

# **The Cuban ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign in Aboriginal Australia: An alternative to commodified education.**

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## Statement of originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.



Lia Weitzel

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the implementation of the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in Indigenous Australian communities in north west New South Wales (NSW). This thesis 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 thesis 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.

The rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s has sparked the increased presence of commodification of social services in Australia, including education. This thesis focuses on the commodification of social services, including education, which has been described as a process consisting of three elements. These three elements include marketisation, competition, and a new perceived use value of the social service. The commodification of education in Australia has informed and transformed the educational ethos used by successive Australian governments when trying to ameliorate Indigenous disadvantage.

The Cuban educational ethos is guided by the work of José Martí, Fidel Castro and Paulo Freire, and is also guided by three key principles, which are solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment. Since the beginning of its revolution in 1959, Cuba has based its approach to education on these principles and the work of these prominent figures. Notably, Cuba implemented a national mass literacy campaign in 1961, in which it eradicated illiteracy in Cuba within a year.

This thesis suggests that the 'Yes, I Can' campaign has been able to offer an alternative approach to addressing Indigenous disempowerment in Australia because it represents a less commodified, more empowering approach to education. The 'Yes, I Can' campaign model mobilises entire communities in order to develop an enduring culture of learning in each hosting community. This thesis contributes an analysis of the differences in educational approach between Australia and Cuba, which are reflected in the relative success of 'Yes, I Can' in raising literacy in rural and remote Indigenous communities in NSW.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The written word is a form of communication that has a crucial role for participation in contemporary economic, social and political life. The written word also facilitates the spread of knowledge through time and space. 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). There are approximately 774 million adults in the world who cannot read or write (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] Institute for Statistics, 2013). This number represents a staggering 15% of the global adult population. A notable percentage of these illiterate people live in countries that have enduring and standardised education systems that have been attended by most adults at some point in their lives (Leiner, 1987). Australia is one such country. In Australia in 2012, the national literacy rate was 96.3%, meaning that 620 000 Australian adults between 15 and 74 years old are unable to read and then extract information from a short paragraph on a familiar topic in English (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). While the national illiteracy rate is 3.7%, this number rises dramatically to between 40% and 65% for adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Ray, 2014). This overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians among those people who experience low levels of literacy reveals a systemic failure of the education system. Thus, the struggle to increase English language literacy in Australia involves more than learning to read and write. The best approach to addressing this failure is open to political economic debate.

Kral (2009) explains that the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in Australian adult illiteracy is a symptom of more than two hundred years of colonial oppression. 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). This thesis will unpack the current situation of Indigenous disempowerment through education by examining how education in Australia has become increasingly commodified with the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s and how this process of commodification affects the nature and outcomes of education for Indigenous Australians. 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.

The Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign, better known as '*Yo, Sí Puedo*' in the Spanish speaking world, has been implemented in thirty countries across all the populated continents of the world, and has helped more than ten million people to learn to read and write (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, 'Yes, I Can' started in Australia and, as of June 2016, is being implemented in several rural and remote Aboriginal communities in north west New South Wales (NSW). In order to explain the success of the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in Australia, this thesis will use a broad definition of education. This broad definition incorporates indicators of success that can be clearly viewed through quantitative means, such as graduation rates, as well as indicators that have a qualitative nature, such as whether or not the students of education feel empowered by their participation in that education. This broad definition of education will be further discussed in Chapter 2 below.

This thesis sets out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the effects of the commodification of education on Indigenous Australians?
- Is the Cuban approach to education appropriate for responding to Australian Indigenous disempowerment?
- What does the 'Yes, I Can' campaign experience demonstrate about the interplay between empowerment, disempowerment and commodification in education in Australia?

In order to answer these questions, this thesis will employ the use of three main concepts; namely *education as empowerment*, *commodification*, and *Indigenous disempowerment*. By defining and then using these concepts to answer the research questions, this thesis aims to contribute to various broader political economic debates. One such debate centres around the role of markets in easing social inequality and a related debate is whether commodified education plays a role in reducing or reproducing social oppression. Another debate focuses on the use of reform or revolution as the most effective way to move towards progressive economic and social alternatives. A third debate centres around the role of education in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Although these debates have been argued by many political economists over time and might be considered to be 'tired' within academia, this does not mean that they have been solved, nor that they are irrelevant. The outcomes of these debates continue to affect the everyday realities of Indigenous Australians and it is therefore important to add voices to these debates that prioritise Indigenous opinions and perspectives.

Further to contributing to intellectual debates, this thesis also aims to make a practical contribution to the small, but growing, body of work that focuses on the priorities and principles of the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' literacy campaign. Despite its widespread use around the world, there are only a handful of academics who have written, especially in English, about the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign model.

While defining the scope of this thesis, it is also pertinent to point out that this thesis does not aim to perform a cost benefit analysis of the increase in literacy resulting from different

programs, but rather will focus on the social benefits of teaching literacy in an empowering way. Financially speaking, it is widely known and accepted that the economic benefits of increasing literacy can far outweigh the economic costs. For example, the 'Yes, I Can' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in Australia costs approximately \$14,000 per graduate (Boughton, 2016). This is roughly equivalent to a six week stay in jail, at \$300 per day. Given that literate people are able to make better life decisions, especially with regards to their health, their encounters with the criminal justice system and their engagement with the local educational institutions, it follows that literacy acquisition represents huge savings for governments (Beetson, 2016). The financial cost of the campaign is an important aspect for consideration. However, in utilising a broad definition of education and educational success that prioritises the qualitative gains that education can achieve in the communities in which it is implemented, this thesis will analyse the campaign based on social justice principles that such a definition requires.

The research approach used for this thesis has been a combination of literature review, on-site observation of the campaign in the town of Brewarrina, New South Wales, and collaboration with staff from the Literacy For Life Foundation, the University of New England and from the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples in Havana, Cuba.

### **Definitions**

This research will use several terms that are worth defining at the outset of the thesis:

The term *Indigenous Australian* will be used to describe people who identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. The term *Aboriginal Australian* will be used to refer to Indigenous Australians who come from mainland Australia and who have a cultural heritage that is distinct from that of Torres Strait Islanders.

The term *adult* will be used to describe a person aged over 15 years old, as this is the age of participants in the 'Yes, I Can' campaign in Australia.

The term *literacy* will be used to refer to written literacy, which is commonly understood as the ability to read and write spoken languages. Of course, the word 'literacy' can be used synonymously with 'knowledge', implying that there are many different types of literacy aside from language literacy. While it is important to recognise the existence and complexity of these other literacies that exist separately from written literacy, for example, oral literacy and land literacy, this thesis will concentrate on written literacy, which is of paramount importance to living today, especially in a Western-dominated society such as Australia.

The term *literacy campaign* will be used to refer to a coordinated educational approach aimed at not only achieving literacy, but also a wider range of social and political goals, including community empowerment, self-determination and economic independence (UNESCO, 2006).

The term *literacy campaign* can be contrasted with the narrower idea of a *literacy program*, which is used to describe an educational approach that aims to achieve literacy without necessarily worrying about the broader concerns held by a literacy campaign (Beetson, 2016).

The term *social services* will be used to refer to services that concern the welfare and wellbeing of the community and that are often provided by governments. Some examples of social services include education, health care, subsidised housing, rubbish collection and emergency services.

The term *adult basic education* will be used to describe a type of education in Australia, the essential purpose of which is to give educational opportunities to people who are beyond school age but do not have basic literacy and numeracy skills (Boughton & Durnan, 2005). Learning to write a text message, pay a bill, fill out a form or vote in government elections allows people to take charge of their life and therefore, even a small increase in the level of literacy of an illiterate adult can be profoundly empowering. However, not all adult basic education is liberating. In order to successfully teach an adult to read and write, a class program must have a focus on empowerment in order to overcome the social, economic and political barriers that adults have faced that have prevented them from learning literacy in the past.

### **Thesis overview**

Chapter 2 provides an outline of three concepts that are central to the analysis of this thesis. These three concepts are education as empowerment, commodification and Indigenous disempowerment. Chapter 3 proposes a three element explanation of the process of commodification of social services generally, and of education in Australia in particular. It then looks at how commodification affects Indigenous Australians by referencing two case studies of education in Australia, one an example of commodified education and the other an example of a capitalist response to the negative effects of commodification. Following this, Chapter 4 offers an explanation of the principles that reinforce educational philosophy in Cuba and how these principles have been applied to Cuban education, including international campaigns like 'Yes, I Can'. Chapter 5 will examine how the 'Yes, I Can' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in north west NSW represents a fundamentally different approach to Indigenous education than those used by Australian governments in the past. It will assess whether or not the campaign has been successful in empowering the Indigenous communities in which it has been implemented. Finally, Chapter 6 will offer some concluding remarks about the 'Yes, I Can' campaign in Australian Indigenous communities, and its implications for political economic debates.

## Chapter 2: Conceptual foundations

Any academic exercise requires the articulation of the key concepts used to frame and consider the subject matter. In this chapter, the three concepts of *education as empowerment*, *commodification* and *Indigenous disempowerment* will be explored and defined. These three concepts are relevant to an analysis of what the ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign has contributed to Indigenous literacy education in Australia.

The elucidation of these concepts will be complimented by an understanding of the theory of *Circular and Cumulative Causation* (CCC), which is a concept that is central to institutional economics (Berger, 2008). Gunnar Myrdal (1944) first developed CCC as a research hypothesis, in which he identified two processes happening concurrently: circular causation and its cumulative effect. He argued that circular causation becomes cumulative when a change in conditions results in a second set of circular causes that push the primary circle further. In other words, CCC does not simply describe a process of mutual causation but rather a process of causation that becomes increasingly intense and large. This process is not necessarily one that spirals down towards greater levels of inequality. It can also spiral up towards an increasingly equal society. The direction of the trend depends upon the primary causal factors that influence it. CCC is useful for understanding the three conceptual foundations of this thesis because it helps apply these abstract concepts to real world situations.

This chapter will define the concept of education as empowerment by first developing an understanding of education and empowerment as separate processes and then explaining how they can be linked. This will be followed by an explanation of the concept of commodification as a process consisting of three elements. Finally, this chapter will explain the concept of Indigenous disempowerment by developing an understanding of what it means to be Indigenous and how this status can lead to those people who identify as Indigenous to being disempowered. It will focus on Indigenous disempowerment in Australia specifically.

### **Education as empowerment**

A broad definition of education includes the concept of education as a process of learning for the purposes of personal and social development. The nature of this process is always contextual, because education is inextricably linked to the social values held by powerful interests in any given location. In fact, Atweh and Singh (2011) state that education can be seen as a form of social policy, representing a conscious effort to mould groups of people to a social ideal. Education systems reflect the mainstream political economic attitudes in a society and also the dominant cultural trends associated with popular social movements, including those connected with religion, gender, race and the environment. Youngman (2000) argues that these social values, whether they occur at a national or international level,

determine how a country will develop into the future and in turn shape the way that education is organised and assessed. At a societal level, education and mainstream social values have a reciprocal relationship, each feeding into and shaping the other. This means that, in fact, the very definition of education is contextual and cannot be explained without taking into account the mainstream values of the society in which it is developed and used.

The way in which education reflects the dominant values of a society is well illustrated through an examination of the teaching of Australian history in schools. The content and focus of the history curriculum in Australia is much debated due to the potential political economic implications that an understanding of an Indigenous perspective on Australian colonisation might expose (Parkes, 2007). In Australia, the representation of Australian history and the role of Indigenous perspectives are clearly important to mainstream political narratives. Therefore, the increased involvement of Indigenous perspectives in the teaching of Australian history is highly contested, to the point of being labelled 'history wars' (Parkes, 2007). The fact that this debate is portrayed as a war shows that what is taught in schools both reflects and reinforces the dominant Australian narrative.

