Australian Journal of Adult Learning
Volume 60, Number 2, July 2020

Maestras: Exploring dialectical relationships in an Aboriginal literacy campaign

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Previous studies have documented the personal transformation that many low literate adults undergo when they engage in literacy campaigns. In particular, research has captured how improved literacy leads to a greater willingness and capacity to speak out, or what is often referred to as voice. This paper focusses on the impact of an adult Aboriginal literacy campaign on those responsible for implementing it. Through the words of these 'maestras', we reveal how the teachers and trainers of the campaign, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, experience a similar trajectory of transformation to the literacy students. This transformation, we argue, is the result of the pedagogic relationship between students, local campaign staff and national trainers. This dialectical relationship in which teacher is learner and learner teacher is at the heart of the literacy campaign model and is part of what Giroux (1988) characterises as a radical theory of literacy and

voice. We further argue that the impacts of the literacy campaign at the individual and collective levels and crucially, the sustainability of these impacts depend largely on this pedagogic relationship and the new, shared understanding of the world which results.

Keywords: *adult literacy, popular education, indigenous education*

Introduction

The national literacy campaign in Cuba in 1961 deployed thousands of young women, or 'maestras' to teach the rural poor to read and write. This act saw women take up positions of authority while at the same time helping to develop respect and solidarity between men and women, old and young, literate and non-literate. In interviews with some of the maestras many years later, they described their experience of the 1961 literacy campaign as 'the dying of an old life and the start of something absolutely new' (Kozol, 2019). In 2012, the Cuban-born filmmaker Catherine Murphy made a film, Maestra which documents this significant personal transformation through the women's own testimonies. It is to this film and the international literacy movement inspired by the Cuban experience that the title of our paper refers.

Since 2012, Australia has had its own literacy campaign with its own maestras. Yet unlike Cuba, Venezuela or Timor-Leste, the campaign in Australia has centred on low-literate Aboriginal adults. From its start in Wilcannia in New South Wales, the Aboriginal Adult Literacy campaign has recruited over 30 Aboriginal maestras to teach adults in their own communities to read and write in English. These Aboriginal maestras engage with other new staff and the national campaign leadership in a highly structured process of pre-service and on-site capacity building and leadership development. The preservice training involves induction into the mass literacy campaign model, its history and philosophy. Through this, the Australian maestras, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal begin to experience the solidarity that comes from becoming part of an international movement for social change.

Much has been said and written about the Aboriginal Adult literacy campaign (see Williamson & Boughton, 2020; Boughton & Williamson, 2019; Ratcliffe & Boughton, 2019; Wise, Harris, Nickson, Boughton, &

Beetson, 2018; Boughton & Durnan, 2014). However to date, the focus has been on understanding how the model works and its impacts on participating students and communities. Less attention has been paid to the impacts of the campaign on the staff, or maestras, and the legacy the campaign leaves in each community. Over several years of researching the workings and impacts of the campaign, a single phrase has passed the lips of campaign staff from Wilcannia in the far west of NSW to Toomelah in the east: 'it just opens you right up'. This paper is an account what this phrase means through the words of four maestras who have collaborated closely on the literacy campaign in north-western NSW: two Aboriginal women who were employed as local coordinators in their communities of Enngonia and Brewarrina and the two non-Aboriginal staff responsible for supporting them to deliver the campaign.

Background and methodology

In March 2018, the co-authors met in Dubbo, NSW. The goals of the research were two-fold: first, to understand and document the effects the campaign has had on our lives and relationships; and second, to continue to develop our knowledge and capacity as popular educators through the research project itself. As an extension of the way in which the co-authors have worked together on the literacy campaign, this project draws strongly on the principles of popular education and the intimately linked methodology of participatory research. An explicit aim of participatory research is to empower communities and community-based researchers/ participants through engaging in an equal and collaborative process of inquiry (Walter, 2009; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 2001).

