

SUBMISSION TO THE

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, WATER, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

IN RESPECT OF THE

INDIGENOUS BROADCASTING AND MEDIA SECTOR REVIEW

Introduction

The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) is a non-profit company funded by the Commonwealth Government and the governments of all States and Territories of Australia. It is a national children's media production and policy hub, performing a wide range of functions in children's media: as a voice in policy matters; as a distributor of and investor in Australian children's television series; as an instigator of new, innovative and entertaining children's media and as a developer of valuable screen resources for the education sector.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is a non-profit, independent company which does not receive Government funding. ACER is one of the world's leading educational research centres, providing state-of-the-art research based knowledge, products and services to improve learning in both formal and informal settings. ACER is committed to the use of systematic investigation, evaluation and critical reflection in the search for ways to improve learning.

In this joint submission the ACTF and ACER are concerned to address just one term of reference to the Review of Indigenous Broadcasting and Media. We will identify and propose that there is one very significant way in which indigenous media could contribute to *Closing the Gap*. The ACTF and ACER believe that a high quality educational television program developed for an audience of Indigenous children aged 3 to 6 years old could address the learning needs of Indigenous children, in particular by improving school readiness for Indigenous pre-schoolers.

"...there is a strategically important pre-requisite to closing the gap on numeracy and literacy, and that is school readiness and attendance. You can't close the gap on literacy and numeracy unless you first close the gap on school readiness and attendance."

Noel Pearson, Some Magic Bullets for Education, The Australian, 27 March 2010

Indigenous education performance and how the concept of “school readiness” can be linked to educational outcomes.

On a wide range of educational indicators, there is a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. NAPLAN data shows that by Year 3 Indigenous children have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than their non-Indigenous peers and that the gap becomes wider as children move through their schooling. Participation rates in early childhood education settings are lower for Indigenous children than non-Indigenous children.

As Noel Pearson and many others have identified, one of the key underlying factors that needs to be addressed in order to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children, is that of school readiness and attendance. It is a well established fact that a smooth transition to school has long-lasting impacts on a child’s success at school, but achieving successful school readiness can be difficult for Indigenous children who are raised with different world views, different languages, different learning styles and different expectations to the mainstream school system. Knowing what to expect and knowing the rules and social expectations of the new school culture can be major issues for all children, but for Indigenous children, starting school may more likely be a culture shock. We also know that starting school with a positive attitude and interactions with role models (older siblings, other children who are already at school) is extremely important. Many Indigenous children do not have these role models, especially if their parents and family members have not had a happy experience of school.

An educational pre-school television program could promote and assist the transition to school for Indigenous children and their parents.

Indigenous pre-schoolers watch television

Television is ubiquitous and we know that the overwhelming majority of Indigenous pre-schoolers have access to a television set and watch television on a daily basis. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has consistently reported that more than 99% of Australian households have at least one television set. According to the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*, 94% of parents report that their pre-school children watch television for an average of one hour and 11 minutes each day. According to the *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children*, 25% of participants reported that their children spent “about” an hour watching television a day, 24% reported that their children watched two hours of television a day, 15% indicated that their children were watching three hours of television a day and 13% reported that their children were watching television for five or more hours a day.

Educational television programs are effective with young children

There is a substantial body of research, particularly from the United States, that demonstrates the educational benefits of television programs, particularly for young children in the 3–6 year old age group.¹ The United States Federal Department of Education has entered into a cooperative agreement with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) called “Ready to Learn” which has resulted in the production of a number of programs for pre-schoolers focusing on pre-literacy, literacy and numeracy skills intended to prepare pre-schoolers for school. In other parts of the world, children’s television programs have been used to inform families and pre-school children about pressing social issues. (For example,

¹ A review of the literature, *Young Children and the Media* by Dr Leonie Rutherford, Professor Michael Bittman and Dr Dean Biron, was published by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in May 2010.

Takalani Sesame, in South Africa, includes an HIV-positive puppet character; and in Egypt *Alam Simsim* promotes the importance of girls going to school and being educated.)

Educational television programs for children are even more effective, when they are viewed with a parent or carer

All of the programs produced under the United States' "Ready to Learn" initiative are being individually evaluated for their educational effectiveness. One clear theme emerging from that research is that not only does regular exposure to an educational pre-school program provide viewers with a clear educational advantage, but that educational television programs are even more effective from an educational standpoint if children watch those programs with a parent or carer ("co-viewing"). Educational impact can be enhanced even further again, if there is an effective outreach program to support the television series. (This may include the provision of books, DVDs, online games and ideas for playing at home being provided to communities, and lesson plans provided to schools.)