Specifically, a society that advocates capitalist values of private ownership, growth and market efficiency also advocates an education system, and a definition of education, that is based on and promotes those same values. These capitalist values result in education systems that prioritise a narrow, commodified definition of education that is increasingly focused on training (Taylor, 1998). The capitalist emphasis on growth and individualism has spurred the popularity of *human capital theory*, which defines the knowledge and skills that a person gains through education and training in terms of that person's subsequent contribution to the growth of the economy (Beeson & Firth, 1998). Under human capital theory, the purpose of education is to contribute to a pool of human resources that can improve economic performance. Therefore, in a capitalist society such as Australia, written literacy education, which is a main focus of this thesis, is considered important for functioning in society in terms of achieving success in the workplace. The nature of capitalist, commodified literacy education will be further examined in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

In contrast, a socialist society, which endorses values of public ownership, solidarity and social equality, supports an education system that reflects those values. These socialist values result in an education system that support a broad definition of education that prioritises it as a tool for realising social justice goals, such as human dignity. These social justice goals prompt an analysis of who is participating in education, who the education system is best serving and who it is worst serving, as well as what perspectives are being taught and by who. Paulo Freire, a twentieth century Brazilian educator who is known as the father of critical pedagogy, claims that education should enable people to think for themselves by transforming knowledge into a conscious process of thought development and originality (Freire, 1975). This understanding of education can be distinguished from other types of learning, such as training, because it

deals with 'know why', rather than 'know how' (Essenhigh, 2000). While all education must include some element of training, and vice versa, the socialist definition of education represents an expanded level of learning, in that once a person knows why something works, they can start to apply that knowledge to other situations, and thus start to think for themselves (Nassif, 1994). Therefore, in a socialist society, such as Cuba, literacy education is prioritised as being an integral starting point for understanding and as a vital part of ensuring that its members lead a healthy, informed and self-determined life. The nature of socialist Cuban education will be further examined in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

In many respects, education is a means to an end and is important as training for economic growth and technological development. However, it is simultaneously an end in itself, providing the potential to fulfil and enrich the lives of individual people and thus, cumulatively, a whole society. Because of the origin of the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in socialist Cuba, this broadest definition of education is required to analyse its impact in Australian Indigenous communities.

A central concept in this thesis is *empowerment*, a concept that has a relationship to education. This is an elusive concept that can be difficult to pin down. This difficulty arises because it is almost impossible to create a definition for empowerment that can be universally applied to all contexts and, further, a widely applicable definition will most likely be vague (Page & Czuba, 1999). For example, the Macquarie Dictionary defines the verb 'empower' as an action "to cause (a person or group of people) to feel confident and in control of their own life" (Empower, 2009). While this definition does capture the essence of the concept, it is inadequate because it does not provide any description of why people do not have control over their lives in the first place or how control over one's life might be realised. However, this is not a reason to avoid discussing the concept of empowerment and applying it to an analysis of economic and social life. In fact, if anything, it is important to *not* shy away from these kinds of intangible concepts because they represent an attempt to conceptualise human satisfaction with life in order to better describe and comprehend the nuances of equality (Rappaport, 1984). The research in this thesis has been particularly influenced by the conception of empowerment provided by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, who used the concept to highlight inequality across Latin America.

This thesis 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 & Czuba, 1999). This ability to self-determine is linked to the existence of social and historical divisions, which form the basis for human identity. This is because social, economic and political discrimination has been, and is, based on these divisions, which include but are not limited to class, race, gender, religion, sexuality and disability. Any one person is made up of multiple identities and their level of empowerment is linked to the discrimination, or lack thereof, faced by the groups to which they belong (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994). 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.

If empowerment is a state of being, then it follows that it is possible to not be empowered. We can call this unempowered state of being, *disempowerment*. Disempowerment is a state of being that 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).

Recognition of the importance of histories through education has an important role to play in the creation and maintenance of empowerment and disempowerment. In the broadest sense, education, as discussed in the previous section, is empowering when it takes into account past and present forms of oppression and the way they impact contemporary social structures (Streck, 2008). This is because socially perceived inferiority is historical and can be either ameliorated or made worse, in part, by what and how educators teach. However, not all systems of education are empowering. This is due to the fact that 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 is a slippery concept because it is a state of being characterised by both a real and perceived feeling of control. Education that only tells a single biased version of history can still feel empowering for those people whose perspective is prioritised. These people can boast control over many aspects of their life, sometimes at the expense of the empowerment of other non-dominant groups. Despite this, Freire (1975) argues that such a biased education will cause members of the dominant group to develop a *false consciousness*. Those who have false consciousness hold an understanding of the world that is culturally biased and is therefore not an accurate reflection of social patterns and divisions. This is because education, when it is defined by capitalist interests, is designed to maintain the status quo and to produce a populace that is accepting of social and political inequality (Connell, 2013).

The dominant political and social values of a society are the most important factors that determine whether or not mainstream education will be empowering for a whole society. A society whose culture fosters solidarity and recognises the interdependence of all people is more likely to be successful in creating education that speaks to all its citizens (Lankshear, 1994). For example, the particular histories of oppressed people are often excluded from colonial education, which disempowers these people by implicitly defining them as an 'other'

(Barton, 1997). Empowerment for a whole society happens when the 'other' is not merely represented, but in fact, is allowed to represent itself. Through this process, all people, whether dominant or 'other', can 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.

Education can be particularly empowering when it allows people to participate in democratic processes with the knowledge of how society is built and maintained (Lyons, Smuts & Stephens, 2001). This requires an understanding of democracy as being more diverse than the liberal democratic status quo limited to a single vote every few years in a national election. It also includes the ability to argue coherently, hold meetings, make informed local decisions and practice personal autonomy. Ultimately, it is having the ability to participate fully in society that makes educational empowerment so important.

In this thesis, there will be an emphasis on a truly popular education that is focused towards empowerment for a whole society. Popular education can be understood as education for the benefit of all people, as opposed to education only for the benefit of powerful people and groups (Streck, 2008). Popular education recognises the existence of multiple perspectives on history and the impact these have on different areas of the world, and therefore breaks free from conventional education styles.

#### *Education as empowerment for adults*

Popular forms of education are most often used in adult basic education, which has a strong element of empowerment because it is designed to give adults the tools to participate in society, including basic literacy and numeracy skills. This type of educational empowerment can be particularly transformative when it happens as a part of adult education because adult empowerment is primarily about overcoming previous disempowerment.

The term *adult education* encompasses all types of adult education provision, from university, to vocational education and training courses and apprenticeships, to basic education. Adults have different needs to children and therefore, adult education should have different pedagogy, curriculum and teaching to that of child education. Thus, particularly in the context of adult education, the broad definition of education is necessary to analyse the value of education for adults. A focus on adult illiteracy is often unpopular in education policy and mainstream discourse because it highlights an apparent failing of mainstream schooling. Further, it implies that mainstream schooling is complicit in establishing social stratifications, in that it does not play an active role in preventing their occurrence on a large scale (Wickert, 1992).

## Commodification

Commodification is a central part of capitalist development and refers to the tailoring of a good or service for commercial exchange. 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 social services in Western countries such as Australia has been a symptom of the increasing dominance of neoliberal political ideology since the late 1970s (Knight, Lingard & 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 commodification of social services in particular is defined as the tailoring of social services for the purpose of exchange in markets. A *commodity* is a good or service that has been tailored for the specific purpose of exchange in markets. By its nature, a commodity will always be designed to satisfy human needs or wants, whether they are basic needs, such as provision of water and sanitation, or material desires, such as cars and massages. The process of commodification can be seen as consisting of three elements, including marketisation, competition and new perceived use value, outlined in this section.

The first element of commodification is marketisation, the development of markets for publicly provided goods and services. This is the process by which goods and services become bought and sold by consumers, rather than considered common or provided for free by government. The rise of neoliberalism during the 1980s brought with it mainstream beliefs about the efficiency of market forces (Beeson & Firth, 1998). Under neoliberalism, markets are purported to provide an optimal distribution of wealth, to be responsive to the needs of individuals and firms, and to encourage economic growth, through the interplay between supply and demand. Proponents of neoliberalism argue that, in order to operate in the most efficient and effective way possible, the behaviour of public institutions should mimic that of private institutions (Lynch, 2006). In this way, the services they provide become 'products' and the people who use them become 'clients' or 'customers'. In the case of education, the products are schools, curricula and extracurricular opportunities and the customers are students and their families. Further, according to the neoliberal perspective, fewer regulations placed on schools will lead to more innovative teaching and, therefore, better learning (Webb, Gulson & Pitton, 2014).

This leads to the second element, which is a resulting development of competition in these markets. Competition is the reason that proponents of neoliberalism promote markets as the best way to distribute resources. As consumers begin to buy products selectively, whether goods or services, the providers of those products find themselves in competition with each other in order to stay viable (Perry & Southwell, 2014). The very nature of competition means that it creates winners; those providers who can produce and sell their product in the most attractive way are able to draw in the most desirable consumers to buy their product and to help their product build and maintain a high reputation. However, on the flip side of the

competition coin are the losers; providers who are unable to attract desirable consumers. From the neoliberal perspective, inequality is not necessarily a problem, but rather can be an effective way to drive individuals to perform better and thus contribute more to the growth of the economy (Coburn, 2004).

The neoliberal mantra of market efficiency affects many aspects of education policy because public education institutions are placed in competition with private education institutions to attract the best performing students and teachers. For example, in Australia, students are expected to act as consumers and determine which educational institution is best by referring to league tables, measures of productivity and staff calibre when choosing an educational institution (Lynch, 2006). They are required to weigh up the advantages and risks of each institution and to bear the burden of any pitfalls privately. The existence of this sort of competitive market for education is an indication that education is becoming further commodified.

Finally, the development of competitive markets leads to a transformation in the perceived use value of social services. *Use value* is derived from the intrinsic value a good or service holds as a thing that is useful or desirable. The final element in the process of commodification occurs when there is a change in the dominant narrative of how and why a commodity is perceived to be useful. Education has a diverse range of characteristics that can be used to understand its use value. Education can be useful in that its acquisition helps a person to get a job, gives them tools to develop a sense of autonomy and high self-esteem, allows them to engage in cultural activities, supports them in participating in democratic processes, and enables them to contribute to economic growth. These characteristics of usefulness are inherent to all types of education, whether commodified or not. 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).

Within the education sector, the introduction of fee structures, institutional ranking systems and business style relationships are indicators of commodification and are symptomatic of wider changes in the way that society relates to social services. The neoliberal emphasis on the concept of human capital is an example of this wider change. Through the understanding of people as merely 'human capital', the individual becomes commodified, viewed as a service that is created for and sold to the market economy (Levidow, 2002). Further, the marketised focus on quantitative, visible educational goals means that the social justice goals of education, contained within the broad definition used in this thesis, can become lost (Wickert, 1992). These social justice goals concern who is participating in education, who the education system is best serving and who it is worst serving, as well as what perspectives are being taught and by who.

While these three elements offer a guide to the process of commodification, they do not necessarily occur one after the other, nor do they necessarily influence an entire market or sector. For example, the majority of school and university level education in Australia is state owned and is therefore not strictly commodified. Though privatisation is not universal, the process of commodification in privatised areas of the education market has led to market-like elements creeping in to public education provision, creating competition within the education sector. The spread of commodification through an economy is a process that externalises social inequalities, human relationships and other concerns that are not able to be bought and sold in the marketplace (Ball, 2004). The process of commodification has both originated from, and responded to, capitalism in its wealthiest environments (Levidow, 2002). Instead of focussing on qualitative morals and social achievements, commodification brings the focus of political economic discourse onto quantitative and profit-related concerns.

### **Indigenous disempowerment**

At the international level, there has been resistance to the adoption of an official definition of 'Indigenous peoples' (Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions & The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). The reason given is that Indigenous peoples have a right to define themselves by the characteristics they feel are most important. Therefore, this thesis will use a broad working definition of an Indigenous person as a person who identifies as a descendant of the original occupants of a land that has been colonised and who is recognised as Indigenous by their local Indigenous community. While this is by no means a comprehensive definition of Indigeneity, it will be used in this thesis because it is a definition derived from the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSW Aboriginal Land Council, 2009). This definition gives us a starting point from which to better understand the concept of Indigenous disempowerment.

