

The Cuban ‘Yes, I Can’ Adult Literacy Campaign in Aboriginal Australia: An Alternative to Commodified Educationⁱ

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Abstract

This article focuses on the implementation of the Cuban ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign in Indigenous Australian communities in north west New South Wales (NSW). It examines the interplay between empowerment, disempowerment and commodification in education in Australia in order to assess what new elements the Cuban ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign has brought to the education of Indigenous Australians. In doing so, this article has considered why and how the Cuban approach to education is fundamentally different to the Australian approach and whether or not the Cuban approach is more appropriate for responding to Indigenous disempowerment in Australia.

Keywords: *Development; Commodification; Empowerment; Literacy; Aboriginal Australia*

Introduction

Literacy can empower a person to engage in economic and social development, to express their own thoughts and experiences for others to read, and to understand the progress of history and their place in it (Limage, 1987). In Australia in 2012, the national illiteracy rate was 3.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). However, this number rises dramatically to between 40% and 65% for adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Ray, 2014).

Indigenous Australians are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who first owned and inhabited the land which we now call Australia. This overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians among those people who experience low levels of literacy reveals a systemic failure of the Australian education system, which is increasingly dominated by commodification, and is a symptom of more than two hundred years of colonial oppression and Indigenous disempowerment (Kral, 2009).

On the other side of the world, the small island of Cuba is well known for its socialist revolution, which started in 1959. Cuba has become a pioneer in the field of adult literacy education with its development of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign model. The literacy campaign, better known as “Yo, Sí Puedo” in the Spanish speaking world, has been implemented in thirty countries, and has helped more than ten million people to learn to read and write in their local language (Valdés Abreu, 2015). Based on the principles and practical experience that Cuba has developed since the Cuban revolution in 1959, the “Yes, I Can” campaign model uses an approach to learning that prioritises empowerment through community mobilisation. In 2012, the Cuban “Yes, I Can” campaign model was adopted for use in several outback Aboriginal communities in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia.

This article will first outline broad definitions of education and empowerment. These concepts are inextricably linked; thus, a brief discussion of educational empowerment is necessary in order to understand the success of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign. Next, this article will briefly consider Indigenous disempowerment in Australia and the process of commodification of education. It will then describe the origins of the Cuban “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign before reviewing the three-phase method used by the campaign. It will articulate how the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign represents a less commodified approach because it does not engage with market place competition and because it places a higher value on human dignity than human capital.

Educational Empowerment

A central concept in this article is empowerment, a concept that has a relationship to education. This article will use a broad working definition of empowerment as a state of being that is characterised by the ability to self-determine the direction and content of one’s own life (Page and Czuba, 1999). This ability to self-determine is linked to the existence of social and historical divisions, which form the basis for human identity. An important step in the development of empowerment involves the recognition and affirmation of the historical, material and social experiences of all socio-economic and cultural groups.

Conversely, disempowerment is characterised by a lack of control over the direction and content of one’s own life. Many people and groups of people are disempowered due to their membership of social, economic or political groups, which can lead to them being discriminated against and therefore having a real or perceived lack of control over the direction of their life (Rappaport, 1984).

Education can be used to tell or retell history using either diverse or selective perspectives and to either guide the thought processes of individuals towards an empowering view of their place in the world or guide them to a lesser understanding of their place in the world. In this way, education is important because of its role in the psychological development of a person which, in turn, drives and shapes the behaviour and interactions people have with their world.

Empowerment for a whole society can happen when the ‘other’ is not merely represented, but in fact, is allowed to represent itself. Through this process, all people, whether dominant or ‘other’, have the potential to experience a political awakening, because they are given the opportunity to question their own socio-economic placement and to challenge traditional dialogues that divide society. In the case of literacy, learning to write a text message, pay a bill, fill out a form or vote in elections allows people to take charge of their life in a day to day sense and therefore, even a small increase in the level of literacy of an illiterate adult can be profoundly empowering.

It is worth noting that the attainment of basic education, even if it does achieve ideological or psychological empowerment for its students, does not necessarily immediately result in self-determination. Literacy alone cannot overcome the social, economic and political barriers that have worked to prevent adults from learning literacy in the past. It is, however, a necessary first step. Ultimately, no matter what their background is, people want to be valued for the knowledge they have and the experience they can bring to the table (Herbert, 2012).

Indigenous Disempowerment and Commodification in Australia

Since the invasion of Australia, British colonial interests have dominated the culture of education in Australia and, to this day, Indigenous Australians are suffering the effects of ongoing intergenerational trauma inflicted upon their

families, in part through education policy (Hickling-Hudson, 2014). Although Australian governments and other powerful institutions have used and continue to use rhetoric of social inclusion and ‘closing the gap’, it is difficult to reconcile this dialogue with ongoing racist policies in Indigenous affairs (Hunter, 2009). Historically, in an effort to ‘smooth the dying pillow’ of Indigenous Australians, successive Australian governments have used policies based on protectionism from the 1800s to the 1930s and assimilation from the 1940s to the 1960s (Kapellas and Jamieson, 2016). The education system in Australia has been one of the central tools used under these policies to disempower Indigenous Australians (Gray and Beresford, 2008).