Many have highlighted the appropriateness of participatory and narrative-based approaches to research within Aboriginal communities (Ober, 2017; Caxaj, 2015; Jackson-Barrett, Price, Stomski, & Walker, 2015; Barker, 2008). Through participatory and narrative-based approaches to research, the process of knowledge creation can shift from a top-down to bottom-up process. In this way we can build a more critical, coherent and collective account of the impacts of the literacy campaign on understanding the role of literacy in our own and each other's lives and communities.

The central question this study explores is 'how did the campaign contribute to our development as popular educators and leaders in both local communities and the literacy campaign more broadly'. The theme

of leadership emerged from the individual narrative-based interviews that one of the co-authors (Frances) conducted. The workshop which followed these preliminary interviews sought to construct new knowledge around how the campaign develops leadership using the popular education methodology of 'systematization' (Streck & Holiday, 2015); that is, a practice of collective knowledge production using:

- dialogue as a basic methodological principle to co-construct an account of how we see the world and what we value
- strategies to maximise participation through a structure of story, personal thinking and reflection time, yarning and deep listening
- recollections of the story of the campaign in each of our communities to make connections between ourselves and others, our past and present
- questions to help analyse the economic, social and cultural context of our lives and how these contribute to the issue of low literacy
- strategies for action on how to continue the work of the campaign through ongoing popular education and leadership
- theory to develop our thinking about our roles in our families, communities and wider Australian society.

As with the methodology adopted for the research, we felt it important to present our findings in a way which reflects the critical components of popular education and transformative learning. For this reason, we have developed this paper as a conversation, allowing dialogue to reveal not only our ideas but the way those ideas came to be. Writing as a dialogue also allows us to honour the grassroots intention of the literacy campaign by privileging the voices of the participants/co-authors. It also highlights the value of yarning, deep listening and two-way learning so crucial to respectful and constructive relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues (Buchanan, Collard, & Palmer, 2018).

The gate is open

Deborah: You know when you joined the Literacy for Life campaign I called you popular educators. You probably looked at me and thought what on earth is she talking about? So it's been a couple of years since the campaign finished in your communities. Do you see yourselves as popular educators now?

Tannia: I'd like to think so. Someone said to me a while back "how do you feel about the Literacy for Life campaign leaving?" And I said, "but it hasn't – the Literacy for Life is still there. We own that". So we've got to keep it going. If people need to come and learn how to do something, I've got to acknowledge that person as soon as they walk through the door, "Do you need any help? Just yell out." Because sometimes our people feel excluded because they don't know enough about the land council or community working parties and how they work. All these different organisations; our mob are afraid of not knowing what really goes on there. So it's up to us to try and encourage them to come, even if it's to listen. Slowly it'll build someone. So I've got to still be that person I was when I was the [literacy campaign] coordinator. I've got to be that same person whether I'm in the community or whether I'm working on something else.

Mary: I'll never forget going up to the Shire Council Chambers for an excursion with the students. We'd never stepped past the front counter. No one'd went beyond that, you know. So to see the students sit down in the council meeting room, a place that they knew was making decisions about us, about our community, I knew I couldn't stop. And even now the Literacy for Life is gone from Brewarrina, it doesn't stop there. You can continue to go on, to do more, you know.

Tannia: Yeah, I guess the Yes, I Can! empowered me to keep going and stand up in front of community. When you deliver the lessons, that alone starts creating that leadership within you, and I guess you don't feel it at the start, but you do feel it at the end. It empowers you to do more and encourage others to keep going, inspire them to step up and not be afraid to speak out. Being a community member, being a better parent, but also showing leadership, showing people that we care.

Frances: You know, what really struck me? The first time I met you, Tannia was when you were helping to start the campaign in Brewarrina. You kept saying, 'the gate is open' or 'it opened

me up' when we talked about the campaign. I knew 'the gate is open' is the first positive message the students hear in the lessons but I was surprised by how much that phrase meant to you. Well, it's taken me a few years of being in the classroom and reflecting on what I've learnt to finally understand what you were getting at. It's not just about opening the gate for someone, as in teaching them, but it's about opening yourself up as a learner too by being willing to walk through the gate with them. In other words, you can't open the gate for others if you don't go through that gate yourself. That's what I think a popular educator is.