Disempowerment is an issue that lies at the heart of Indigeneity, as the very description of an Indigenous person refers to someone who has been dispossessed of their land. It is not disputed that colonialism had, and continues to have, a severe impact on Indigenous communities around the world. Indigenous communities experience ongoing effects from the trauma caused by invasion and settlement, to the maintenance of historical racist policies. The paternalistic nature of colonialism means that Indigenous people have rarely been given the opportunity to learn in their own languages and to have autonomy over the way their histories are told and understood.

*Indigenous Australians* are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who first owned and inhabited the land which we now call Australia. Since colonisation, Australian history has been marred by a record of genocide, violence and institutional and cultural discrimination aimed at Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Stemming from the dispossession of their land and the displacement of their communities, Indigenous disadvantage has been

cemented by the intergenerational effects of poverty and a loss of cultural and economic autonomy. Indigenous Australians are overrepresented in jail, have low literacy rates and can expect to live at least ten years less than non-Indigenous Australians. By comparison to Indigenous people from Canada, New Zealand and the USA, Australia's Indigenous people have the worst overall rates of relative socio-economic disadvantage within the wider population (Gray & Beresford, 2008).

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 & Jamieson, 2016). The education system in Australia has been one of the central tools used under these policies to disempower Indigenous Australians (Gray & 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.

This situation has resulted in a circular and cumulative pattern of under-achievement, which only serves to further reinforce Indigenous disempowerment. CCC is a useful tool for understanding the situation of Indigenous disempowerment at present in Australia. Because CCC is a theory of interrelatedness, it can be used as a conceptual tool to investigate cycles of inequality that span economic, political and social realms. CCC rejects the staple neoliberal concept of equilibrium and stands in opposition to the idea that economic growth has an ameliorative effect on development. By applying CCC to the context of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, it is possible to connect the process of Indigenous disempowerment from its origins in British occupation in the late 1700s directly to the present day situation, which sees Indigenous Australians still suffering from racist and culturally misguided policies and attitudes, as well as the effects of past policies. The intervening 228 years have seen a circular and cumulative process of policies and approaches that have, in turn, acted as a catalyst for the real and perceived lack of control that many, or even most, Indigenous Australians have over their lives. As the situation has spiralled, there has not been a catalyst significant enough to reset the trajectory of causation.

CCC helps with understanding intergenerational disadvantage through an examination of relatively low levels of formal education held by Indigenous Australians. One major factor associated with low academic performance in Indigenous school students is the low levels of

formal education held by their parents and caregivers (Zubrick et al, 2006). Less than one quarter of Indigenous students complete year 12, a statistic that lies in stark contrast to the two thirds of non-Indigenous students who finish high school (Prior, 2013). Low levels of education hinder the ability of adults to help family members with school work and to communicate with the school about any issues. Further, more than 50% of Aboriginal students are significantly behind their non-Indigenous counterparts in English competence when they start kindergarten (Prior, 2013). This situation is further compounded by the fact that Standard Australian English is not the first language of many Indigenous children and also by the fact that Indigenous oral traditions are distinct from Western ones. Thus, the cycle of non-achievement for Indigenous children is continued and compounded in future generations. The fact that so many Indigenous children do not have the necessary assumed knowledge before they enter mainstream primary schooling sets in motion a circular and cumulative process of Indigenous disempowerment in education.

The high illiteracy rates in Indigenous Australia that arise from the failure to engage with the formal education system have circular and cumulative impacts beyond the education sphere. In outback Australia, driving is one of the only forms of available transport, including for regular activities such as grocery shopping, which can require driving a number of hours away. Illiteracy prevents people from being able to sit the test to get a driver licence, which is a written multiple-choice test presented on a computer. Thus, many people proceed to drive without a licence and with less ability to engage with road signs and road rules. This situation has led to many Indigenous people being repeatedly fined and eventually imprisoned for driving without a licence as well as for other traffic infringements. This shows the direct contribution of illiteracy to the imprisonment of Indigenous people, which is then further compounded by the barriers to filling out forms in applying for parole that illiteracy creates. When they are released, these adults often have no choice but to resume driving without a licence. This chain of events is an example of the circular and cumulative nature of Indigenous disempowerment.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the main concepts that this thesis will use to describe and analyse the story of the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in Australia. They help to explain the current context of education in Australia and especially the Indigenous experience of the Australian education system.

## **Chapter 3: Commodification of education in Australia**

Commodification is a process that has occurred across the world and its effects can be observed in a range of sectors and industries. With the rise of neoliberalism in Australia since the 1980s, commodification has been widespread, affecting a number of social services, including the education system. Within this context, Indigenous people have experienced the negative effects of commodification of education more intensely, as they already live in disempowered circumstances.

This chapter will outline the process of commodification of education in Australia in terms of the three elements of commodification outlined in Chapter 2. It will show this process with the use of a case study of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Adult Basic Education, a program developed in Australia. It will then explain some of the ways this commodification process in education has affected Indigenous Australians. Finally, Direct Instruction, a program from the USA that is used in Australian primary schools, will be reviewed in order to investigate the type of response that is typical of Australian governments when trying to ameliorate Indigenous disempowerment.

### **The commodification of Australian education**

The post-war history of education policy in Australia can be divided into two main periods, corresponding to wider shifts in policy approach. Early policy revolved around widespread provision of social services, and during the 1970s, education policy was focused on creating a dual approach to policy making that incorporated both top-down and bottom-up considerations (Knight, Lingard & Bartlett, 1994). The period that is relevant to the current discussion is from the beginning of the 1980s, which is when neoliberalism became the dominant ideology used to justify an increase in the commodification of social services (Navarro, 1998).

Neoliberal political ideology, and corresponding neoclassical economic theory, rose to prominence during the 1980s in Australia. This approach fostered an increased emphasis on individualism, smaller government and self-regulating market mechanisms, as well as a general turn against the public provision of social services (Beeson & Firth, 1998). During the 1980s, the Australian government implemented many neoliberal microeconomic policies, including floating the Australian dollar, deregulating the financial sector, deregulating oil markets and removing most foreign investment regulation (Hawke, 1989). The growth of neoliberalism contributed to a growing discourse dominated by managerialism, which painted policy decisions as value-neutral, rather than as representing normative ideology (Beeson & Firth, 1998). In 1986, the then treasurer of Australia, Paul Keating, suggested that Australia was in danger of becoming a 'banana republic' if it did not start integrating its national economy with the international economy. Keating's statement paved the way for further overhauls of Australian institutions and public policy, which were euphemistically

called 'structural adjustments' (Beeson & Firth, 1998). During this time, the 1989 Garnaut Report, "Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy" was released, which outlined a need for Australian trade liberalisation especially with Asia, and later, the 1993 Hilmer Report was released, which recommended that competitiveness in the market be the foundation shaping economic reform in Australia.

This turn towards neoliberalism during the 1980s represented the beginning of a process of commodification of many social services, including education (Connell, 2013). The commodification of services that have previously been considered as social services is an outcome of the actions of powerful vested interests that utilise the neoliberal mantra of the primacy of market mechanisms and small government to increase their profits and power (Ball, 2004). Within this process of commodification, including in the education sector, it is possible to identify the three elements of commodification, including marketisation, competition and change in perceived use value, that have been proposed in the previous chapter above.

The first element of commodification is the increasing presence of markets for social services, which have led to a decrease in public funding for education. The development of the idea that social services can be bought and sold is the initial, and perhaps the most obvious, evidence of their transformation from social services to commodities. Within the Australian education context, and especially adult education, increasing exposure to capitalist markets and continually decreased public funding has led to cost saving as a driving factor to fund education (Marginson, 2004). In the late 1980s, the Australian federal government introduced a new discourse of education policy that reflected the belief that high levels of education spending were unsustainable because they were harmful to economic growth (Beeson & Firth, 1998). Education institutions came under pressure to privatise their funding sources, for example, the development of links with previously unrelated private enterprises. One such example is the marketing campaigns run by major supermarkets during which shoppers collect stickers that represent tokens to go towards funding learning resources for their local school. By 1992, Australia ranked fifteenth out of the seventeen countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in terms of education spending, which comprised only 3% of GDP at the time (Morrow, Blackburn & Gill, 1998). This partial withdrawal of government funding represents a transferral of responsibility for education from the government to the market and was part of a wider move to marketise and privatise education.

The second element of commodification is the growth of competition, which is an increasingly common aspect of all areas of education in Australia, from primary schooling to TAFE and universities. As social services, including education, become marketised, the different institutions that provide these services face increasing competition for funding from both private businesses and government. According to neoliberal theorists, competition inspires

institutional innovation and originality because institutions, whether public or private, are given the responsibility of attracting students, teachers and funding. Therefore, successive Australian federal and state governments have operated under the neoliberal belief that the market economy and its resulting competition will have a positive effect on the quality of educational institutions. During the 1970s, in an effort to inspire competition, the nature of funding structures for education began to change (Perry & Southwell, 2014). This change reflected, in part, a growing trend towards private schooling, something which was encouraged by governments in Australia because private enterprise was considered to be good for competition. Between 1988 and 1994, government spending at the state level increased by 42% for students in private schools, but only 7% for students in state schools (Morrow, Blackburn & Gill, 1998).

Another example of the increasing competition present in the Australian education system was the 2010 launch of a website called 'My School', run and funded by the federal government. The website formed part of a so-called 'education revolution' and provides detailed profiles of Australian schools with the aim of giving caregivers and students the information they need in order to choose the right school for their child. Updated annually, My School allows its users to compare and contrast different aspects of every Australian primary and secondary school, including attendance rates, academic performance, income, gender distribution and cultural diversity. The online publishing of easily accessible league tables for Australian schools is believed to encourage inter-school competition and represents a prioritisation by government of freedom of market choice (Ball, 2004). League tables such as these treat educational institutions as commodities to be compared by individuals for the purpose of choosing an institution, and are evidence of a consumer driven education system.

The final element of commodification is the change in perception of education as primarily holding use value for the purpose of economic growth, rather than for personal development or social justice (Ball, 2004). In the education sector this shift often manifests as the understanding of education as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Specifically, since the 1980s, educational goals have increasingly been defined in narrow and quantitative economic terms of efficiency and competition, rather than in broader, qualitative social terms of personal development, democratic citizenship or social justice (Beeson & Firth, 1998). For example, education has come to be couched as an important tool for enhancing Australia's competitiveness in international markets (Connell, 2013). It is reasoned that a more skilled workforce is better able to contribute to the innovation and flexibility needed for growth in capitalist economies. An early example of this rationale in policy was the 1988 White Paper commissioned by the minister for education, John Dawkins, which positioned education, and especially tertiary education, as a top priority for economic structural adjustments. One result of the Dawkins White Paper was the consolidation and amalgamation of higher education institutions under the principle of economies of scale, a move which framed education as part of a broader drive for profit (Harrold, 1988). This trend towards couching the use value of

education in terms of its ability to increase economic growth and international competitiveness has allowed education policy to become less focused on fostering equality.

Another example of the transformation of educational use value can be found by examining the way that literacy has been perceived in Australia since the 1980s. In the early 1980s, one million Australian adults were functionally illiterate (Grant, 1987). Despite this large number, prior to the 1980s, the area of adult literacy was largely considered to be a policy issue for poorer countries, not rich countries like Australia. However, during the late 1980s, the OECD ran surveys in Australia, Canada and the USA for a report on adult illiteracy that was eventually published in 1992. This report brought attention to the importance of adult literacy as a tool for encouraging economic growth. Given the increasing dominance of human capital theory at the time, this perception of adult literacy resonated with Australian policy makers and adult literacy became a mainstream issue (Wickert, 1997). This reinvention of literacy as having use value for its ability to expand economic growth meant that, over the course of the 1980s, policy dealing with adult literacy became subject to a dominant discourse of human capital theory (Wickert, 1997). Thus, amid this growing commodification of literacy, this discourse redefined illiteracy as a failure of each individual, rather than a failure of national and local social structures. Indeed, addressing literacy from the neoliberal perspective has allowed successive federal and state governments to redirect attention away from these structural problems and towards a focus on the individual and their particular shortcomings (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2007).