These policies include the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families, now known as the Stolen Generation, often to institutional settings, the establishment of reserves for Indigenous people, and the education of Indigenous children on missions, away from the state schooling system. This legacy of government led alienation, including through the education system, has resulted in a pattern of intergenerational disadvantage which often manifests itself through illiteracy, family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide and the constant threat of loss of cultural tradition and identity. Indigenous Australians are overrepresented in jail, have low literacy rates and can expect to live at least ten years less than non-Indigenous Australians.

Over the past forty years, the Australian approach to education has been increasingly affected by the process of commodification. A commodity is a good or service that has been tailored for the specific purpose of exchange in markets. The process of commodification of education is worth examining because it is an important element of capitalist economic development that strongly influences the wider economic system and has a role in producing and reproducing Indigenous disempowerment. In response to the dominance of the

Keynesian-based welfare-state models that reached their peak after World War II, the current wave of commodification of education in Western countries, such as Australia, has been a symptom of the increasing dominance of neoliberal political ideology since the late 1970s (Knight, Lingard and Bartlett, 1994). The change in economic emphasis, from Keynesian macroeconomics to neoclassical microeconomics, has seen the rise of the process of commodification of many aspects of the economy.

The process of commodification of education can be seen as a process of marketisation, a development of competition, and a change in the perceived use value of education. Marketisation is the development of markets for publicly provided goods and services. This is the process by which education becomes bought and sold by consumers, rather than considered common or provided for free by government. Marketisation leads to the development of competition in these markets. The very nature of competition means that it creates winners and losers. From the neoliberal perspective, inequality is not necessarily a problem, but rather can be an effective way to drive individuals and companies to perform better and thus contribute more to the growth of the economy (Coburn, 2004). Finally, the development of competitive markets leads to a transformation in the perceived use value of education.

Use value is derived from the intrinsic value a good or service holds as a thing that is useful or desirable and is distinct from exchange value. Education has a diverse range of characteristics that can be used to understand its use value. The process of commodification of education is one that repackages the usefulness of education by highlighting quantitative aspects of usefulness of education. Education is increasingly seen as a means to an end, or in other words, a way of contributing to the pool of human resources that represents our economy (Labaree, 1997).

The Cuban ‘Yes, I Can’ Adult Literacy Campaign

On 26 September 1960, Fidel Castro (1960) announced to the United Nations General Assembly that Cuba would eradicate illiteracy nationally within the space of a year. Then, at the beginning of 1961, Cuba launched The Year of Education, a policy which most prominently featured a national mass literacy campaign. It was Castro who decided to send an army of school children, armed with pencils and books, to teach Cuba’s poor how to read and write. By April of 1961, it was decided that all Cuban schools should be closed for the year so that the children could focus on teaching literacy. This ultimately resulted in the involvement of more than 100,000 primary, secondary and university student volunteers, most of whom were between fourteen and sixteen years old. The campaign was designed to reach and empower those from the lowest income brackets and rural areas, who were most marginalised in the society.

Simultaneously, it exposed more educated city dwellers to the lives of rural peasant people, thereby building a culture of understanding and compassion between different socioeconomic groups. Thus, it represented the concrete beginnings of the national effort to universalise education across class, sex and race, as well as across urban and rural areas.

During the Year of Education, 707,212 people had learnt to read and write to first grade standard, 476,155 of whom lived rurally (Leiner, 1987). The 1961 Literacy Campaign was unprecedented, not only in its scope and time frame, but also in its ability to empower the Cuban population to become both lifelong learners and lifelong teachers. Mier Fables, a senior educator in Cuba, explained that “the peasants discovered the world. The students discovered the poor. Together, they discovered their own homeland” (as cited in Keeble, 2001, p.25).

Cuba has made a significant contribution to the global quest to eradicate illiteracy. Following the resounding success of their 1961 adult literacy

campaign, Cuba was asked to assist a number of other countries in improving their literacy rates, including Nicaragua and Angola (Muhr, 2015). Following an increasing demand for Cuban assistance, Cuba decided to create a method by which it could share the lessons it had learned through forty years of adult literacy campaign experience, which had given them insight into how a campaign can best be adapted to a multitude of contexts. Cuba developed a mass literacy campaign model in 2000 called “Yes, I Can” through the Latin American and Caribbean Pedagogical Institute. The campaign model was designed in 2000 by Leonela Relys Diaz, a woman whose first experience of literacy learning was as a fifteen-year-old literacy teacher in the 1961 campaign (Cuba Debate, 2015). The Cuban Government stipulates a fee for the implementation of the “Yes, I Can” lesson materials and the provision of a Cuban advisor to oversee the establishment of the campaign in a new country (Boughton and Durnan, 2014). The amount charged is based on how wealthy the recipient country is and many countries of the Global South receive the campaign materials at very low cost (Muhr, 2015).