Tannia: Yeah, we've got to feel that too, that the gate is open. If we just tell the students that the gate is open to all these possibilities and we're not feeling it ourselves, then it means nothing.

Mary: For me, from when I first started with the Literacy for Life as a coordinator for Brewarrina, every interview I've had or when I spoke about it with my people, it was always about empowerment.

Deborah: Can I ask a question? Was there anything that actually happened with you being part of the literacy campaign that made you think, "I can do this"?

Tannia: Yeah well like I said, standing up in front of the class. That was the hardest job to be able to deliver lessons to your own people. That alone builds confidence. And it wasn't only within the class. I think as a coordinator too I had to deal with other people within the community, like Council and all these other organisations. It was like peeling one layer at a time and opening up. I started to build that relationship right around from the class to the whole town. It was something I'd never done before, I was afraid of doing. So yeah, it empowered me to have that voice, that voice that was there but needed to come out. And the Yes, I Can! has done that for me.

Mary: Yeah like Tannia was saying, that voice's always been there but just bringing it out, you know that's what the Literacy

for Life did. It was there with us all the time, but I don't know, there was something that stopped us. Was it us, was it ourselves? We knew that we could make changes, and changes was meant to come, but if we didn't voice our opinions then changes wouldn't happen.

Deborah: So Mary, I recall the very early days of working in Brewarrina, we'd go to those community working party meetings and you'd sit there, quietly. And then I remember several months later going back and you wouldn't stop talking.

Mary: Yes!

Deborah: The thing that I remember most was you were disagreeing and I thought, "Mary, you're saying publicly you don't agree?" That was a big thing for me because I remember thinking that wouldn't have come easy to you.

Mary: Yeah, I never spoke. I've seen that change from the campaign, you know, when something happens, I just can't shut my mouth now. When something's happened to my family or to my people, you know … I just have to speak out.

Deborah: I remember Tannia when you did your first lesson I said, "you were just beautiful, you did such a wonderful job" because you did, and you turned around to me … you were cleaning the board, and you said "no one's ever told me that before".

Tannia: Yes. And just in that alone like you know, when we get the feedback … like Deb what you're doing now and the way you and Frances see Mary and I through your eyes … I guess it's something we don't see ourselves. We doubt ourselves too much, that we can't do things but when you see us that way, it inspires us and makes us want to do more.

Frances: I think that different perspective is key to the learning that takes place in the campaign. We all – the students, the local staff and the national staff start to see ourselves differently through each other's eyes. But in my case, seeing myself through your eyes forced me to question lots of things I thought I knew. It has only been from reflecting on my experiences through this project that I've realised that the world which made you and Mary who you are is the

same world that made Deborah and I who we are. They're not two different worlds. And yet, before I worked on the campaign, I'd only ever seen one side of that world. By inhabiting this other side, I've come to understand my own side in a different way. Does that make sense?

Tannia: I always say what I've learned I've learned most from Deborah, a non-indigenous woman, a person who come into my community. Deborah was the only one who I can really say has built me as a person, and the person I've become.

Mary: We have strong women in Bre who seen that I had something there. They knew that I can move forward and move on, but how? And it wasn't until the Literacy for Life and for Deborah to come.

Tannia: They saw something in you that you don't see as an individual.

Deborah: You think that you learn things from me, but it's definitely two ways. I'm very nervous when I go into your place. I remember driving into that community and these three blokes were at the land council at their ute, hanging off the ute and wouldn't turn around and say hello. I thought, "How do I do this? I don't think they actually want me here". So that was really ... difficult. But my great mentor, Jack Beetson has always said to me, "Just go in there and listen, just listen and you'll be all right". I'm sure I didn't always listen, I know that, but I really tried to listen and I have learnt so much by working with you.

Frances: I think I learned to listen in a different way. By closely watching you all and listening to what wasn't being said as much as what was, I started to see what literacy really means for our students, what it looks like, how they use it. Only when I began to understand what the world means to the people in Brewarrina could I start speaking their language. And only then could I teach them.