As neoliberalism has been the dominant ideology of government over the last thirty-five years, education in Australia has become increasingly commodified. The development of markets for education has led to competition between institutions, students and teachers and has also resulted in a focus on the primary use value of education as being one of economic growth, at the cost of a prioritisation of the empowering effects that education can have on its recipients. This leads to stronger markets for education and a stronger desire to compete for bigger savings and more funding.

#### *Case study: TAFE NSW Adult Basic Education*

The area of vocational education and training (VET) has become one of the most commodified sectors of the education system in Australia (Long, 2012). TAFE (Technical and Further Education) includes a number of state government-owned vocational education and training organisations that cater to over one million students across Australia. Most TAFE institutions initially developed as part of government education departments across Australia as early as the 1880s and, since this time, TAFE has had a near monopoly in providing education and training outside the ambit of secondary schools and universities (Goozee, 2001). TAFE offers vocational training, as well as basic or 'second-chance' education. TAFE is an education service that is provided by governments at the state or territory level and therefore it is appropriate to focus on TAFE NSW because this is the state where the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign

is also being implemented. TAFE NSW consists of ten institutes across the state of NSW, facilitating access to TAFE for students in both urban and rural areas. TAFE NSW is the major, and often only, provider of adult basic literacy classes to Indigenous people in rural and remote NSW.

As commodification, and particularly competition, has developed in the education sector in Australia, government funding for VET has been increasingly directed away from TAFE and towards private colleges. The privatisation and marketisation of the VET sector has meant that TAFE now competes for government funding and for students with a raft of private institutions. The Commonwealth Government spent roughly \$1.7 billion in funding for the VET sector over the 2013-14 financial year, 40% of which was allocated competitively (Australian Education Union, 2015). This shows that market oriented and competitive behaviour is pervasive throughout the VET sector.

Over time, changes made in TAFE by state and federal governments have proven to be prophetic of the type of reform that was in store for other Australian schools and universities (Seddon, Angus & Brown, 1998). Thus, many TAFE colleges, staff and students have borne the brunt of the commodification of education in Australia. Since the 1980s, TAFE has seen a lowering of training quality, a price hike in student fees and an increase in the proportion of casual teachers (Goozee, 2001). Also important in this process is the increase in management staff who specialise in cutting costs but who do not connect with the traditional education sector networks of unions and professional associations (Long, 2012).

Every TAFE NSW institute has been subject to the commodification processes that have occurred across the wider education system. TAFE is the main provider of VET in rural and remote areas. For Indigenous Australians living in rural and remote areas, TAFE is often the only option available for further education (Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2014). This means that the level of competition in rural and remote areas of NSW is low. However, the effects of commodification pervade all parts of TAFE NSW, including rural and remote areas even though competition is low. This is because all TAFE Institutes are subject to changes in funding structures that are determined at the federal and state level. Therefore, while urban institutes face the effects of competition more strongly than rural institutes, this does not mean that rural institutes are untouched by the process of commodification.

TAFE NSW runs a range of courses that are specifically for Indigenous Australian students who wish to build up the skills and confidence required to succeed in mainstream education. Many of these targeted courses are free of charge. However, these courses assume that students already have a moderate level of English literacy skills and for the up to 65% of Indigenous Australians who are not functionally literate in English, these courses are out of reach. Instead, these people without English literacy can access TAFE's Adult Basic Education (ABE)

program to gain basic literacy and numeracy skills. In NSW, TAFE ABE is run by the Open Training & Education Network (OTEN), which acts as the correspondence arm of TAFE. OTEN ABE offers two courses that aim to improve English literacy levels, each one aiming to have its students functioning at the Australian Core Skills Framework Levels 1 and 2 respectively (OTEN, 2016).

TAFE NSW prioritises the process of commodification through its tendency to use cost-effective, but inappropriate methods of enrolment and teaching. One side-effect of this commodification has been the sidelining of empowerment as a primary goal in education (Forward, 2015). In order to achieve this, TAFE's educations would have to recognise and be tailored to the specific past experiences of its students (Streck, 2008). Further, because OTEN is a correspondence branch of TAFE, the majority of OTEN ABE courses are offered online. This presents issues of accessibility for people who do not have access to the internet and also for people who struggle with literacy. As the next section explains, this is the usual situation for Indigenous people in the education system in Australia.

### **Australian Indigenous experiences of commodified education**

Since colonisation, Australian education systems have played a key role in shaping the status of Indigenous Australians (Herbert, 2012). Currently, on average, Indigenous students have lower school retention rates, lower attendance rates and lower school results than their non-Indigenous counterparts. While some indicators are improving slowly over time, such as Year 1 commencement, Year 3 reading and writing skills, and post-secondary participation, in large part, Indigenous education continues to exist in a state of stagnation and the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remain wide (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2014a). Unfortunately, in the adult education sector, Indigenous achievement is also low. The completion rates for Aboriginal people living in western NSW and studying VET courses, which are predominantly supplied by TAFE NSW, are only 14%, reflecting the failure of this model of education provision (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER] VOCSTATS, 2014). These statistics do not even take into account the number of Aboriginal people who cannot or do not access courses for many reasons. TAFE makes serious and commendable efforts to make their courses accessible to rural students, however, the take-it-or-leave-it education model used by TAFE and OTEN does not resonate with many Indigenous adults in rural communities because it does not aim specifically to change the learning culture of each community. The history that has led to this entrenched state of inequality has been the history of Indigenous disempowerment in educational policy decision making, compounded by the commodification of the education system in Australia more generally.

Australian Indigenous people were included in the mainstream state schooling system for the first time in the 1960s, following many years of legislated exclusion based on government policies of racial segregation (Korff, 2016). The election of the Whitlam Government in 1972

led to major changes in the way that Indigenous education was viewed. The 1970s saw the introduction of educational programs, such as the bilingual 'two-way' teaching concept conceived by Gurindji elder Pincher Nyurrmiyarri, which aimed to teach Indigenous languages and also to present a fair interpretation of both Indigenous and Western culture (Herbert, 2012). However, very few of these policy adjustments had long-lasting effects and Indigenous people continued to suffer within an education system that catered for the learning needs of the dominant white culture.

Since the 1970s, policy developments in Indigenous affairs have been characterised by inconsistency, with both sympathetic and unsympathetic policies approaches, sometimes existing at the same time. An example of simultaneous, inconsistent policies can be found during the late 1980s. The 1988 Dawkins White Paper adversely affected Indigenous education because it limited consultation and instead transferred policy-making control to the education minister and his department. This had a disempowering effect on many Indigenous communities, as decisions about their welfare and education were increasingly made by non-Indigenous people in positions of power. In contrast, only one year later the Australian government developed the first education policy in Australian history to be specifically tailored to the needs of Indigenous students (Herbert, 2012). The 1989 National Aboriginal Education Policy was aimed at all levels of education, from pre-school to university. It contradicted the policy direction of the Dawkins White Paper in that it received widespread approval from Indigenous educators and communities for its guarantee of Indigenous inclusion in the planning of educational institutions. The simultaneous application of these two very different approaches is an example of the haphazard approach taken by Australian governments towards Indigenous affairs and is symptomatic of the lack of control that Indigenous people have over policies that concern them. Further, even if a program does honour local traditions, it can still be cut by the government for economic reasons, even if a community still wants or needs it. Thus, there is a lack of community control over what programs run in a community and how long they stay for. Perhaps the only thing that has remained consistent in Indigenous affairs is the pattern of institutionalised powerlessness experienced by Indigenous Australians as non-Indigenous governments have continued to dominate decision-making processes about Indigenous education (Gray & Beresford, 2008).

During the Howard era from 1996 until 2007, the situation of Indigenous disempowerment deteriorated with the implementation of policies that further limited Indigenous representation in government. For example, in 2004, the Howard Government dissolved the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which was a body of elected representatives established in 1990 to oversee policy developments in Indigenous affairs. Another infamous policy development during this time was the implementation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, better known as 'The Intervention'. This policy instituted the use of income management, which acted to further disempower Indigenous Australians by removing their ability to make decisions about how they could spend their own

money. During this time, education policy was overshadowed by these well-known policies. However, the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in education access, participation and outcomes expanded and remained wide (Herbert, 2012).

This history of Indigenous education policy has occurred within the wider process of commodification of education, as described in the previous section. It is worthwhile to examine how the three elements of commodification of education apply specifically to Indigenous education in order to fully understand the context of this thesis. The process of marketisation of the Australian education system, the first element in commodification, has resulted in policy that prioritises revenue recovery and savings over changes in pedagogy and curriculum. This focus has meant that minority groups, especially Indigenous Australians, have been left behind because catering to their needs requires more money per individual and produces less economic reward than would be spent and gained from educating non-Indigenous Australians (Gray & Beresford, 2008; SCRGSP, 2014b). This is partly because Indigenous people represent a small part of the national population and also because many live in rural and remote areas, meaning they have minimal influence in markets. Further, even if the extra resources required are put into Indigenous education, Indigenous forms of work, such as land management and custodianship of cultural heritage and history, are not seen as valuable because they do not necessarily create monetary profits (Altman, 2010).

As markets for 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 & Southwell, 2014). The fact that very few initiatives to improve Indigenous education are informed by the communities in which they will be run is perhaps the most influential factor contributing to Indigenous under-achievement in education (Prior, 2013). For a program to be successful in any community, it must speak to the traditions and cultural trends of that community. Therefore, programs that do not have collaborative partnerships between community leaders, families and education institutions that increase local ownership of education are less likely to produce significant and lasting outcomes (Langton & Rhea, 2009). If collaborative relationships between educational institutions and communities are not actively encouraged by a program, it is almost impossible to ensure that students will be able to identify with the education they are receiving. An example of how mainstream education does not communicate with the Indigenous community is the very small number of teachers who are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (Zubrick et al, 2006). Less than 2% of primary school teachers and less than 1% of secondary school teachers in Australian schools identify as being Indigenous (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Further, non-Indigenous teachers are often not adequately prepared to work with Indigenous students and struggle to understand that there is no single method that can be universally applied to teaching Indigenous people (Herbert, 2012). One consequence of members of minorities not

identifying with mainstream education is that they develop a pattern of self-preservation by designating academic achievement to be a white person's domain (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This lack of identification with mainstream education can set in motion a circular and cumulative cycle of disempowerment because, for example, when a member of an Indigenous community fails to perform to their potential, they are able to shrug this off as something that is 'white' and therefore not desirable (Pechenkina, 2016). This contributes to a culture of under-achievement among Indigenous students that is further spurred on by peer-pressure to not excel. The market focus on supply and demand pushes the importance of community participation in education to the background as education is increasingly thought of as a culturally neutral product to be bought and sold by clients.

Competition, the second element of commodification, has also had detrimental effects on Indigenous education because, for several reasons, Indigenous Australians are not on a level playing field with non-Indigenous Australians. One reason for this is that not all students and educational institutions can compete in the market equally. If equal outcomes in education are the goal, and equal access to education is desired, then competition puts these goals at risk, because it advantages people and groups who have more monetary wealth while it disadvantages those who have less. Market competition is a particular problem for Indigenous people, whose employment rate for working age adults is 46%, compared with 76% for other Australians (Forrest, 2014). Further, almost half of Indigenous adults aged 18-64 rely on government support as their primary source of income, compared to 17% of the general Australian population in that age group (Forrest, 2014). Further, those Australians who are wealthy and therefore in a position to compete and exercise their market-given right to choose will inevitably make choices that reinforce their own class interests, thus increasing, not ameliorating, inequalities (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1998). Rather than attempting to make students and learning institutions more equal, the encouragement of competition by government represents an acceptance of systemic inequality.

