



IKC101 Indigenous Cultures, Histories and Contemporary Realities

Module 3: Contemporary Realities

Topic 2: Indigenous Australian Education and Employment

Module 3 introduces you to a number of issues that impact upon or are of concern to contemporary Indigenous Australians. Week 11 investigates Indigenous education and employment.

This topic of study is focused on achieving the following **outcome**:

- outline a range of contemporary issues which impact upon Indigenous Australian peoples and communities

This topic is divided into the following **sections**:

- Indigenous experiences of education in a Western education system
- Education for human rights and social justice
- Education and Criminal Justice/Health/Otitis Media
- Indigenous Employment
- Welfare Colonialism

Checklist

- ☐ Read *Module 3 Topic 2*
- ☐ Read *Required Readings* x 2
- ☐ Optional: Read *Optional Readings* x 4



Indigenous experiences of education in a Western education system

Key idea

Historically, education systems have been places of marginalisation and negative experiences for Indigenous peoples.

The Australian education system has historically had a very poor relationship with Indigenous Australians. As we saw in the previous Module, education was key to assimilation policies. Education has been used as a way to implement broader government and societal expectations about the place of Indigenous Australians within broader Australian society.

As we have learned throughout this session, at different times, policies have been implemented to exclude Indigenous children from education, offer them only a basic education which assumed that Indigenous children were of low intelligence or incapable of learning, or worked to train Indigenous people for specific economic roles in Australian society, such as domestic service or basic trades.

Indigenous people have often, however, also had difficult experiences in contemporary educational settings, which reflect Western forms of knowledge and do not generally affirm the experiences and cultures of Indigenous students. This difficulty is reflected in the levels of educational attainment for Indigenous Australians measured in 2006:

Indigenous peoples aged 15 years and over were still half as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to have completed school to Year 12 in 2006 (23% compared with 49%). They were also twice as likely to have left school at Year 9 or below (34% compared with 16%). These relative differences have remained unchanged since 2001....

Although there have been continued improvements in the educational attainment of Indigenous Australians in recent years, levels of attainment remain below those of non-Indigenous Australians. Non-Indigenous people were twice as likely as Indigenous peoples to have a non-school qualification in 2006 (53% compared with 26%). Non-Indigenous people were more than four times as likely to have a Bachelor Degree or above (21% compared with 5%) and twice as likely to have an Advanced Diploma or Diploma (9% compared with 4%) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008).

Although equity in educational participation and attainment has still not been reached, there have been some recent improvements. Figures from the 2011 Census show that:

- 56% of 3 to 5 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attended pre-school or primary school, up from 53% in the 2006 Census
- 61% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 to 17 years were attending secondary school, up from 53% in 2006
- more than one in three (37%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over had attained Year 12 or equivalent and/or Certificate II or higher qualification, up from 30% in 2006.

Still, only one-quarter (25%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over reported Year 12 or equivalent as the highest year of school completed, compared with about half (52%) of non-Indigenous people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Optional reading

- Crawford, E. (1993). Yantabulla. In *Over my Tracks*. Ringwood, Vic: Penguin. pp.12-41. Available via Subject Reserve.
- AECG Partnership Agreement 2010-2020 – Available [here](#)
- Aboriginal Education Policy – An Introductory Guide – Available [here](#)
- NSW DEC Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2009-2012 - Available [here](#)



Education for human rights and social justice

Key idea

Education can play a key role in the promotion of human rights and the achievement of social justice

While Indigenous experiences in the education system have historically been very negative, the education sector is now far more aware of the importance of including and affirming Indigenous students and Indigenous communities in education at all levels. The following discussion is intended to encourage you to reflect on the role that education can play in promoting human rights and social justice.

Previously we learnt about human rights, and international mechanisms to help protect and promote the human rights of all people. Education can also, however, play a vital role in “activating” human rights, as Newell and Offord suggest:

Activating human rights is... a crucial dimension of an education that values an understanding of what it means to be human, to be a part of society and connected to others, regardless of how similar or different those others might be. Human Rights brings us face to face with what we do as educators in a profound way. If our curricula are guided by human rights principles and practices, then we are engaged in making a society that is humane, democratic, socially inclusive and collaborative. Education is the primary space we know in which human potentiality has its greatest opportunity to flourish (2008, 9).