Tannia: I think listening is really important, because if you're a leader and you don't listen, then you're doing it for you. You're not doing it for the community.

Deborah: I want pick that up just for a minute and see what you think. One of the reasons why the Literacy Campaign is so

essential is because otherwise it falls to the literate to be the representative of the people. But the problem with that is that unless the people behind you have had a voice in what you're saying as that leader, then you're not being a leader.

Tannia: I agree because if you look back and no one's following, you only benefit yourself. But I don't want to be a leader, I just want to be me. But I want to voice what's real, what's going on and get over some of these barriers within the community. And I want to encourage other people to be themselves and to be able to come out of their shell. They want to say things but they're too afraid to.

Deborah: So leadership Tannia, if I'm hearing you correctly, would be that you're empowered to take that voice to speak up. But as a leader, you have to empower. So it's that circular thing; you can only be a leader if you're empowering the next person to step up, then you're all stepping up.

Tannia: Yeah, that's it. But having the responsibility that comes with it, people having that expectation of you, that's the part that I don't like. I think that too often there's the expectation that we need to deliver for everybody else, but at the same time we've got to share love and take care of our own families.

Mary: Yeah, it's hard and I've learnt that with leadership you can't give up.

Tannia: It's like we all have a responsibility in the community, and everyone's gotta find their place in community. We all should be doing it together. And I don't believe that we've gotta wait 'til someone hands us the baton to step up. I believe that we can step up now 'cause we can all create the things that are needed but unless the people are with us nothing will work.

Mary: Yeah. We all walk this walk together, you know?

Frances: And you know that understanding took a while to crystallise for me. Just like with 'the gate is open', the campaign slogan we use, 'Literacy: everyone's right; everyone's business'? Well I understood that but only in the abstract. That whole idea of solidarity which the campaign

rests on was something I thought I understood but it wasn't until I had spent a lot of time not only living and working alongside you but walking through the gate together that I realised something important: Literacy and the change we're seeking is not going to happen unless everyone learns through the process of the campaign – not just the low literate people. And not just the facilitators and community people but the managers as well. Everybody has to develop new knowledge as a result of the campaign.

Tannia: But sometimes it does take one person to step up and voice things out for change. Say for example, if domestic violence is an issue in community, it's voicing it out, showin' that it is a problem within the community. Not pointing the fingers, but it's our problem. Because until it's said out loud, we can't see it reflected it back at us.

Deborah: When you said that I thought, yeah exactly, it's a collective problem. A leader has to show that housing or drugs, or whatever it is, it's our problem. It's like literacy. The literacy is a problem for us. It's not a problem for the person who can't read or write. And it's only when we collectively own the problems of the community, of the family, of the class, do we actually change anything.

Tannia: Yeah, and that's why it needs to be voiced out and then reflected back. And when you voice it, you find out you're not the only one having the problem.

Deborah: Exactly. It's like that moment in the campaign classes where the students suddenly realise they're not the only people in the world that can't read and write. Do you remember when we do that lesson about how many people all over the world aren't able to read and write?

Mary: When I started with Literacy for Life, we said it had to be at a grassroots level, had to reach out to the people. And one the things we've always talked about was equality. How do we show the grassroots people that they're just as good as anyone else? Well we do it together; we started the class together, so we're going to finish it together, you know?

Deborah: You've got to go out and make sure everyone shows up. Because if they're not showing up, all you're doing is benefiting you, the literate. That's what the literacy campaign is all about.

Tannia: Yeah, and that comes back to building that trust and relationship so you can really see where your mob are coming from, how their lives are and the challenges that they face just within community or home.

Mary: Listening from a grassroots level. We need to listen to our people. That's where the trust come from.

Tannia: The trust. And respect. It comes back to the core values. When we're doing the core values in the very first lesson and we ask the students to say how they want the class to be, usually the number one thing they'll say is respect. But how often do we actually practice what we speak? We say respect, but do we give it? If you're going to put respect up there on the board, you've got to really live it. And for me that means being able to listen when people disagree with you. Because the frustration has built up over the years that no one is listening to them so they're going to keep coming angry.