The systemically racist, white dominated Australian political economic landscape is another factor that negatively influences the ability of Indigenous students and institutions to compete effectively. Due to Australia's colonial history, racism has played a crucial role in determining the circumstances that many Indigenous people live under. Indigenous Australians suffer under Australians' racist attitudes differently because, unlike migrants or people from migrant families, there is no other homeland or place of identity for Indigenous Australians (Moreton-Robertson, 2003). Racist attitudes in Australia have resulted in the social tendency of many non-Indigenous Australians to characterise Indigenous people incorrectly and often in harmful ways that affect how Indigenous perspectives are perceived by many non-Indigenous Australians. The stereotypes applied to Indigenous people are sometimes believed to be universal across the entire Indigenous population. These stereotypes include viewing Indigenous people as alcoholics, drug users, dependent on government support, violent, untrustworthy and unintelligent (Walker, 1993). Some non-

Indigenous Australians even believe that Indigenous people pose an implicit threat to the 'Australian' way of life (Pickering, 2001). While these misconceptions are not held by all Australians, they have a significant impact on the everyday lives of Indigenous people and communities, who suffer from wide-ranging discrimination. This discrimination exists in educational institutions, in the workplace and in public spaces and means that Indigenous people are unable to compete in the education market in the same way that non-Indigenous (and particularly European-descended) people are and are unable to ensure their perspectives are taken into account by policy-makers.

In the process of commodification, Indigenous Australians are disproportionately affected by the current dominant understanding of education as having use value in its potential as a tool for economic growth. This is partly because, until recently, Indigenous Australians have not been considered to be an important part of the economy (Altman, 2010). Australian governments draw upon a neoliberal political economic imperative for raising the literacy levels of Indigenous adults that is driven by the economic rationale that literate people can contribute more to the growth of an economy because they are more adaptable, and they can be trained and retrained (Wickert, 1992). This focus on the economics of education has had negative effects on Indigenous Australians because a focus on the use value of education as being for economic growth takes focus away from concerns about whether or not mainstream education is empowering all students equally. The under achievement of many Indigenous students is evidence that Indigenous students are not empowered by the content or styles of learning used by many education institutions in Australia.

An example of how the changing perception of educational use value further entrenches the mainstream nature of education in Australia is the fact that Indigenous Australians are forced to interact with an education system that is often not sympathetic to their cultural traditions. An example of this perception can be seen by examining the issue of school attendance. Indigenous students have very low school attendance, something that is often attributed to disinterested parents. Indigenous parents and caregivers are often seen as a barrier to the academic success of their children (Lea, Thompson, McRae-Williams & Wegner, 2011). This attitude is partly a result of a perception that Indigenous people do not know how to value education. Indigenous parents are, of course, interested in the education of their children and a more complete explanation would recognise that there are other cultural priorities that arise in Indigenous cultures that are more important than mainstream schooling. These priorities might include attending funerals, visiting home country and helping to care for sick family members. While students taking time off school for these cultural priorities might be read as a lack of commitment by themselves or their parents, it can more accurately be understood as a symptom of families who seek cultural affirmation in places other than educational institutions (Lea, Thompson, McRae-Williams & Wegner, 2011). There has not been a significant effort to make the education system more accessible to Indigenous people

because the system does not exist to empower its people but rather to enhance economic growth.

This section has illustrated some examples of how the commodification of education has affected Indigenous Australians, who have no option but to interact with the mainstream education system. By applying the three elements of commodification outlined by this thesis, this section has shown that the commodification of education in Australia has had a range of negative impacts on the education of Indigenous Australians. These impacts result from an education system that is not designed in collaboration with local communities, that leaves Indigenous people behind due to class and race discrimination, and that is not sympathetic to Indigenous cultural values.

*Case study: 'Direct Instruction' in primary schools*

The second case study in this chapter will look at Direct Instruction, a program that was developed in the USA in the late 1960s and has been implemented with primary school children in Indigenous communities across northern Australia. Direct Instruction has been implemented as a response to the failure of the mainstream education system to cater to the particular requirements of Indigenous communities. It is worth looking at this example because it has received a lot of government support and been featured in the media as a program aiming to tackle entrenched disempowerment in Indigenous communities. Direct Instruction is aimed at primary school students, especially at those with financial difficulties, but also at those for whom English is a second language and students with physical or mental disabilities (Lockery & Maggs, 1982; McMullen & Madelaine, 2014).

Direct Instruction is a copyrighted, commercial product that the Australian government purchased from a for-profit American company owned by Siegfried Engelmann, the original developer of the method. The Australian Federal Government bought the Direct Instruction program with the support of Australia's former prime minister, Tony Abbott, in order to address the particular issue of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. It has also been championed by Noel Pearson, a prominent Indigenous lawyer. In 2014, funding was made available by the Commonwealth government for Direct Instruction to be adopted into the regular teaching methods of thirty-four primary schools across the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland (The Department of Education and Training Media Centre, 2014).

Direct Instruction is a basic skills teaching method that intentionally uses a narrow definition of education to try to overcome student disadvantage at an individual level. The program itself is aimed at primary school students in a school environment and prioritises scripted lesson structure, teacher neutrality and the explicit teaching of skills and problem solving strategies (Becker & Gersten, 1982). It emphasises carefully planned lessons in which instruction and content is very controlled, so as not to risk reinterpetation by students

(National Institute for Direct Instruction, n.d.a). The program has boasted increased short term test results in basic literacy and numeracy but there is controversy about whether these results are sustainable in the longer term and whether they can overcome the disadvantage of the students (Riddle, 2014).

Direct Instruction treats its students as culturally indistinct consumers of the Direct Instruction product. The Direct Instruction approach assumes that if a student does not understand the educational content, it is the fault of the teacher and not the student and, therefore, the focus of any lesson is always on what is being taught, rather than who is being taught (McMullen & Madelaine, 2014). This approach to learning is meant to ensure the neutrality of teachers because Direct Instruction teachers must ignore any perceived limitations of each student and instead shoulder the responsibility for academic failure themselves. However, Direct Instruction has come under fire for its rigid approach to teaching and its assumption of cultural homogeneity. Because Direct Instruction treats its students as equal consumers, regardless of their cultural background, it can be alienating for students who do not identify with the cultural framework from which it came (Luke, 2014).

In a Direct Instruction class, students are guided through tasks on a step by step path which is established by a closely scripted lesson plan that leaves little room for discussion or cultural adaption. This is particularly problematic because the teacher/student relationship that is established with the Direct Instruction method assumes that the teacher has all the power and knowledge, while the student is an empty vessel with no knowledge to impart to the teacher (Luke, 2014).

Direct Instruction in Australia also extends this ignorance of cultural diversity to the hiring of its staff. For example, in the Cape York program, while the staff who teach and administer Direct Instruction often have many years of teaching experience, there is no requirement for either teachers or other staff to come from the local region where the program is being hosted. This is problematic because those staff who are not familiar with the local environment cannot have a nuanced knowledge of how to navigate local culture and politics (Fogarty, Lovell & Dodson, 2015).

Direct Instruction holds use value for the government as a tool to achieve highly visible, quantifiable test results in a minimal time frame (Riddle, 2014). This means that the use value of education as a tool for addressing the underlying, less visible, causes of Indigenous disempowerment remains in the background as there is little concern with what happens after the program has ended. An example of the way that Direct Instruction disempowers its students can be found on the website for The National Institute for Direct Instruction, which explains that Direct Instruction teachers “don’t need to worry about how to present critical skills and concepts. Instead, they can concentrate on what students know, what they don’t understand, and where they need additional practice or support” (National Institute for Direct

Instruction, n.d.b). This statement highlights that the program does not aim to help students to think for themselves or to think critically, which is perhaps the biggest problem with the application of Direct Instruction on Indigenous people. The fact that the Australian government has chosen to properly fund the implementation of a program that does not encourage critical thinking for Indigenous children is symbolic of the assimilationist and paternalistic approach taken by successive Australian governments towards Indigenous education.

Direct Instruction intentionally uses a narrow definition of education to attempt to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. However, while Direct Instruction fits with the individualist attitudes of mainstream Australian political leaders, the program is, at least, culturally irresponsible and at most, ineffective in the long term, because of the theoretical neutrality with which students are treated.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of neoliberalism in Australia over the past thirty-five years has led to the increased commodification of education in Australia, which has impacted the nature of education and training. This process has had adverse effects for Indigenous Australians and some of these adverse effects have been demonstrated in this chapter using the case studies of TAFE NSW ABE and Direct Instruction. 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). The task of increasing literacy is not merely a process of finding the correct pedagogy, but rather this task must also address broader issues, such as levels of community ownership, access, and resources.

## Chapter 4: The Cuban approach to education

Despite having a population of only eleven million people, Cuba is well known throughout the world for its socialist revolution, which started in 1959. Since then, the Cuban government has implemented reform in almost all aspects of Cuban life, including introducing universal and free education and health, land ownership reform and nationalisation of the economy. In addition to myriad reforms at the domestic level, the internationalist ethos of the Cuban revolution has resulted in the advancement of health and education around the world. Cuba is best known for its international medical mission, with 2014 figures showing that approximately 50,000 Cuban healthcare specialists were working in sixty-five countries around the world, which was more than the combined workforces of the Red Cross, Medicines sans Frontières and UNICEF (Huish, 2014). Although less publicised, Cuba also has a sizable international education mission. Cuba has become a pioneer in the field of adult literacy education with its development of the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign model, which has been used by ten million students around the world. In 2012, the campaign model was adopted for use in several outback Aboriginal communities in the state of NSW in Australia.

The Cuban approach to education is based on the concept of *mass* education. It is important to understand that the term *mass* in the context of education does not refer to education for very large numbers of people but rather it refers to education that actively encourages all people in a community to participate in some aspect of that education. Of course, mass campaigns to improve literacy are not a modern, nor solely Cuban, phenomenon. In Europe, there are records of successful literacy campaigns having occurred on a large scale since the Protestant Reformation four hundred years ago. Some examples include campaigns in Scotland between 1560 and 1803, Sweden in 1700 and again after 1850, and Russia between 1861 and 1939. These campaigns have been associated with efforts to create a national political consensus and, particularly in the last two hundred years, with nation-state building (Arnove & Graff, 1987).

This chapter will first outline three concepts that are important to an understanding of the principles of the Cuban revolution, namely solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment. It will then highlight the ideas of José Martí, Fidel Castro and Paulo Freire, three influential figures who have focused on the importance of achieving empowerment, self-determination and equality through education. Then, Cuba's own mass literacy campaign of 1961 will be reviewed to show how the principles of solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment as well as the ideas of Martí, Castro and Freire have been applied to form the Cuban approach to education. Finally, this chapter will outline how the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign developed from the successful experience of the Cuban 1961 literacy campaign as well as subsequent Cuban efforts to assist other countries to increase their own literacy levels, including Australia.

### **Cuban principles for education**

Solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment are three concepts that are important to understanding the Cuban revolution since 1959. These concepts are important principles that have informed political economic action within the revolution, including in education. A brief reflection on each of these concepts as principles aids an understanding of the philosophy underlying the Cuban approach to education.

The principle of *solidarity* refers to unity in thought or action between multiple parties (Huish, 2014) and is a central guiding principle in the national and international policies of Cuba (Granma, 2016). In fact, Cuba has a government body dedicated to international solidarity called the Institute for Friendship with the Peoples. For Cuba, solidarity represents an effort to achieve universalism and participatory empowerment for everyone across socially and historically created barriers such as class, gender, race and religion. Cuban solidarity at both the domestic and international levels is informed by a philosophy of sharing what you have, rather than what you have leftover (Granma, 2016). Cuban internationalism strives to increase global solidarity by sharing the benefits of socialism as far as possible through trading their most valuable assets, education and health. The sizable Cuban commitment to international solidarity has been both celebrated as completely altruistic and belittled as being driven by economic motivations or political strategy (Huish, 2014). The truth lies somewhere between, because the reality is that, for Cuba, solidarity facilitates generosity, income *and* political strategy. However, the fact that solidarity has a range of benefits for Cuba does not take away from its value as a set of policies that have served to increase the standard of living of people living in every continent of the world.

