 2005, commenced a 3-year appointment as a member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. He was subsequently reappointed for a further 3 years to December 2010. Mick participated in the crafting of the text of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), and the Inter-sessional Working Group of the Human Rights Commission which was adopted overwhelmingly in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly. From September 2011 to February 2012 inclusive, Professor Dodson was at Harvard University where he was the Malcolm Fraser & Gough Whitlam Harvard Chair in Australian Studies and a Visiting Professor, Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. In 2009, Professor Mick Dodson was named Australian of the Year by the National Australia Day Council.