Deborah: And I think we were always clear that it isn't our role in the literacy campaign to solve the conflicts, especially as they're very deep, sometimes going back generations. But, what we have done is said, "Okay, here's a space. We can create a space inside here to start the dialogue, to start the rebuilding, and to let that fabric strengthen." So, I think we created that sense that you don't have to solve everything in order to move forward.

Frances: I agree, the whole campaign from the very first lesson to the end of post literacy is about supporting people to read the world a bit better so they can come to their own realisation about how to solve problems. That critical literacy.

Mary: Yeah, I've seen it within the lessons themselves, especially the one with the story about the old fella who was being neglected. When we started to get into the writing, it took the students back to their elders. They thought "Oh, how do we respect our elders? What do we do for our elders?"

Deborah: Well you know that I really believe in critical reflection. I think it's a really powerful tool. You know how we used to ask as part of the critical reflection each day, "How are you feeling about the class, the students, the campaign?" But the crunch was really, "What can you be doing better?" Do you think that critical reflection, just for you personally, has helped? Do you think it's a useful process?

Tannia: I think it's a very useful tool. It’s definitely helped me at home and in the land council as well like when we're having board meetings; it helps doing all that stuff too. And you know, with the [community] garden, we have that conversation all the time. "What's working, what's lacking, and what else could we be doing?" So, we've had to put our heads together. We just couldn't get many people in the garden, so it was like, "What do we need to do?” Making sure that everyone has their say, and making sure it's going around the table, so people are then opening up.

Mary: It’s giving them the option to identify better things, and then we're focussing on tackling some of those barriers, and focussing on the good stuff that we can do. So it gets their mind off all that toxic other stuff and it helps them to develop their community as well, and be a part of it.

Tannia: But how do you know if you don't know? That's a question in one of the lessons and I love the fact that it’s raised because it's not until you know something that you're more likely to speak up. If I look back at myself throughout the years, even before the Literacy for Life come, if I had known the things back then that I know today, I would've been speaking up I reckon back then.

Frances: I'm just thinking of what you're saying. When we did post-literacy, the aim was to expose people to a lot of different services, different bits of knowledge, learning their rights, talking about history, finding out who their family is. Well as you know, part of why we do all of that in addition to continuing to practice literacy is to give people much more confidence to participate outside the safety of the classroom. We're trying to go through another gate

together. So how do we continue to do that once the classes have finished?

Tannia: It's really hard if community don't come to the meetings. All we can do is try to share it when we see them, you know, word of mouth.

Mary: I still go to the community working party meetings and I go to the AECG [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group]. And you want to see your old students there, you want to see them stepping up.

Tannia: We have to share information. I believe it's our responsibility to keep the chain going, where you're passing on that information. Because it's not only for them; it's going to help their family and our children.

Mary: Yeah, if we're fighting for the injustice, it doesn't really help no one except yourself if you're not sharing knowledge and information. I think a leader is sharing the information and listening to people. If you're not doing that, you're ain't one.

Tannia: And when people start to see that you're speaking about things that they've told you, that you're actually listening and bein' the voice for the people who haven't yet found their voice, they start to believe in you.

Mary: Yeah, it shows the students we believe in them, we care about them.

Deborah: What you just said Mary reminds me of what we always used to say: if you can't love your students then you won't be able to teach them. Really deeply, believing in the humanity of each student, which is what you did in bucket loads, both of you. And you communicated that compassion so that each and every one of your students thought, "You know, I'm really special".

Frances: For sure, you can't build literacy unless you've built a relationship and that takes lots of time and patience. It's a slow process.

Discussion

Previous studies have documented the personal transformation that many low literate adults undergo when they engage in literacy campaigns (Boughton & Williamson, 2019; Stromquist, 2009; Prins, 2008). In particular, research has captured how improved literacy leads to a greater willingness and capacity to speak out, or what is often referred to as 'voice'. The dialogue above reveals how we, as teachers and trainers of the campaign, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal have experienced a similar trajectory of transformation. Like the Cuban maestras who came before us, we all feel we have learned far more than we could ever teach (Kozol, 2019).