The “Yes, I Can” campaign model embodies the Cuban principles of solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment and in doing so, is able to effectively connect with people around the world who can identify with the Cuban struggle for independence against colonialism. There are notable examples of countries that have hosted ‘Yes, I Can’ campaigns. Venezuela hosted “Yes, I Can” between 2003 and 2005, during which 1.5 million Venezuelan adults completed the “Yes, I Can” classes and Venezuela was declared free from illiteracy (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2016). Timor Leste held a national literacy campaign using the “Yes, I Can” model between 2006 and 2012, during which 200,000 adults learnt basic literacy skills in Portuguese or Tetum (Boughton and Durnan, 2014). In Angola, one million people have benefited from the campaign (Cuban News Agency, 2015) and

since 2007, 20,000 Guatemalan adults have gained literacy with the ‘Yes, I Can’ model (teleSUR, 2014). It has been estimated that ‘‘Yes, I Can’’ has the potential to eliminate illiteracy globally in ten years (Canfux Gutiérrez, Corona González and Hickling-Hudson, 2006).

The Cuban ‘‘Yes, I Can’’ Adult Literacy Campaign in Australia

The ‘‘Yes, I Can’’ campaign was brought to Australia in 2012 by Australians who had been working on the campaign in Timor Leste (Boughton, 2013a). ‘Yes, I Can’ was first piloted in Wilcannia, a small ‘outback’ town located in the Murdi Paaki region of north west NSW. Since then, the campaign has been extended to the neighbouring towns of Enngonia, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett, Weilmoringle, Boggabilla and Toomelah. 8378 Aboriginal adults live in the Murdi Paaki region and, of these adults, somewhere between 1600 and 3000 have low or very low literacy (Boughton, 2013a). Currently, the ‘‘Yes, I Can’’ adult literacy campaign is finishing in Walgett, Boggabilla and Toomelah. In 2019, the campaign will be held in Campbelltown and Collarenebri, both in NSW, as well as Santa Teresa in the Northern Territory. As one of the more recent towns to have hosted the campaign, this article will focus on the experiences of the campaign in Brewarrina.

Brewarrina is a small country town one hour’s drive east of Bourke and four and a half hour’s drive north west of Dubbo and has a population of roughly 1500. A recent report published by the Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, titled *Dropping Off the Edge 2015*, examined 621 postcodes in NSW, assessing them for twenty-one indicators of disadvantage. These indicators included access to internet, family income, overall education, long-term unemployment, criminal convictions, child mistreatment and domestic violence (Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis and Ericson, 2015). Brewarrina was ranked in the top 5%, or most disadvantaged category, in at least ten of

these indicators, placing it as one of the five most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW. The socio-economic status of the campaign students in Brewarrina is similar to those of campaign students in other Murdi Paaki towns and is symbolic of the ongoing disempowerment and oppression of Aboriginal people in the region.

In Australia, a pilot of the “Yes, I Can” campaign in Wilcannia was originally established in partnership with, and funded by, the University of New England. However, after the campaign proved to be successful in mobilising the Wilcannia community, the running of the campaign was handed to the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), an organisation that was set up specifically to oversee the upscaling of the Australian “Yes, I Can” campaign. Jack Beetson, who is an Aboriginal man who grew up in the Murdi Paaki region, is the CEO of the LFLF, which is directed by three Indigenous leaders as well as two representatives from Brookfield Multiplex, a global contracting and development company that is the major private sponsor of the campaign. The campaign costs approximately \$500,000 for three intakes of classes in one community, which equates to approximately \$14,000 per graduate (Boughton, 2016).

Jack Beetson (2016) explains the funding philosophy of the foundation, arguing that due to a history of government inconsistency when it comes to providing funding, it is important that any Aboriginal-aimed initiative is funded by a range of sources. Therefore, the campaign is sponsored by a mix of private and public, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous funding. While Australian governments fund approximately 80% of the cost of the campaign (Boughton and Durnan, 2015), the remaining funds come from a range of sources, including Brookfield Multiplex, the Lowitja Institute, Clayton Utz and the University of New England (Literacy For Life Foundation, 2016).

This mix of private and public funding means that the Australian iteration of the “Yes, I Can” campaign does, in part, rely on the commodified markets whose disempowering effects on Indigenous people it seeks to overcome. This unavoidable contradiction speaks to the challenges faced by a socialist campaign from Cuba as it works within the confines of capitalist, colonised Australia. The need to prioritise consistent funding over a commitment to a purely non-commodified approach to education illustrates the pervasiveness of commodification of education in Australia. However, the “Yes, I Can” campaign model has many features that work to minimise or mitigate the effects of commodification and these features will be discussed throughout the remainder of this section.

Between 2012 and August 2017, 633 people in the Murdi Paaki region have been contacted through a household doorknock survey, 213 of whom have attended a “Yes, I Can” class and 137 of whom have graduated from the campaign (Boughton, 2017). Although these numbers may seem small, the graduation rate of the campaign sits at 64%, which is significantly higher than the 14% graduation rate of other Certificate I and II providers in rural and remote NSW (NCVER VOCSTATS, 2014). The table below gives a summary of the quantitative successes of the campaign, showing starting and graduation numbers in each location, as well as the retention rates for each intake of students to date.