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the 2008 *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS)* found that 92% of Indigenous pre-school children who watched television, videos or DVDs, do so with a parent or carer. This is an extremely high rate of co-viewing, and it indicates the significant potential that a television program aimed at Indigenous children and their parents and carers may have to effect transformation and positive attitudes to starting and attending school.

What issues would the television program address

Any attempt to prepare children for school is most effective when:

- The situation, equipment and people are familiar;
- The child feels secure in the new environment;
- The introduction to the new situation is gradual;
- The child's prior knowledge and experiences are utilised.

A live-action television program could seek to demystify school, boost children's confidence about school and their willingness to attend it. It could be used to model the social and emotional experience of school culture, whilst affirming and valuing the viewer's own culture.

The program should be broadcast on the ABC and supported by a widespread outreach program in order to maximise its impact.

Why the ABC

The ABC would be the logical home for an educational pre-school program for Indigenous children and it is consistent with the ABC's charter to provide such a program. The ABC Charter states that the broadcaster will provide:

- (i) *broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and*
- (ii) *broadcasting programs of an educational nature.*

Furthermore, the ABC would be the most accessible broadcaster for the program. It has the widest possible reach in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia. It has a familiar and established brand, ABC For Kids, for pre-school programs, and broadcasts children's programs on ABC1, ABC2 and ABC3. It is most likely that many Indigenous children and

their families are already viewers of children's content on the national broadcaster, as the national broadcaster has the largest audience share of pre-school and school age children of any free-to-air broadcaster. The ABC also broadcasts school television and educational programs and Indigenous content. It is therefore the most likely broadcaster to support and transmit such a program.

An Outreach Program should support the television series

The impact of the program will be significantly enhanced if it is accompanied by an Outreach Program that targets Indigenous children, families and communities. An Outreach Program could include the provision of games, activities, online interaction, books and DVDs to disadvantaged communities, community centres, maternal health centres and early childhood centres to support the themes explored in the television series.

One of the programs commissioned through the *Ready to Learn* initiative with PBS, which is most consistently associated with positive educational outcomes in its target 4–7 year old audience, is *Between The Lions*, a series with the slogan "Get Wild About Reading". The research points to the effective incorporation of the program into a Mississippi Literacy Initiative and an American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative in New Mexico, showing that young children who participated in those initiatives showed consistent and significant educational gains.²

Funding for the program should be provided for this specific purpose, possibly through the Departments of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) as a special Indigenous education initiative, because current support mechanisms for film and television industry production are market based and do not allow for the production of such a niche program.

High quality Australian content for adults and children is supported through a range of measures. Broadcaster licence fees typically contribute 30% to the cost of production of an adult drama series, and up to 20% in the case of an Australian children's drama series. Producers must attract the rest of the cost of production from overseas pre-sales, international distributors, through the tax production offset, Government agencies such as Screen Australia or state film funding bodies. Funding from Government agencies is in the form of investment, and is dependent on producers demonstrating the required level of local and international market support for a program. It is a market driven system which results in high end Australian content which also appeals to a worldwide television market.

An educational program targeted towards Indigenous pre-school children and their families would not be able to find support under the current funding system, aimed as it would be, at a niche market. While it would be hoped (and intended) that such a production would also make a contribution to the entertainment and education of non-Indigenous pre-schoolers (particularly, perhaps, children from non-English speaking backgrounds or in other disadvantaged circumstances), the program should be produced in a manner that is particularly relevant and culturally identifiable to Indigenous pre-schoolers in order to achieve its primary objective. It would therefore need to be funded as a special project and evaluated according to key performance indicators that were unique to this particular project.

² Between The Lions website at <http://pbskids.org/lions>

Conclusion

The ACTF and ACER propose that it is possible for Indigenous media to make a significant contribution to *Closing The Gap*. The provision of funding for special purpose projects aimed at Indigenous communities and broadcast on the national broadcasters would be an effective means of reaching out and addressing issues with Indigenous communities. Furthermore, Indigenous audiences, like all audiences, deserve to see themselves and their stories reflected on Australian television screens. Television is the most powerful storytelling medium of our age and it is through stories that we learn, question, reflect and address the important issues of our identity and our place in the world. Seeing ourselves reflected in those stories is essential to our self esteem.

There is perhaps no audience more important than the pre-school audience, but they are possibly the most underserved audience of all. In considering the needs of Indigenous viewers, we would urge this Review to consider how the needs of Indigenous pre-school children might be addressed by broadcasting. The ACTF and ACER believe that a television program intended to give Indigenous pre-school children a head start for school, would make a major contribution to *Closing the Gap*.

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