Local staff Tannia and Mary identify specific transformative experiences within the campaign such as standing in front of community members, including elders, to deliver literacy lessons; liaising with service providers; and accompanying students to places they have not previously felt confident to enter such as the local government offices. Tannia likens the effect of these experiences to 'peeling one layer at a time and you're opening up and your confidence is building'. Increased confidence and self-belief are the first transformations we see in students involved in the campaign (Williamson & Boughton 2020; Boughton & Williamson, 2019) so it is not surprising that it also emerges as one of the most significant and immediate impacts on staff. One of the consequences of increased confidence is having the courage to speak up more. This is particularly true for Mary, who throughout the campaign transformed from silent observer to vocal participant. However, as Mary and Tannia both point out, they have

always had the ability and opportunity to speak out on issues that matter to them, but 'there was something that stopped us'. A main catalyst for the reclaiming of voice is the close working relationship that formed between us, as local and national staff.

This relationship developed as a result of close collaboration over the duration of the campaign. Mary and Tannia undertook structured in-service training with Deborah and Frances in their capacity as LFLF professional staff. The training began with two weeks on-site training, learning about the three-phase structure of the Yes, I Can! model and the theory of popular education. Mary and Tannia as well as the local facilitators in turn taught the national staff about their community,

including how low English literacy is experienced and understood in their context. Collectively, we, worked out how to undertake community mobilisation and socialisation work (Phase One of the campaign). A similar three week training program was held prior to the start of the basic literacy lessons (Phase Two) and four days training before Post Literacy (Phase Three). During each phase, this 'pre-service' training and preparation was supplemented with daily and weekly sessions, conducted on-site or by teleconference, doing action–reflection and lesson preparation.

In particular, it was this structured practice of critical reflection in which we critically reflected as individuals and as a group on our own culture and practice in doing our job, shared ideas, problem-solved, devised actions and together learnt how to improve our own practice. Tannia explains the impact of this reflective practice:

> *When we get the feedback ... and the way you [Deborah] and Frances see Mary and I through your eyes ... I guess it's something we don't see ourselves. We doubt ourselves too much, that we can't do things that we can do but when you see us that way, it inspires us and makes us want to do more.*

A corollary of this newfound confidence and voice is the willingness to challenge the status quo. For Tannia, this involved renegotiating personal relationships, as she describes:

> *I think we need to take our rightful place in relationships, in community as women. In your relationship there's problems going on or domestic violence but we can step up and say "I'm not going to do that anymore; this is how it's going to be". And as a community member, it's starting to get involved in meetings, in schools, in community gatherings, just to take our rightful place and start speaking up and having our say so we can encourage others to also do that and then be able to empower other women so they can take that leadership.*

The above extract clearly shows the cascading impact of personal transformation that the local *maestras* have undergone as a result of teaching and learning in the literacy campaign. By undergoing transformation in their own lives, Mary and Tannia have been empowered to address inequalities in their own relationships and then to more actively engage and advocate at the community level.

We argue that these changes are the result of the new identities, understandings and knowledge we have formed through the dialectical relationship that is at the heart of the literacy campaign model. This relationship is part of what Giroux (1988, p. 73) characterises as a radical theory of literacy and voice, which he argues:

> *… must remain attentive to Freire's claim that all critical educators are also learners. This is not merely a matter of learning about what students might know; it is more importantly a matter of learning how to renew a form of self-knowledge through an understanding of the community and culture that actively constitute the lives of one's students [our emphasis] …*

This is far more than walking in each other's shoes; in becoming critical educators, all four of us have engaged in a process of questioning our own self-knowledge. This process is a direct result of repositioning ourselves as learners and teachers simultaneously. In the literacy classes that form part of the Aboriginal adult literacy campaign, each lesson starts with a positive message, and the first message in the first lesson is simply 'the gate is open'. Each time someone with low English literacy walks with their local facilitator or coordinator and their campaign adviser through that gate, each of us learns something new; and as these learnings come together, we are building our joint understanding, our collective consciousness of the reality we share. That reality is the product of a history of unequal educational provision, a history through which some people have become educated while others have not. We have always been part of that same reality, but none of us could see it from the other's standpoint. Our solidarity, if it existed at all, was abstract, not the concrete solidarity which emerges from a jointly lived experience. The emergence of this new solidarity consciousness is what Freire calls conscientisation (Freire, 1970).