Intake	Starters	Graduates	Retention
Wilcannia 1	13	10	76.90%
Wilcannia 2	11	6	54.50%
Wilcannia 3	16	7	43.80%
Bourke 1	16	11	68.80%
Bourke 2	22	15	68.20%
Bourke 3	19	17	94.40%
Bourke 4	13	8	61.50%
Enngonia	21	15	71.40%
Brewarrina 1	19	14	78.90%
Brewarrina 2	18	8	44.40%
Brewarrina 3	17	11	64.70%
Brewarrina 4	15	6	40.00%
Weilmoringle	7	6	85.70%
Walgett 1	21	9	42.90%
Walgett 2	30	16	50.00%
Walgett 3	14	7	50.00%
Boggabilla 1	22	18	81.80%
Toomelah 1	10	7	70.00%
Boggabilla / Toomelah 2	11	8	72.70%
Total	213	137	64.24%

Table 1: Starters and graduates from completed intakes of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign in Australia, 2012-2018 (Durnan, 2018)

Phase One: Socialisation and Mobilisation

The first phase of the Cuban “Yes, I Can” campaign model is called “socialisation and mobilisation”. In Australia, it does not begin until the campaign has been invited into a community by its Aboriginal leaders. So far, such invitations have been based on knowledge of the campaign that has spread by word of mouth between friends and family living in neighbouring communities. This first phase runs for twelve weeks prior to the first literacy class and the socialisation and mobilisation process continues throughout the duration of the campaign (Boughton et al, 2013). The aim of this first phase is

to interact with the lives people are already living in the community and to gain support for the campaign among these people.

During this first phase, the LFLF coordinates with the Community Working Party, which is an established part of every Aboriginal community in NSW. This coordination includes sourcing local staff, including literacy teachers and a campaign coordinator, conducting a household doorknock survey to assess literacy levels in the community, participating in interviews with local media, and hosting banner making sessions. These activities are carried out with the aims of spreading the word about the campaign, mobilising the entire community to enrol in the campaign and gaining an understanding of how local community members relate to literacy (Boughton, 2013a). The campaign is launched with a public event held towards the end of these first twelve weeks.

The first phase of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign recognises a long history of Indigenous disempowerment by prioritising community involvement and mobilisation. By spending time working with local community leaders, the campaign team are able to reach those people who are most oppressed by their illiteracy. In order for a people to be empowered, their historical, material and social experiences must be recognised and affirmed. The “Yes, I Can” model includes the affirmation of these experiences from the very start, as the campaign is not brought to an Aboriginal community without first being invited into that community by the leaders of its Community Working Party (Boughton and Durnan, 2015). This invitation-only beginning ensures that participation in the campaign is voluntary and that the campaign does not make unwanted impositions on existing life in each community. This is particularly important in the Australian context because the “Yes, I Can” lessons teach English literacy, rather than literacy in local Indigenous languages.

The above may be viewed as a potential criticism of the campaign because, within a colonial context, learning and becoming proficient in the language of the coloniser can cause Indigenous languages to be used even less than they already are. However, the fact that the “Yes, I Can” campaign must be invited into a community places the decision-making power in the hands of each individual community. This way, each community can decide if they want to increase the English literacy skills of their community or if they think that doing so might be a threat to their own language and would therefore prefer not to take part. This first step recognises that each Aboriginal community is different and that, therefore, not all Aboriginal communities will want to host the campaign.

The “Yes, I Can” literacy campaign is based on a model of community involvement, which means that community coordination lies at the heart of the functioning of the campaign. The chairperson of the Brewarrina Ngemba Community Working Party, Grace Gordon (2015), said that ‘Yes, I Can’ is the best thing to have happened to Brewarrina and that nothing else has had this kind of effect, especially over just two months. In her estimation, the success of the campaign is due to the fact that it does not use a top-down approach. In fact, the reason for its success is exactly because of its grassroots approach (Gordon, 2015).

One example of the kind of community involvement that the LFLF has encouraged in Brewarrina during the first phase is an Elders morning tea with the students. The campaign organised to transport Elders from the nursing home at the hospital to the morning tea location. This morning tea ensured that everyone in the community was able to feel familiar with the campaign and also recognised that Indigenous Elders play an important community role in guarding traditional knowledge and maintaining community cohesion. Not only

did this create a fun day for the students, but it also brought the community together and provided an engaging activity that acknowledged the important place of Elders in the community.

By examining the socialisation and mobilisation phase of the campaign, it is possible to see that the “Yes, I Can” literacy campaign is less commodified than mainstream educational programs that are available to Aboriginal people, many of which charge a fee for access to education materials and teaching. While the campaign materials are sold by the Cuban Government and bought by the LFLF, meaning that the model is, in this sense, a commodity, it is only bought and sold at the institutional level.