Education, additionally, plays a very important role in promoting social justice. Education is the key that unlocks the doors to employment and income opportunities. This in turn provides the key to better health and housing and the ability to practice self-determination over one's life.

There are complex relationships between different social justice indicators which mean that each impacts on the other. A lack of education is associated with issues related to health and connection

to the criminal justice system as outlined below. On the other hand, improving educational outcomes has the potential to have significant positive impacts on other social justice indicators. The role that teachers play has the potential to make a real impact on the lives of Indigenous Australians.



Education and Criminal Justice

Low educational achievement of Indigenous Australians has been implicated in the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody and juvenile detention and is considered not only a factor in the likelihood of Aboriginal people offending, but also a factor in the likelihood of their re-offending (RCIADIC, 1991).

It is well-known that arrest and incarceration rates for Indigenous people are many times those for European Australians... From this Committee's viewpoint another statistic is just as serious and revealing. The experience of arrest reduces the probability of attending school by 26 per cent and 18 per cent for males and females respectively. Living in households where others have been arrested reduces the probability of attending school by an additional 23 per cent and 20 per cent for males and females respectively... (Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education, 2000, 53-55).

The Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education (2000) also, however, highlighted the importance of education to reducing Indigenous contact with the criminal justice system.

The Royal Commission found that non-participation in school was likely to result in young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being introduced to the juvenile justice system at an early age. [Hence] improving the educational opportunities of Indigenous children and adults was seen as one way of trying to reduce the high incarceration rate of Indigenous people (Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education, 2000, 53-55).



Education and Health

The evidence from around the world is very striking: with the addition of a single extra year of education in a population, the infant mortality rate drops by between seven and ten per cent. This has been found throughout the Third World. It has been found historically in a series of mortality data in relation to Western countries.

One of the most substantiated findings in the literature of the social determinants of health is that one of the major factors influencing child mortality is the level of education amongst their parents. There is also a great deal of research which shows that education has a positive effect on the health of people themselves and on the health of their children (Dr Bob Boughton cited in Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education, 2000, 140).



Education and Otitis Media

Many reports detail the fact that health problems seriously affect the education of many Indigenous children through absenteeism or impaired ability to learn. One of the most common is the middle ear disease, otitis media, commonly known as 'glue-ear'. This disease is commonly found in poverty-stricken third world countries and begins with an infection in the middle ear causing the build-up of thick fluid. This build-up causes temporary and fluctuating deafness and can result in the eardrum bursting, releasing the fluid. The constant inflammation and perforation of the eardrum can cause permanent damage and as a consequence, some children may be profoundly deaf by the time they reach school age. The Senate Inquiry into Indigenous Education (2000) found that on any given day an average of half to two-thirds of Indigenous children suffered otitis media related hearing loss in one or both ears. The Northern Territory Department of Education's review of Indigenous education (1999) found that over 90% of Aboriginal children in Year 4 at one NT bush school had no eardrums due to the damaging effects of chronic otitis media.



Checking for otitis media.
Source: www.menzies.edu.au

The importance of hearing difficulties in relation to learning ability can be best understood when one considers the reality that school based learning depends upon a child's ability to listen. In addition to the primary difficulties caused by hearing loss, if a child's ability to learn is further affected by their inability to hear correctly, they are hugely disadvantaged in learning to read. People who have not mastered reading skills in the early years of schooling will find all subsequent school-based learning a struggle. Hence, learning disabilities are compounded. For Indigenous children who speak English as a second, third or fourth language, hearing difficulties can magnify the complexities of learning to master a new language at school.

Reflection

Think about these things:

- What are the relationships between Indigenous knowledge and Western education systems?
- Why might non-Indigenous people have provided lesser standards of education for Indigenous people?
- How does a poor quality education impact on your life?



Indigenous Employment

Key idea

Indigenous Australians experience significant labour market disadvantage relative to other Australians.