Early in the training of new maestras, we all watch Catherine Murphy's *Maestra*. Despite the audio being in Cuban Spanish and despite the fact that we must read subtitles to follow the story, we see and feel the story in new ways. This is because by watching the film together, we are also seeing it from each other's world view. Local facilitators and coordinators like Mary and Tannia see a possibility for themselves and their communities, the possibility that their communities, like the Cuban people of 1961, can learn to read and write and can become people who

will be able to speak and be heard by those who are educated. The key message is that it can be done, because others have done it before them.

The practice as it is portrayed on the screen also produces a new consciousness for the non-Aboriginal staff. Those who are more educated and literate must also go through that 'open gate', just as much as the local staff and students do. None of us can ask another – student, teacher, trainer or community member to go through, or help another through, unless we are prepared to go through it ourselves. What lies on the other side of that gate is not something any of us already know. It is, in fact, a new knowledge, a new consciousness, a new understanding of the world which we inhabit together; and of what we can do and must do to change it. We view the insights gained through our close collaboration in the literacy campaign as "movement knowledge", or the knowledge a social movement collectively constructs in the process of action (Cox & Fominyana, 2009).

This movement knowledge is consolidated and sustained by the campaign model. The curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation and research – all components of the campaign model that both local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff are actively involved and trained in – draw on the techniques of critical reflection, dialogue, active participation and story-telling. It is these components that are intrinsic to the literacy campaign as an expression of Freirean-inspired popular education and therefore intrinsic to social transformation. And yet the literacy campaign is more than a model; it is also a philosophy and a practice. Its core values are compassion, solidarity and the right to learn, to speak and to be heard. In order for the campaign impacts at the individual and community level to be sustained and indeed for the campaign as a movement to be sustainable, we argue that these values must be embodied by campaign staff.

Conclusion

This paper has presented one of the most significant findings of a longitudinal impact study of the Aboriginal adult literacy campaign of which this study is one part; that is, that the transformation that has been shown to occur in graduates of the campaign also takes place in the staff. Further, we argue that the impacts on students and communities are the direct result of the dialectical relationship between not only the local staff and their students but also between the local staff and

the national staff. This relationship positions learners as teachers and teachers as learners. The new knowledge and embodiment of the values of compassion, solidarity and rights are acquired through the pedagogic relationship between teacher and student, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, action and reflection.

Moreover, what we have understood and are embodying is that leadership is a pedagogical act. That is, at its core, leadership is about teaching people how to take more control over their lives and encouraging them to have the confidence to take steps towards an alternate life that they envisage for themselves. Further, through our shared experiences in the campaign and this action–reflection project, we have come to understand that the campaign and its objectives are only sustainable to the extent that the relationships we have developed are. In this way, we, along with the students of the campaign, their families and the communities as a whole have taken the first step in building a movement for transformation.

The social relations of western NSW Aboriginal people with the wider society of which they are a part is characterised by massive inequality. The Aboriginal Adult Literacy campaign takes a few small steps towards bridging the gap between the more educated and the less educated. The objective of the literacy campaign is not the low literate gaining literacy to move closer to the literate but rather both sides reaching toward the other so that the conditions – the lack of shared knowledge, understanding and solidarity – that produced the gap between literate and non-literate no longer exists. Through the opportunity the literacy campaign creates and the reflective dialogue captured in this paper, new possibilities emerge for us all; the possibility of working together in ways we might never otherwise have done and the co-creation of new knowledge, new skills and new perspectives.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions and feedback provided by Bob Boughton in the writing of this paper.

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