Individual campaign participants do not pay any fees to take part in the campaign and they are provided with learning materials and lunch after each class (Boughton and Durnan, 2015). This means that, as participants are deciding whether or not to take part in the lessons during the first phase, they do not have to make their decision based on whether or not they can afford the cost. The fact that participation in the campaign is totally free means that the education offered by the campaign is not bought and sold by its individual consumers.

The “Yes, I Can” campaign also represents a departure from mainstream education in Australia because it prioritises community involvement and cultural sensitivity and adaptability, which help to give its students a sense of belonging to a cohesive and active community team. Although this prioritisation is evident throughout the entirety of the campaign, it is in this first phase of the campaign that it is most obvious. No other education provider spends twelve weeks prior to the commencement of classes engaging with and encouraging community members to participate in its lessons. In the rural communities of

NSW where the campaign is run, TAFE provides the only other option for adults who want to learn basic education. TAFE, which stands for Technical and Further Education, has a near monopoly in providing education and training outside the ambit of secondary schools and universities and offers vocational training, as well as basic or ‘second-chance’ education (Goozee, 2001).

However, TAFE literacy courses do not offer such a comprehensive initial campaign of community involvement and many of the participants would not take part in literacy classes without a significant amount of encouragement and support from their local community. This is, in part, due to a lack of confidence at the individual level but also a lack of confidence in the education system more generally. In contrast, the first phase of “Yes, I Can” is designed to counter the alienating effects of commodified education by making contact with Aboriginal adults who have been estranged from the education market. In this sense, the “Yes, I Can” campaign exists largely outside the mainstream Australian education market.

Phase Two: Literacy Lessons

The second phase comprises sixty-four literacy classes, held over thirteen weeks. Each class holds approximately fifteen to twenty students and provides basic reading and writing skills, including lessons on how to hold a pen, letters, words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and punctuation. Each lesson is led by locally sourced instructors, called facilitators, who come from the local community and uses a DVD that depicts a classroom setting with five students participating in a literacy lesson. The campaign students watch the video, taking part in the lesson on the screen and also imitating parts of the lesson in real life. After watching the video, students practice using what they have just learnt in writing and comprehension exercises. Completion of all sixty-four lessons enables a student to fill out basic forms, write personal letters and read up to

two paragraphs on a familiar topic. More broadly, the classes also teach students to follow a daily routine, to manage their time and to identify as a learner (Dixon, 2015). Lunch is provided at the end of every lesson.

Even though the “Yes, I Can” campaign is less commodified than other programs, this does not mean that it exists totally separate to the larger economic system in Australia. It is forced to engage in certain types of competition in Australia as, for example, all initiatives aimed at Indigenous people, regardless of what area they focus on (education, health, housing, etc.), exist in a state of constant competition for government funding. The campaign is also in competition for time. During any given week of the campaign classes, a range of fly-in-fly-out government and NGO programs are also on offer for local people to attend (Boughton and Durnan, 2015). These programs are often in the form of workshops on a range of social issues, for example, dealing with domestic violence or grief. While these programs are important, they do present a problem for the literacy campaign because there is little to no collaboration done in advance by the out of town organisers to ensure they do not disrupt the daily schedules of the local residents (Dixon, 2015). However, the campaign model tries to minimise its engagement with competition, ensuring that the model has as few commodified features as possible.

The “Yes, I Can” campaign model is grounded in a philosophy of education as empowerment and recognises that socially perceived inferiority is historical and can be ameliorated or made worse, in part, through education. The particular histories of oppressed people are often excluded from colonial education, which disempowers its subjects by defining them as an ‘other’ (Barton, 1997). This article is not based in educational theory and will therefore not analyse the detail of the pedagogy used in the campaign classes. Instead, it will examine the ways that the second phase of the campaign in Australia recognises and

addresses the existence of Indigenous disempowerment by creating a classroom environment that prioritises Aboriginal and individual knowledge and self-determination over profits and colonial dependency. The campaign model does this by using a lesson structure that is supported by the use of DVDs, which allow the LFLF to employ local staff.

The use of local, unqualified staff in the “Yes, I Can” model is something that has been taken from the experience of the 1961 adult literacy campaign in Cuba, in which many of the literacy teachers were school age children. UNESCO’s 2006 review of the Cuban “Yes, I Can” campaign in Mexico, Ecuador and Paraguay points to both the positives and the negatives of hiring local facilitators, highlighting that, while local staff often have a stronger social commitment than outside staff, they can present problems with achieving consistency in teaching because of their lack of formal training. However, while these local facilitators do not practice perfect pedagogy, they have strengths that outweigh their weaknesses. In Australia, there is currently a widespread lack of appropriate teacher training for non-Indigenous teachers to work with Indigenous students (Herbert, 2012). However, the local Aboriginal campaign staff do not need this kind of training, as they come to each class with first-hand and life-long experiences of racism, oppression and discrimination. They also bring their lifelong experience in working and interacting with their community to the classroom, meaning that the students are less likely to feel alienated in the classroom environment (Boughton and Durnan, 2015).