The principle of *universalism* refers to the complete applicability of something for all people. Universalism is prioritised in Cuba through the guarantee that every person, regardless of real or perceived barriers, has access to education, health, food, water and shelter. This concept is understood not just in terms of universal opportunity to access these services, but the commitment to ensuring universal engagement with them, including fostering a culture of participation. In order to achieve universalism, it is a Cuban priority that education is not for sale and so all Cuban citizens have access to all levels of education free of charge. Internationally, Cuba does charge a small fee for the use of its education and health services (Boughton & Durnan, 2014a). However, in the name of solidarity, this fee is determined on the basis of how much wealth is owned by the recipient country (UNESCO, 2006).

The principle of *participatory empowerment* refers to the particularly Cuban emphasis on achieving empowerment through active participation in social processes, including education, public health and democracy. The Cuban approach to education prioritises participatory empowerment because it aims to address inequality through the prioritisation of local ownership of national development. The Cuban government has facilitated this participation

across all areas of society by creating and supporting a range of people's organisations, such as neighbourhood *Committees in Defence of the Revolution*, a national women's federation and labour unions (De Vos et al, 2009). Cuba uses education as a central tool in developing a populace who are aware of and interested in issues surrounding national and cultural development, thereby empowering them to be involved in a popular and democratic process (MacDonald, 2009).

### **Influential figures in the Cuban approach to education**

The Cuban approach to education has been shaped by a number of key figures, including José Martí, Fidel Castro and Paulo Freire. Their experiences and writings helped to foster a Cuban philosophy of independence and perpetual struggle against imperialism and are crucial to understanding the Cuban approach to education.

#### *José Martí*

José Martí was a nineteenth century Cuban poet, journalist, political theorist and revolutionary philosopher, whose work centred on themes of freedom, liberty and democracy. Today, Cubans consider Martí to be a national hero for his contribution to Cuban independence and self-determination. Although he lived more than a century ago, his ideas are foundational to the solidarity that Cuba endeavours to share with the world. Martí has been described as the father of Latin American philosophical thinking, which prioritises those people most oppressed (Streck, 2008). He himself was inspired by the work of several other Cubans, including Agustin Caballero (1762-1835), who pioneered free primary education in Cuba, Caballero's nephew José de la Luz y Caballero (1800-1962), and his student Felix Varela (1783-1853), both who wrote extensively on pedagogy and political consciousness (Streck, 2008). Relying on the foundations established by his predecessors, Martí's ideas provided much of the political, philosophical and practical inspiration for the Cuban revolution of 1959.

Born in Cuba to Spanish parents in 1853, Martí's younger years in Cuba resulted in his resentment of Spanish colonialism and he spent the rest of his life supporting Cuba's struggle against imperialism. Martí spent most of his life living in forced exile outside Cuba where, based on his personal experience of colonialism, he wrote extensively on issues of imperialism, self-determination, education and nationalism. His literary work focused on 'Our America', which referred to the collection of Spanish colonies and ex-colonies in Latin America that were, in Martí's opinion, united by their struggle against Spanish colonialism and impending US imperialism (de Onís, 1954). Martí advocated a united Latin American approach based on solidarity to triumph against these external powers (Nassif, 1994). He also emphasised the importance of action against these imperial powers and, in fact, Martí died in battle against the Spanish army in Cuba in 1895.

Martí believed education to be a necessity in the quest for independence (Nassif, 1994). He often wrote on the importance of celebrating individuality in education, arguing that

education should empower people to harness their *own* ability to be good, useful and free and to create within themselves the capacity for lifelong learning. For Martí, the type of education that could do this was one that prioritised solidarity, individuality and knowledge to motivate and empower each individual to have a role in shaping their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens. It was Martí (as cited in Keeble, 2001, p.8) who pioneered the idea of a mass literacy campaign in Cuba, explaining that “it is necessary to engage in a campaign of gentleness and knowledge, and give the peasants a brigade – not yet in existence – of missionary teachers”. Martí thought that such a campaign would unite all Cubans as they worked together for the common goal of universal literacy and national independence.

Martí payed homage to other progressive thinkers of the time, however, he did not necessarily see eye to eye with them. This is particularly true of his thoughts on Marxism. Martí thought that Marx, who argued that class struggle must be the primary site for change, was destructively creating a conflict zone between different groups of humans (Streck, 2008). While Martí acknowledged Marx for his prioritisation of the working class perspective, he instead called for a trans-classist revolution that would draw all Cubans into a common fight for independence (Martí, 1954). For the same reasons, Martí called for a popular education that would require all Cubans to work together, regardless of their class, so that together they could become ‘the people’ (Nassif, 1994).

### *Fidel Castro*

As the leader of the Cuban rebel armies during the 1950s, Fidel Castro was highly influential in shaping the nature, approach and strategies of the revolution, both before and after its victory in 1959. Castro followed in the footsteps of his personal hero, José Martí, focusing on Cuba’s dependence on the USA and its resulting economic and social underdevelopment. He saw the revolution as an opportunity for a new style of government that combined popular participation with centralised planning (Holst, 2009).

Fidel Castro was born in 1926 into an upper-middle class family living in rural Cuba. Although his family was wealthy, neither of his parents was formally educated and both taught themselves to read and write as adults (Galloway, 2006). During his years at the University of Havana, Castro became active in student politics, becoming the president of the student union and a man of strong ideals. Of his time in university, Castro (as cited in Galloway, 2006, p.67) said that “in the university, where I arrived simply with a rebel spirit and some elementary ideas of justice, I became a Marxist-Leninist and acquired the sentiments that over the years I have had the privilege never to have felt the slightest temptation to abandon.”

During the period of pre-revolutionary struggle, at the request of Castro, members of the rebel army spent many hours learning literacy while living on the rebel army base in the Cuban mountains (Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1975). As the rebel army base moved around the

region, they left a series of schools in their wake. Led by Castro, the revolutionary army brought forward a platform on education, based on the principle of universalism, which ensured that the right to education would be realised for all people regardless of their age, sex, religion, race or location (Martínez Puentes, 2000). For this to be achieved, Castro said that the theory and practice of education must involve popular democratic participation so that the whole country could become a school. He guaranteed that all education would be free and that the state would play a central role in assessing the needs of each individual child and adult. Further, the revolutionary platform maintained that alongside an intellectual education, all Cubans should also have a manual education involving manual work, in order to empower all Cubans and to avoid prejudices attached to either manual or intellectual work (Martínez Puentes, 2004).

### *Paulo Freire*

The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire is one of the fathers of theory and pedagogy relating to empowering education. His approach stems from his experiences as an adult educator in Latin America and is grounded in a Marxist philosophical background, focusing especially on alienation, class consciousness and praxis. Freire focused on the achievement of empowerment through education because he believed that education gives people the skills both to articulate their right to inclusion and to understand the value of diversity (Youngman, 2000). Freire claimed that educational empowerment can only be achieved through revolutionary change (Freire, 1975), and argued that revolutionary reform effects not only education, but also opens lines of communication between governments and their electorate in other areas such as health, workers' rights, and ownership of the means of production (Lankshear, 1994). Freire argued that the language of revolution is required in order to redefine social relationships and to overcome the discourse of those in power (McLaren, 1994). Freire (1975, p.10) explained that "it would be a naive attitude ... to hope that the power elites develop a form of education which would be able to make it viable for people to discover social injustices in a critical way."

Due to the global prominence of Freire's work, he is often referenced in discussions of Cuban efforts to increase basic literacy both domestically and internationally. Freire played a formative role in mass literacy campaigns that were linked to land reform and social revolution in Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Grenada, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tome & Principe, Tanzania and Mozambique. However, he did not have the same influence in the Cuban mass literacy campaign of 1961, which predated Freire's work by a number of years and, in fact, acted as an inspiration for Freire's initial work in Brazil (Boughton & Durnan, 2014b). Thus, Freire did not have an influence on the original education policies of the revolutionary government in Cuba, although he did express support for Cuba's 1961 mass literacy campaign. However, Freire met and collaborated with Cuban education experts in the years following the 1961 campaign and thus came to have a mutually influential relationship with the Cuban pedagogical experts (Muhr, 2015). Certainly, both the Cuban literacy campaign and Freire

have contributed to an increasing body of work that argues that literacy education should be universal and centred on empowerment (Arnove & Graff, 1987)

### **Literacy and education in Cuba**

Along with the ideas of these influential thinkers, the experience and success of the revolutionary 1961 mass literacy campaign has been highly influential on the Cuban approach to international solidarity.

#### *The 1961 Cuban literacy campaign*

Even before the revolutionary victory in 1959, Castro, following the instructions of Martí, had decided that the revolution would start a mass literacy campaign as soon as possible (Leiner, 1987). The most recent census prior to the revolution, held in 1953, showed that the illiteracy rate in Cuba sat at 23.6%. Further, illiteracy was a phenomenon that occurred unevenly between city and rural areas. While 11% of city dwellers were illiterate, 41.7% of the rural population was illiterate (Canfux & Mateja, 1981). Due to this dire situation, the revolutionary government prioritised education by providing funding for school construction, teacher training and program development. Following in the intellectual footsteps of Martí, the Castro government ensured that educational empowerment for the whole society became a fundamental part of the revolutionary strategy for solidarity and national autonomy (Leiner, 1987). If Cuba, a small, poor Caribbean Island, was to see its socialist revolution thrive, its government needed to ensure its people had the skills to participate in the planning and running of the Cuban economy (Holst, 2009).

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. Throughout the duration of the campaign, 707,212 Cuban adults were taught literacy, 476,155 of whom lived rurally (Leiner, 1987). The first stage of the 1961 Literacy Campaign was the identification of all adults who were illiterate and the collection of data relating to their education, income and occupation. This was not an easy task, as many Cubans who were illiterate were reluctant to participate, either because they were ashamed or did not want to learn (Lorenzetto & Neys, 1965). However, the data was successfully collected in a census carried out by national organisations such as trade unions, post offices, banks, courts and the Cuban Women's Federation, which together found 979,000 illiterate Cubans (Leiner, 1987).

After identifying and making contact with illiterate Cuban adults, the next step in the campaign was the recruitment and training of literacy teachers. The literacy teachers used by the campaign were called *alfabetizadores*, who were adult volunteers, and *brigadistas*, who were school-age volunteers. 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. The Cuban

government used TV, radio, newspapers and billboards to encourage school age children to join the *brigadistas* and by April of 1961, it was decided that all Cuban schools should be closed for the year so that the *brigadistas* 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. A further 280,000 *alfabetizadores* were enlisted to ensure that the campaign would be completed within a year, including a group of volunteers called the *Patria o Muerte* Brigade, which consisted of 30,000 literate factory workers who volunteered to teach in rural areas. These quotas ensured one literacy teacher for every two illiterate students. 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. In May 1961, Castro (as cited in Keeble, p.15) explained to departing *brigadistas* the role that the literacy campaign was playing in facilitating national solidarity when he said “you are going to teach, but as you teach, you will also learn. You are going to learn much more than you can possibly teach... Because while you teach them what you have learned in school, they will be teaching you what they have learned from the hard life that they have led. They will teach you the “why” of the revolution better than any speech, better than any book.” The literacy campaign was dynamic because of its mass use of volunteers. The campaign empowered these volunteers to play a vital role in the shaping of the new Cuba.

The next stage in the campaign was implementation. Literacy teachers were sent into the remote areas of Cuba with a kit that included a uniform, blanket, teaching materials and an oil lamp for studying at night. The *brigadistas* and *alfabetizadores* met with regional organisers, professional teachers and political advisors weekly in order to stay on top of the workbook and to foster continued enthusiasm for the campaign (Lorenzetto & Neys, 1965). Great steps were taken to ensure that the families of the *brigadistas* were able to visit their children in the remote areas in which they were living. This cultivated understanding between city and country families and placed Cuba’s youth in a position of leadership as they fostered the connection between city and country people. The campaign used a workbook called *Venceremos*, which can be translated to ‘we shall conquer’. The *Venceremos* workbook provided information on changes being made by the new revolutionary regime and was also designed to enhance the political awareness of its students. The workbook took roughly two or three months to work through and contained exercises that involved the review of recent social reforms including agrarian reform, housing reform and the introduction of free public healthcare and education.