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conditions under which Aboriginal people have lived during the last two hundred years to a large extent determine their position in the economic system today, and many of the barriers to equitable and equal participation are difficult to remove. This disadvantage manifests itself in terms of lower incomes, lower employment rates, lower labour force participation rates and higher unemployment rates. In 2006, 57% of the Indigenous population aged between 15 and 64 "was participating in the labour force compared with 76% of the non-Indigenous population. Labour force participation rates for Indigenous peoples declines with remoteness, with a 57% participation rate in major cities compared with 46% in very remote areas" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). In 2009, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians was 19% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Indigenous people also have much lower rates of household income than the non-Indigenous population: "In the 2006 Census, the mean equivalised gross household income for Indigenous persons was \$460 per week, which amounted to 62% of the rate for non-Indigenous Australians (\$740 per week)" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008).

There has been little improvement in this area over the past seven years. In the 2011 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recorded:

- a labour force [participation rate](#) of 51%, the same as in the 2006 Census

- an [employment to population ratio](#) of 42%, down from 43% in 2006
- an [unemployment rate](#) of 17%, up from 16% in 2006

In 2011, about half (51%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over were participating in the [labour force](#). The participation rate for non-Indigenous people aged 15 years and over was 13 percentage points higher (64%) than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ((Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Required reading

Norris, R. (1998). Human Rights and Wrongs, Indigenous Employment, Past, Present and Future. *Social Alternatives*, 17(2).

<http://ezproxy.csu.edu.au/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=24230138&site=ehost-live>



Welfare Colonialism

Poverty and welfare dependency lie at the heart of many of the problems Indigenous Australians face today. This dependency is a contemporary legacy of the historical process of colonisation which resulted in Aboriginal dispossession and subordination to the state. Hence, central to the process of colonisation has been the denial of Aboriginal people's human right to self-determination and the forced dependency of Aboriginal peoples on the welfare of the coloniser.

Aboriginal people lost access to the means to practice the subsistence economy which had provided Aboriginal societies with full employment for at least 50,000 years. They were progressively subject to policies of control and segregation and denied access to a quality education. Aboriginal employment was subject to government approval and generally restricted to the rural industry and domestic servitude. As wages were commonly paid in meagre rations or, as in the case of the children forcibly removed from their families and later placed in positions of domestic servitude, a nominal sum was paid into a 'trust fund' controlled by government officials. The awarding of equal wages to Aboriginal people in the late 1960s was accompanied by a downturn in the rural economy. This downturn resulted in a significant rise in Aboriginal unemployment and movement of Aboriginal individuals and families to the fringes of urban centres in search of work. Employment was generally hard to obtain and often required a higher level of education and skills than many Aboriginal applicants possessed. Consequently, poverty became entrenched and reliance upon government and social security payments grew.

Many authors and Aboriginal spokespeople argue that the process of colonisation is manifest today in the continued domination of Aboriginal people by the Australian state through welfare dependency and the government's bureaucratic control of resources and processes of Aboriginal organisations. This process is called welfare colonialism (Beckett, 1998). The issue of welfare dependency has been hotly debated yet the need remains to build a strong economic foundation



from which Aboriginal individuals and communities can transcend the constraints of welfare colonialism and dependency.

Required reading

Hughes, H. & Hughes, M. (2010, April 29). Education fails indigenous kids. *The Australian*. Available at:

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/education-fails-indigenous-kids/story-e6frg6zo-1225859601205>

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009), *Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey 2009*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. Available here:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/6287.0~2009~Chapter~Unemployment>

Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2012). *Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2011.*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. Available here: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2076.0>

Australian Human Rights Commission, (2008). *A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia*. Sydney, Australian Human Rights Commission. Available here: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/statistics/index.html#Heading342

Beckett, J. (1988). Aboriginality, citizenship and the nation state. In Beckett, J. (ed), *Aborigines and the state in Australia*.(p.4). Social Analysis 24, Special Issue Series, AGPS, Canberra.

Northern Territory Department of Education (1999). *Learning Lessons: An Independent review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Committee, (2000). *Katu Kalpa – Report on the Inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

You have finished Module 3 Topic 2!