Hiring local staff means that the campaign participants are able to identify with, know, and trust in their teachers and, therefore, in the learning process. This can be seen by the fact that Sarahⁱⁱ (2015), a student in the 2015 Brewarrina intake and a local Elder who grew up on the reserves, said that “Yes, I Can” is different because she actually wants to be there and that’s why she attends

classes. No one is making her come. An example of the way that local facilitators can better communicate with the campaign participants is associated with the fact that many Aboriginal people speak a dialect of English known as Aboriginal English. Aboriginal English uses different grammar rules to those of standard Australian English and has local variation from community to community (Malcolm, 2013). Although “Yes, I Can” teaches standard Australian English, the local staff have an understanding of Aboriginal English and can bridge the gap for students.

As markets for mainstream education have expanded, the process of decision-making for education has become increasingly governed by the market priorities of efficiency, supply and demand. This has meant that local communities have few opportunities to take ownership of their own learning and teaching, as there is no room for different approaches, which may also be more expensive (Perry and Southwell, 2014). However, the fact that the “Yes, I Can” model does not require formal or traditional training for its local facilitators means that the campaign does not have to compete for credentialed teachers in the education labour market. The de-emphasis of qualifications enables the campaign to move forward without worrying about having to find ‘ideal’ formally qualified staff who would be interested in living and working rurally for a number of years.

The position of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign outside the education labour market is further evidence that the campaign is less commodified than mainstream education programs aimed at Aboriginal people in Australia because it faces almost no competition to attract its teachers. Further, the de-prioritisation of formally trained staff allows for the prioritisation of social change (Leiner, 1987) because it allows the campaign to prioritise achieving literacy over culturally bureaucratic formalities. This represents a change in the way that Aboriginal matters are often dealt with, as it fosters independence from

formal ideas of what is required to develop as a community. Professionals are not needed to teach literacy, and, in fact, the local staff are able to help their communities to learn in their own way.

Once the local campaign staff, including the facilitators and the local campaign coordinator, have been trained and feel ready, the LFLF is able to leave the community with the campaign still being run by these local staff. The fact that the LFLF transfers the running of the project to the local staff as soon as possible means that they are, in essence, gifting the model to each community, rather than selling it. Jack Beetson (2015), the CEO of the LFLF explained that “the mantra I have is that I come to town with one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand on the exit strategy”. This is because the aim of the “Yes, I Can” literacy campaign model is not to transfer dependence onto something new, but rather to create independence. The LFLF prioritises local self-determination by shifting control of its product to its consumers. Because the campaign is not for sale, the LFLF does not have to maintain control over it and, in fact, is able to foster local self-determination instead.

The use of DVD supported lessons during the second phase of the “Yes, I Can” campaign also sets this literacy course apart from mainstream adult literacy programs. The DVD lessons are an integral part of the campaign approach, and the “Yes, I Can” campaign could not be run without them. The use of DVD-based lessons was part of an attempt to make the “Yes, I Can” campaign a viable option for rural and remote communities around the world. In rural areas it can be difficult to find formally trained staff who are willing to stay in the community long-term. However, in addition to this practical consideration, the DVD lessons facilitate a number of other characteristics of the campaign that are crucial to its ability to empower its participants.

The DVD lessons are the central functional mechanism that allows the campaign to hire local facilitators with no formal training or teaching experience to teach the classes (Boughton and Durnan, 2015). This is because the DVD lessons provide a clear lesson structure as well as an example of how to teach each lesson. The utilisation of local teachers is one of the most important and successful aspects of the campaign and, therefore, the videos are actually an important part of the empowerment process. Without the videos, the facilitators, who act as the class teachers, would need much more training and it would be nearly impossible to run the campaign.

Thus, the DVD-based lessons provide the necessary class structure that allows the facilitators to come from and be part of the community. Further, while the use of DVD lessons raises the confidence of the facilitators, it simultaneously raises the confidence of the participants (Boughton and Durnan, 2015). By watching the DVD lessons, the participants learn how to learn and are able to regain their confidence in schooling. The actors in the videos voice the concerns held by the real-life students about the difficulty of the lessons and exercises, helping them to be more confident and less embarrassed.

Further, during the second phase of the campaign, a sense of international solidarity is fostered with the use of DVD lessons that were created for the “Yes, I Can” campaign that was implemented in English-speaking Grenada. The DVDs replicate a classroom with Grenadian students and a Grenadian teacher. This helps to reinforce the idea for the campaign participants that they are part of a global project to learn literacy. Further, the actors in the DVDs are black, which better allows the participants to identify with lessons and gives an opening for an opportunity to connect with the circumstances and experiences of other people who have experienced colonialism and racism in their lives

(Boughton, 2013b). The Grenadian origins of the DVDs serve to broaden the geographical, social and political horizons of the participants.