Throughout the duration of the campaign, its participants were tested three times. The first was at the time of the original census to determine the literacy skills of each student and the

second test was half way through the course to determine their progress. The final test was held at the end of the course and was designed to determine whether or not a student was literate. This third test comprised of a reading of two paragraphs from *Venceremos*, a short dictation and the writing of a letter to Fidel Castro. These letters are now on permanent display at the National Literacy Museum in Havana.

On 22 December, 1961, Fidel Castro declared to hundreds of thousands of literacy teachers gathered in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana that Cuba was free of illiteracy. During the Year of Education, 707,212 people had learnt to read and write to first grade standard. 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).

The final stage of the campaign was a follow-up post-literacy stage that occurred in 1962 and 1963. During these years, literacy students had the opportunity to improve and strengthen their newly found literacy skills by attending either night classes for students in urban areas or home reading circles for students in rural areas. The courses, known in Cuba as ‘The Battle for the Sixth Grade’, were designed to encourage a habit of reading and to bring students up to a year six level of literacy, numeracy and science. These follow-up classes were attended by 70% of the students who learned to read and write during 1961.

Concurrent to the Cuban literacy campaign was the development of an increasingly hostile relationship with the USA, with President Kennedy sanctioning a trade blockade on Cuba in 1960. In January of 1961, seventeen year old literacy teacher Conrado Benítez became the first victim of terrorism aimed at young Cuban revolutionaries when he was murdered by CIA-funded death squads (Keeble, 2001). Then, in April, the United States attempted an invasion of Cuba at Playa Girón, known in English as the Bay of Pigs. At this time, literacy work was beginning in the region of the invasion and, although the invasion only lasted three days, several *brigadistas* were held hostage. In total, thirteen people, both literacy volunteers and students, were murdered by anti-government forces during the Year of Education (Keeble, 2001). In order to overcome these tragedies, the Cuban government planned a ‘Second Invasion’ at Playa Giron, this time armed with giant pencils and literacy materials instead of guns. This second invasion is an example of how the 1961 literacy campaign was used to empower Cubans to say no to US domination.

The 1961 adult literacy campaign was an exercise in making the right to education a reality, recognising that, regardless of who one is or how remotely one lives, every person deserves to have education made easily and readily available. The ways that the 1961 campaign established and nurtured human relationships, through community mobilisation and national

empowerment, show the particular characteristics of the Cuban approach to education, placing the responsibility for learning on the entire community and not only on the individual student. The results of the 1961 literacy campaign were not a miracle, but a political result achieved through hard work, public desire and political willpower (Lorenzetto & Neys, 1965).

#### *Cuban achievements in the field of education since 1961*

Since the 1961 literacy campaign, Cuba has continued to achieve highly in the field of education by prioritising solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment. The 1961 literacy campaign started a process that culminated in the completion of the Battle for the Sixth Grade, with every adult in Cuba educated in Spanish, mathematics, history, geography and science to a grade six standard. Great efforts were made in order to ensure that this battle was won, including setting up classes in students' workplaces and homes (Canfux & Mateja, 1981).

In the last fifty-seven years, the Cuban revolution has used centralised government bureaucracy to create cultural norms that promote academic achievement as positive and desirable. Rather than treating education as something to be achieved by individuals and their families, the Cuban government maintains tight control over national education practice and goals, running a top-down education agenda (Carnoy, Grove & Marshall, 2007). However, the Cuban education ethos also contains a strong bottom-up approach through its encouragement of participatory empowerment, which ensures that there are clear channels of communication between the government and the people. Schooling in Cuba is considered to be inherently political and it is widely accepted that it is the responsibility of the government to transfer particular social values across all levels of education (MacDonald, 2009).

In 2015, UNESCO estimated that Cuba's literacy rate sits at 99.89% (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2015). All levels of education, from primary to university, are universally free of charge and Cuban school students achieve higher grades in maths and language than their counterparts in other Latin American countries (MacDonald, 2009). The maintenance of such high achievements across all levels of Cuban education is all the more impressive when remembering that Cuba is a poor nation, lacking in natural resources and suffering under a longstanding economic blockade from the USA.

#### **The 'Yes, I Can' campaign model**

Since 1959, Cuba has made a significant contribution to the global quest to eradicate illiteracy. Following the resounding success of the 1961 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', or 'Yo, Sí Puedo' in Spanish, through the Latin American and Caribbean Pedagogical Institute (IPLAC). The campaign model was designed in 2000 by Dr Leonela Relys Diaz, a woman whose first experience of literacy learning was as a fifteen year old *brigadista* 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 & Durnan, 2014a). 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 uses a three phase model to articulate its approach of mobilisation, socialisation, and recognition of history. Each of the three phases is dependent on the others and, in total, they take between six to nine months to complete, depending on whether or not the campaign has been run in the community before. If funding is available, the campaign will continue to run the three phases over again, until that community can be declared free from illiteracy. The 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign aims to raise the literacy and empowerment of enough people in a community so that it changes the very fabric of the entire community.

The 'Yes, I Can' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign is unique because of its socialist Cuban origins, which result in a different ethos in educating oppressed peoples. Within this ethos, the particular value of the 'Yes, I Can' campaign is in its non-commodified approach. As discussed in Chapter 3 above, increases in the commodification of education programs result in them becoming less empowering for their students. This is because the more commodified an education program is, the more emphasis it places on economic growth, competition and vocational training. This emphasis removes the focus away from empowerment generally, and particularly from the identification of social oppression. In contrast, the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign uses a model that is designed to recognise and address the circumstances of its participants, who have been disempowered by their past experiences of systemically determined illiteracy.

The Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 had three main favourable characteristics specific to the Cuban situation. These were the linguistic unity in Cuba (everyone speaks Spanish), the density of population, and the stable and warm climate (Lorenzetto & Neys, 1965). While these aspects of Cuban life do not always translate to other countries, the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' campaign model has been able to transfer many aspects of the original 1961 campaign. The campaign model was designed using elements of long-distance education programs in order to make it a viable option for rural and remote communities around the world. It was originally tested in Haiti with radio lessons but later moved towards video lessons (Muhr, 2015). Of particular importance is the horizontal structure of organisation that 'Yes, I Can'

adopted from the 1961 Campaign. This structure is empowering because it places the onus on the everyday people in a community to make a change.

The 'Yes, I Can' campaign has helped almost ten million people across thirty countries to develop basic literacy skills (Valdés Abreu, 2015). In 2006, the 'Yes, I Can' campaign won the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for its promotion of literacy and native languages. In late 2015 there were a total of 794,065 adults across eleven countries who were in the process of completing the 'Yes, I Can' or the 'Yes, I Can Continue' classes (Valdés Abreu, 2015). The campaign materials have been made in many different languages and dialects, including English, Portuguese, Tetum, Swahili, Aymara, Quechua and eight dialects of Spanish. It has been estimated that 'Yes, I Can' has the potential to eliminate illiteracy globally in ten years (Canfux Gutiérrez, Corona González & Hickling-Hudson, 2006).

There are notable examples of countries that have hosted 'Yes, I Can' campaigns. Venezuela hosted 'Yes, I Can' as part of Mission Robinson, a program of popular education that ran between 2003 and 2005. During that time, 1.5 million Venezuelan adults completed the 'Yes, I Can' classes and in 2005 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 and the country was also declared free from illiteracy (Boughton & Durnan, 2014a). 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). The first implementation of the campaign in Europe was run in Seville, Spain (Yo sí puedo, Sevilla, 2008) and the model was trialled at four sites in New Mexico, USA in 2015 (Latino Alliance for Literacy Advancement de New Mexico, n.d.).

The 'Yes, I Can' campaign model embodies the 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.

### **Arrival of 'Yes, I Can' 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). In Australia, the campaign is run by Aboriginal communities in north west NSW. The Cuban principle of participatory empowerment that places a strong emphasis on the struggle for independence against imperialism is particularly pertinent in the Australian setting, where colonialism continues to disempower Aboriginal people. In this respect, Cubans are able to stand in solidarity with Aboriginal Australians.

Clearly, the context of the 1961 Year of Education in Cuba is very different to the context of 'Yes, I Can' in rural and remote NSW. The 1961 campaign was part of a country-wide socialist

revolution, which gave the campaign a momentum that is absent from the Australian campaign. Leiner (1987) outlines several favourable conditions that were at work in Cuba during the 1961 campaign. These include that Cuba has one sole language spoken across the entire country, the revolution had mass support from the people, 60-70% of the population were already literate, and the head of state took responsibility for encouraging enthusiasm and finding resources for the campaign. However, in Australia, Aboriginal English can vary widely across different communities and the Aboriginal struggle for self-determination is, at best, a sideline issue in the mainstream Australian political landscape and at worst, something that is denied and ignored by many Australians. While 96.3% of the general adult population in Australia have literacy skills above Level 1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), only 35-60% of the adult Aboriginal population in Australia are literate. Finally, the present and past prime ministers of Australia have not made any special effort to support or promote the existence of the campaign. Pedro Monzon (2014), the Cuban Ambassador to Australia from 2010 to 2014, explained that,

“I gave [former Prime Minister Tony Abbott] some details on the [Cuban-Australian] collaboration in the field of literacy in New South Wales in the Aboriginal communities. And he said, ‘I am very happy that Cuba is helping us in this field, because we’ve failed’. And he repeated [‘we’ve failed’]”.

This comment shows that the prime minister was aware of the ‘Yes, I Can’ literacy campaign and of the issue of Aboriginal adult illiteracy, but his enthusiasm for the campaign cannot be paralleled to that of the Cuban government’s enthusiasm for the 1961 campaign.

Despite the linguistic, educational and political differences between the Cuban and Indigenous Australian contexts, the nature of their histories, both set in a context of imperialist domination, favours education that is based on principles of solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the principles of solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment that form the foundation of the Cuban approach to education both nationally and internationally. An understanding of these principles and also of the people and historical events that have contributed to the modern Cuban approach to education establishes the appropriateness of this approach for use in an Indigenous Australian context.

## Chapter 5: The Cuban approach in Australia

The themes and concepts discussed thus far in this thesis can be used to understand the new elements that the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign has brought to Indigenous literacy education in Australia. The campaign has been designed to improve adult literacy levels and to build a culture of literacy and learning among each hosting community.

This chapter will discuss the reasons for the relative success of the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in Australia. This chapter will review the three phase method used by the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign, giving a short descriptive account of each phase to establish what happens on the ground, followed by an analysis of how each phase contributes to education as empowerment. It will also articulate how the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign represents a non-commodified approach because it does not engage with market place competition and because it places a higher value on human dignity than human capital. In this way, I will argue the 'Yes, I Can' method is empowering for its participants because of its ability to recognise Indigenous disempowerment and can therefore form part of a developing activism for social transformation.

'Yes, I Can' was first piloted in Australia in 2012 in Wilcannia, a small 'outback' town located in the Murdi Paaki region of north west New South Wales. Since then, the campaign has been extended to the neighbouring towns of Enngonia, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Weilmoringle. 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, 2014). Currently, the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign is being run in Brewarrina, a small country town one hour's drive east of Bourke and four and a half hour's drive north west of Dubbo. Because Brewarrina is the most recent town to have hosted the campaign, this chapter will focus on the experiences of the campaign in that town. Brewarrina 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 & 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, 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 Literacy For Life Foundation, 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 & 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).

Between 2012 and April 2016, 434 people in the Murdi Paaki region have been contacted through a household doorknock survey, 150 of whom have attended a ‘Yes, I Can’ class and 103 of whom have graduated from the campaign (Boughton, 2016). Although these numbers may seem small, the graduation rate of the campaign sits at 69%, 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	77%
Wilcannia 2	11	6	55%
Wilcannia 3	16	7	44%
Bourke 1	16	11	68%
Bourke 2	22	15	69%
Bourke 3	19	17	90%
Bourke 4	13	8	62%
Enngonia	21	15	71%
Brewarrina	19	14	79%
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>69%</b>

Table 1: Starters and graduates from the ‘Yes, I Can’ adult literacy campaign in Australia, 2012-2016 (Boughton, 2016).