Phase Three: Post-Literacy

The third and final phase of “Yes, I Can” is called “post-literacy” and consists of twelve weeks of structured post-literacy activities following the completion of the classes, aiming to consolidate the literacy skills acquired in phase two. In this third phase, the Cuban campaign model uses a set of lessons called “Yo, Sí Puedo Seguir” (“Yes, I Can Continue”) that are designed to enhance comprehension and writing skills. However, in Australia, these lessons are not used. Instead, a program of post-literacy activities is redesigned for each new intake of students and is tailored to the specific wants and needs of the students and their community.

This change to the usual Cuban model was made to better adapt the campaign to the realities of rural life in Australia. Examples of activities in the post-literacy phase in Australia to date have included writing resumes, organising work experience, enrolling in TAFE, learning to use a computer, learning to read recipes, doing further work on letter writing skills, reading to children, learning about nutrition and maternal health, and visiting local sites of significance.

Once a participant has completed all sixty-four literacy lessons, as well as the post-literacy activities, they are able to graduate in a public ceremony. On graduating, each student receives a \$300 completion award from the LFLF, which they are able to spend how they wish. Some of the participants have never received such a large amount of money in one transaction before, so it is a significant incentive and reward (Boughton and Durnan, 2015).

The campaign has an empowering effect on different levels of the communities in which it has been run. While it has profoundly changed the lives of many of its participants, it has also had a significant flow-on effect in the wider community. The third phase of the campaign solidifies the educational empowerment encouraged by the previous two phases and helps to make the effects of the campaign sustainable in the long term.

During the third phase, the participants' new-found literacy allows them to expand their horizons in a way not possible before participating in the campaign. Many participants begin the classes feeling shy and reserved, feelings that are the result of the inappropriate schooling they have received in the past (Emma, 2015). However, during the campaign, students are surrounded by local Aboriginal staff who can support them with local cultural knowledge and ensure that the students are nurtured and encouraged in the most effective way possible. Completion of the literacy classes in phase two gives participants the confidence necessary to embark on further study and phase three ensures that they have assistance with applying their new skills in ways that are meaningful to them.

After achieving literacy, the lives of the students have changed in many ways as they are able to make better life choices regarding their health, their drug and alcohol consumption and their engagement with the criminal justice system (Beetson, 2016). Alex Dixon (2015), the onsite Australian advisor to the Brewarrina campaign, pointed to an example of how the campaign has influenced seemingly simple changes in the health choices of its participants. She observed that after learning about the difference between white and wholemeal bread in their classes, the Brewarrina participants started eating a lot more wholemeal bread at the lunches provided after each class.

The responsibility given to the campaign coordinator and facilitators to guide the participants through the course shapes the local staff and also gives the community a new generation of people who are mobilised for change. Similar to the 1961 Cuban experience, the lives of the literacy teachers are affected just as much, if not more, than the lives of the students. The campaign helps to shape new leaders in its host community by creating role models of the local staff.

One local facilitator, Emmaⁱⁱⁱ (2015), explained that before the classes started, she was very nervous about teaching and was worried that she could not do it. However, having a hand in helping people to gain literacy has had an empowering effect on her own life because she is now confident in her ability to cause further positive change in her community. The “Yes, I Can” literacy campaign has also had an effect on her personal life. Before her role as facilitator in the campaign, she had ongoing issues with drug and alcohol abuse, she had been in two long term, physically abusive relationships, and she was often in and out of the courthouse. However, becoming a facilitator with the campaign has given her the motivation to commit to changing her life and since then, she has been sober and has found a new, non-abusive relationship.

The campaign has also had an effect that extends beyond those people who are directly involved in its day to day running. For example, although “Yes, I Can” is a campaign for adults only, an increase in adult literacy rates has had flow-on effects for the children of these communities. The principal of the local school in Enngonia noticed a significant change in the reading ability of the children at the school since the campaign was held in their community (Harrison, 2014). Principal Harrison explained that, over one summer break, the students in years one to three actually exhibited increased literacy. This phenomenon is unusual, given that most Australian students in that age group lose literacy over the six-

week summer break. The gain in literacy in Enngonia has been attributed to an increase in story reading to children by newly-literate family members (Beetson, 2015).

The campaign has also encouraged its staff and participants to think about how they can use their new-found knowledge to help their community. José Manuel Chala Leblanch, one of the Cuban advisors to the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign in Australia, argues that the campaign is primarily about expanding the horizons of the participants, staff and community by expanding their knowledge base and introducing new ways to be critical (Chala Leblanch, 2015).

The development of critical thinking can empower people by increasing their ability to participate in the democratic process and in national development. This is particularly important for Aboriginal Australians, who have been excluded from matters of national development since the arrival of the colonisers. The third phase of the campaign allows students to rediscover parts of their life with their new-found literacy. For example, as part of the third phase of the campaign, the most recent intake of students at Brewarrina visited what is left of the old Brewarrina Mission (Waites, 2016).

Operated between 1886 and 1966, the Brewarrina Mission is a site of significance to the local Aboriginal groups, as many of their parents, grandparents, and even they themselves lived on the mission prior to 1966. Although there are no buildings left standing, there are a number of plaques describing what happened at the site and this visit was the first time many of the “Yes, I Can” students could read these plaques. Being able to visit this historically significant place as a group after having overcome what, for some students, has been a life long struggle with reading and writing has an

empowering effect. This visit was a triumphant return to a place that was the site of severe colonial oppression (Waites, 2016).

The third, post-literacy, phase of the “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign provides a useful lens through which to examine what kind of use value the campaign places on literacy, as it is during this part of the process that the participants are able to start using their new literacy skills. The third phase of the campaign is based on a ‘use it or lose it’ philosophy (Beetson, 2016) and represents a departure from many adult education programs that do not offer follow up activities as a compulsory part of the course. The “Yes, I Can” campaign places more value on human dignity than on human capital and in this way, prioritises a use value for education that is centred around human dignity and social justice.

However, this is not to say that the campaign places no value on the usefulness of education to foster economic sustainability. Similar to the Cuban adult literacy campaign of 1961, the Australian campaign is attempting to empower Aboriginal people to live in a way that is self-determined. The 1961 Cuban literacy campaign formed an important part of the revolutionary plan for a sustainable, independent and socialist economy, allowing its recipients to understand new laws that were being introduced and empowering its people to actively participate in shaping the direction of the revolution. In a similar vein, the Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in rural NSW represents an important step in ensuring that rural living is an economically secure option for Aboriginal people who want to live on country.

More precisely, for Aboriginal people living in the communities that are hosting “Yes, I Can”, is an important element of empowerment. In order for a community to create new economies and opportunities that are based on

Aboriginal knowledge and culture, its members must have the literacy, confidence and motivation to drive this change. In the Australian campaign, much of this drive is developed in the post-literacy activities, in which the participants are encouraged to start using their literacy to engage with their community in new ways. This engagement could be to enrol in the local TAFE, to get a job, or to take an active interest in the schooling of their children. Therefore, any presence of a commodified perspective on the use value of education that is supported by the campaign is in fact underpinned by a search for empowerment and human dignity.

The post-literacy phase of the campaign is most useful because of the way that it empowers participants to be active in social transformation. For the people running the campaign, a successful outcome is not simply one of graduation. They view literacy as being useful in a day to day sense, but more importantly, as useful in forming a core part of the struggle for individual and social transformation (Boughton, 2016). It is a difficult task to transform oneself while still being subject to the conditions that have created an oppressive situation in the first place and so the campaign is seen as useful because it enables its participants to know that a better, more self-determined, future is possible.

Historically, mass literacy campaigns have often formed part of large social transformations. Arming people with the words and skills necessary to speak clearly and succinctly about their oppression gives them the tools to fight their way out of poverty. In Australia, while literacy alone cannot overcome two centuries of Indigenous disempowerment, political activism by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians underlies the “Yes, I Can” campaign in Australia. The struggle for Indigenous rights and recognition in Australia is a slow and on-going process, and the campaign forms part of the wider struggle

against the continued devastation on First Nations people arising from colonisation.

Conclusion

The LFLF hopes to continue to expand ‘Yes, I Can’ nationally and is monitoring the results and impact of the campaign with a longitudinal study, led by Associate Professor Bob Boughton from the University of New England. Although the results of this longitudinal study are not yet available, it is possible to say that the ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign allows its students to learn literacy in a way that interacts with their local knowledge and culture, thereby empowering them through education and newly found communication skills. The LFLF received unanimous recognition from the NSW Legislative Council when The Hon Catherine Cusack motioned to recognise the work of the foundation and the graduation of its participants on 14 May 2014. As the campaign expands, the LFLF will need to maintain the grassroots nature of the campaign and, in particular, avoid the bureaucratic nature of government support from influencing the planning process. How this challenge manifests will be contextual, reliant on the cooperation of local and state governments, and local Aboriginal Community Working Parties and communities.

The success of the “Yes, I Can” Aboriginal adult literacy campaign is most obviously shown through the high success rates that have been achieved by its participants. However, the success of the campaign has also had profound impacts on the communities that have hosted it. The results of the “Yes, I Can” literacy campaign in NSW are a political result achieved through hard work, public desire and political willpower. When the LFLF has left, they leave behind a community capable of taking the campaign forward themselves, empowering the community to carry on being able to develop and maintain its own literacy.

Through the use of its three phase structure, the Cuban “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign in Australia has also helped its participants to discover what empowerment means for them as individuals. Each of the three campaign phases has elements that show a lack of commodification in the campaign and, as has been shown, the campaign is outside the realm of commodification in many respects, despite the wider capitalist, colonial context in which it is being run. This allows the campaign to implement a range of practices that achieve empowerment for its students, whether through knowing about heritage, doing positive things for their family or making a difference for others. This is because of the broad, encompassing definition of education that the campaign uses to define the aims of its work.

This research has shown that education does have the potential to foster Indigenous empowerment in Australia. By listening to the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous people, as is done in the Cuban “Yes, I Can” Aboriginal adult literacy campaign, it is possible to move towards a more empowering environment that can sustain and foster the Indigenous struggle for self-determination and form part of a developing activism for social transformation.

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² This name has been changed for privacy.

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