### **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 Literacy for Life Foundation 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. As discussed in Chapter 2, 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 & 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. This 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 Literacy For Life Foundation 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. 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 & 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 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. 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. Every lesson has a positive message or theme, for example "women hold up half the sky", "my thoughts are with you", "music is a part of our culture" and "we are hungry to learn". These positive messages are reminiscent of Paulo Freire's *generative words*, which are words chosen for their pragmatic use but also for their ability to foster new discussion and thought (Freire, 1972). 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 & 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 thesis 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 Literacy For Life Foundation 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 & 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 Sarah<sup>1</sup> (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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> This name has been changed for privacy.

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 Literacy For Life Foundation is able to leave the community with the campaign still being run by these local staff. The fact that the Literacy For Life Foundation 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 Literacy for Life Foundation 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 Literacy For Life Foundation prioritises local self-determination by shifting control of its product to its consumers. Because the campaign is not for sale and therefore not commodified, the Literacy for Life Foundation 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 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 & 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 & 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 Literacy For Life Foundation, 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 & 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 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 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, Emma<sup>2</sup> (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.

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<sup>2</sup> This name has been changed for privacy.

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). 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). As described in Chapter 2, 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 element in the process of commodification of social services, as outlined in Chapter 3, is a transformation in the way that use value is perceived. 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. For Aboriginal people living in the communities that are hosting 'Yes, I Can', this 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 Literacy For Life Foundation hopes 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 Literacy For Life Foundation 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 Literacy For Life Foundation 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. Each phase reflects the ethos of the Cuban approach, from community mobilisation, to encouragement of participation, to an attitude of universal availability and inclusion of the classes. This is accompanied by a constant attitude of solidarity with the history and current situation of the participants and wider community. When the Literacy For Life Foundation 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. 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.

## **Chapter 6: Concluding remarks**

This research has set out to contribute to ongoing debates in political economy by analysing the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign in Australia. The purpose of this thesis has been to offer a perspective on the interplay between commodification and empowerment by considering why and how the Cuban approach to education is fundamentally different to the Australian approach. Given these differences, this research has revealed that the Cuban approach represents a less commodified, more empowering approach to education. This thesis has also investigated how the 'Yes, I Can' campaign, which in Australia is targeted towards Indigenous people, is able to offer an alternative approach for addressing Indigenous disempowerment in Australia.

In a practical sense, this research has made an intellectual contribution to a small but growing body of academic work that discusses the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign model. Despite the fact that the campaign has successfully graduated ten million people worldwide, there are only a handful of people who have written about the campaign in English. Part of the purpose of this thesis has been to add to and support academic writing on this topic.

This research can offer insight into several broader political economic debates. Therefore, to conclude, I will consider how my research contributes to these debates. One such political economic debate centres on the role of markets in solving social issues. Another of these debates, often argued between progressive and anti-capitalistic political economists, centres around the question of whether radical alternatives to capitalism should happen through means of reform or revolution. Finally, by engaging the differing educational approaches of two countries with very different political economic systems, this thesis gives insight into what can be done to achieve real and lasting Indigenous empowerment in Australia.

### **Effect of commodification of education on Indigenous Australians**

By highlighting the nature of commodified education in Australia, this research is able to contribute to political economic debates about the role of markets and their ability to solve social issues. The capitalist economy exists within, and utilises, social constructs that have historically served to divide human populations into economically and culturally diverse groups. Therefore, in order to engage with the ongoing situation of Indigenous disempowerment in Australia, this thesis has examined commodification through marketisation, competition and changes in perceived use value, and has simultaneously looked beyond markets to different strategies that can be used to empower Indigenous Australians. This has required a broad definition of education as not simply a service that can be bought and sold and which contributes to the economy, but as a process that can and should establish a culture of learning that will continue long after formal lessons have been completed.

As discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberal political theory, backed by neoclassical economic theory, asserts the primacy of markets and competition in the allocation of resources. According to this theoretical framework, uninterrupted free market equilibrium, coupled with competition and limited input from governments and other public institutions, should result in equal opportunity for all. It is assumed by proponents of equality of opportunity that equal opportunity can lead to fair outcomes. However, this analysis of capitalist economies interacting with Indigenous Australia has shown that equal opportunity is unable to overcome differences in wealth and power, which inevitably influence outcomes. This thesis has shown that Indigenous disempowerment has not been ameliorated by marketised, commodified education. In fact, commodified education has served to further alienate many Indigenous Australians from a culture of learning because it externalises social difference by assuming all 'customers' are equal.

One particular problem with commodification is that it is associated with a perception of social development as quantitative economic growth, whether monetary or material, and reduces educational results to their benefits for human capital. Neoclassical economists tend to optimistically claim that, with increased global wealth created by markets and commodification, humans can overcome problems of social inequality. They argue that global economic growth will cause a 'trickle-down' effect that will make poorer groups rich and that this will cause them to be lifted out the social oppression they have previously faced. This is a destructive viewpoint because, even if wealth did trickle-down to a degree which would lift many Indigenous Australians out of poverty, increased wealth by itself does not address emotional effects of more than two centuries of colonial oppression. In contrast, this thesis has been used to argue that social development should be understood as a process of empowerment that represents a qualitative increase in well-being and self-determination. Through the development and sharing of human knowledge we can find new and inclusive ways to distribute resources so that every person is empowered.

This thesis has shown that commodification features heavily in the Australian education landscape. This research has shown how the nature of educational services is transformed when they become commodified and how this transformation has a negative impact on Indigenous Australians and the Indigenous struggle for self-determination.

### **The Cuban response to Australian Indigenous disempowerment**

The identification of aspects of the Australian capitalist system that do not result in meaningful Indigenous empowerment invites questions of what constitutes a better alternative and, importantly, what is the best way to go about achieving that alternative. This thesis has offered an example of an empowering alternative in the Cuban approach to education, which is informed by the principles of solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment. The Cuban approach to education, which takes the form of the 'Yes, I Can' campaign model, is a worthwhile basis on which to build a new Australian approach to

address Indigenous disempowerment because it mobilises entire communities to make decisions together at a local level.

Writers who discuss education as empowerment, such as José Martí, Fidel Castro and Paulo Freire, argue that educational empowerment for a whole society can only happen when education forms part of a system-wide revolution. However, the reality is that for many people and groups living in colonised, capitalist countries, reform makes a true difference in addressing social issues in a context where system-wide revolution is not foreseeable. Therefore, the question remains of whether the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' method can be empowering if it is not part of a wider program of social and systemic revolution, as argued by many educational empowerment advocates. Certainly, in the highly successful Cuban adult literacy campaign in 1961, education reform existed as one part of a holistic revolution that also implemented other changes designed to make empowerment a lived reality for its citizens. In Australia, the context could not be more different, as the Australian government is firmly capitalist and will not be implementing a socialist revolution any time soon. And further, the 'Yes, I Can' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in Australia does not form a significant part of the governmental attempt to 'close the gap'. However, the people working for the Literacy For Life Foundation see the implementation of the 'Yes, I Can' model as revolutionary (Boughton, 2016). Gaining literacy in an environment in which Indigenous people are supported and guided by their own community is a necessary first step in the struggle for self-determination. While the campaign does not represent political change in the form of revolution at the institutional level, it does represent political change in the form of reform at a local level and it is changing the lives of the individuals and communities that it touches.

This thesis has also shown that revolutionary actions, such as the Cuban approach to education, can be empowering to minority groups, even if they are not part of a wider revolution. 'Yes, I Can' sits amongst many other examples of revolutionary action happening in the Indigenous Australian community and contributes to this action. The 'Yes, I Can' campaign model shows that the answer to the question, 'reform or revolution?' is, 'yes'. In other words, any response to disempowerment should always be contextual and a dogmatic approach that insists universally on either reform or revolution as the only progressive path is unhelpful. In the context of the 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign, the campaign is simultaneously the result of the Cuban revolution and an example of Australian reform. While it is true that a socialist revolution would make social and educational reform more effective in Australia, this does not detract from the current meaningfulness of the 'Yes, I Can' campaign. This thesis has shown that we do not have to wait for a political economic revolution in Australia and that it is possible to draw on the solidarity offered by socialist nations in order to influence the direction and nature of Indigenous education and action.

### **Empowerment, disempowerment and commodification in Australian education**

The 'Yes, I Can' adult literacy campaign demonstrates that a broad definition of education is necessary in order to understand whether education is successful. This thesis has explained that commodified, neoliberal education leads to a narrow understanding of what education can and should aim to achieve. This narrow definition of education presents education primarily as a tool for enhancing job prospects and wider economic growth. However, education has a broader range of effects on social life and these effects should be considered when examining educational success.

This thesis has contributed to debates on the best way to close the 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It has shown that the increased prevalence of commodified education has resulted in an approach to education that is disempowering and alienating for Indigenous Australians because it does not connect with the lived realities, both past and present, of Indigenous people. Other adult literacy programs, such as TAFE ABE, may benefit some Indigenous people, and where that happens it is positive. However, many of these programs do not address the root causes of Indigenous disempowerment and therefore they are unable to make significant inroads to increasing Indigenous education levels.

The 'Yes, I Can' campaign model achieves the Cuban principles, which centre on solidarity, universalism and participatory empowerment, through the use of various programmatic strategies and tactics. This thesis has shown that many aspects of the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' campaign model are able to be locally determined, illustrating that it is possible to have one campaign that is appropriate for many Indigenous communities across the country and indeed, for many communities around the world. This is important because Indigenous cultures across Australia are diverse and therefore each community will require different ways of learning. Another way in which the 'Yes, I Can' campaign model brings Cuban principles to life is the way in which it has been designed to be run in even the most remote settings. By bringing the classroom to small and remote communities in rural NSW, the 'Yes, I Can' campaign creates local jobs, facilitates local mobilisation and recognises that, for many Indigenous people living in remote Australia, empowerment is the ability to live on country without having to live in poverty.

This thesis has shown that learning literacy can and should be about creating a space of participation for those who are least able to participate in local and national development. For this reason, it is important to teach literacy to adults. While it is important to teach children, if empowerment is the goal, then it must be adult education that leads the way. This is because adults have the capacity to engage in their local community and wider society and, in this way, adult literacy can act as a foundation for Indigenous empowerment.

The fact that Indigenous disempowerment happens in circular and cumulative manner means that the cycle of disempowerment is complex and not easily broken. Gunnar Myrdal, the

pioneer of CCC, argued that, in the case of race relations in the USA, the way out of the CCC cycle was to either end white prejudice or to improve the situation of black Americans (Hunter, 2009). Myrdal argued that the occurrence of either one of these events would cause the other to happen and would therefore set off a new CCC chain. Theoretically, this idea seems simple enough, however, in Australia, the practical task of increasing mainstream awareness of white privilege or of improving the circumstances of racial minorities is far more complicated. In the case of Australia, both of these tasks are inextricably related to an emotional and personal part of politics and the Australian identity. This thesis has investigated how the 'Yes, I Can' campaign has attempted to improve the situation of disempowerment of Indigenous Australians through the learning of non-commodified adult literacy.

This research has shown that education *does* have the potential to foster Indigenous empowerment in Australia. The Cuban approach to education embodies and implements principles and ideologies that are fundamentally different to the principles and ideologies of other approaches attempted in Australia. Cuban principles for education are grounded in socialist and anti-colonial ideologies, are able to interact with Indigenous cultures and communities in a distinct way. This is partly due to the fact that many Cubans can empathise with the Indigenous Australian history of colonialism and can understand the struggle for independence and self-determination. The Cuban approach to education is not simply about making education accessible, it actively brings education to a community in order to ensure that a whole community is mobilised and involved.

This thesis has shown that it is possible to move towards a more empowering environment that can sustain and foster the Indigenous struggle for self-determination by listening to the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous people, as is done in the Cuban 'Yes, I Can' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign.

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