

BlackWords: The Indigenous Literacy Foundation as a model for change, hope and Aboriginal self-determination

Dr Anita Heiss

From *The BlackWords Essays* edited by Kerry Kilner and Gus Worby.

See: <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/8665956>

Introduction

Literacy is essential to Aboriginal people's self-determination. As someone who has had the good fortune of English literacy since my childhood and enjoyed all the benefits it brought me as a teenager and adult, I know that if we cannot read we cannot make the decisions that inevitably impact on our lives. Self-determination requires each of us to have the literacy to have the power to make our own decisions and control our own futures. Only when we are self-determined as individuals will we be self-determined as a nation of peoples.

I became an Ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation because I was appalled by the statistics around Indigenous literacy – particularly when measured against non-Indigenous counterparts. While the education of all Australians should remain the role and goal of government, the grassroots, community work of the Australian book industry facilitated by the Indigenous Literacy Foundation has created a model for what is possible in terms of increasing Indigenous reading rates through strategic, culturally appropriate and interesting approaches. This paper aims to give a brief history of the ILF with some statistics on Indigenous literacy and discusses some of the reasons literacy rates are so low in remote communities. It ends with testimonials from those benefiting from the work of the Foundation.

Much of the material in this essays has been drawn from and engages with content currently on the ILF website, and information has been provided in consultation with Foundation staff. This essay, in conjunction with the other BlackWords articles, is designed to recognise the work of the Foundation and help people appreciate the work of the ILF.

The Indigenous Literacy Foundation in brief

The ILF is a not-for-profit charity set up in 2011 with the aim of raising literacy levels and improving the lives and opportunities of Indigenous children living in remote and isolated regions. It is governed by a board of directors, has a small paid team of three, and is supported by a growing network of high profile Ambassadors and generous volunteers who raise awareness of literacy issues and assist with fundraising activities.

The ILF's key strategies are to:

- Provide books and support Australian Indigenous parents so that they and their young children and babies can enjoy literacy experiences together.

- Encourage links between the book trade, schools and libraries to ensure the supply of books in remote Indigenous communities.
- Assist with the writing and publishing of books in the child's first language as well as English.
- Ensure engagement and familiarity with the range and types of books that children will experience in schools.

The Foundation use a three-way approach to building literacy and each of its projects aims to promote:

1. Cultural Literacy – connecting people, particularly young people, to their culture and traditional language;
2. Practical literacy – developing the skills needed for daily activities;
3. English literacy – promoting skills in English reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Statistics around Indigenous Literacy – especially in remote and isolated communities

There is an enormous gap between the English literacy rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. Research indicates that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students emerges early and that non-Indigenous students far out-perform Indigenous students in benchmark tests for reading, writing and numeracy in Year 3 and Year 5. By Year 7, the gap has widened (DEET, *Indigenous Education*). But the disparity in results is even more pronounced for Indigenous people living in remote and isolated communities.

According to the national Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014, evidence shows that –

... the more remote the community the poorer the student outcomes. This is clear on all indicators including participation in early childhood education, literacy & numeracy, attendance, retention and post-school transitions.

These gaps limit the career prospects and life choices of students and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage. (Ministerial Council 9)

While the *Closing the Gap NAPLAN NAPLAN NAPLAN NAPLAN - The Prime Minister's Report 2015* shows that only 85% of 4 year olds in remote communities were enrolled in schools and there was no overall projected improvement in halving the gap in child reading, writing (and numeracy) by 2018.

Other statistics include:

- Only two out of ten children in very remote Northern Territory are achieving at or above minimum standard in reading in Year 3. This drops to only one out of ten by the time a child reaches Year 9. (Australian Curriculum, *NAPLAN Achievement 2014*)

- In the Northern Territory, 57% of Indigenous students in Year 3 achieved below the national minimum standard in numeracy, while more than 65% of Indigenous students achieved below the national minimum standard in reading, persuasive writing, spelling, and grammar and punctuation. (Australian Curriculum, *NAPLAN Achievement 2014*)
- In the Northern Territory, more than three quarters of Indigenous students in Year 5 achieved below the national minimum standard in persuasive writing, while more than 60% of Indigenous students achieved below the national minimum standard in reading, numeracy, spelling, and grammar and punctuation. (Australian Curriculum, *NAPLAN Achievement 2014*)
- In 2014 only 34.9% of Indigenous students in very remote areas met or exceeded the National Minimum Standards for Year 7 reading. As results for non-Indigenous students show less variation by remoteness area, the gap is much wider in very remote areas than it is in metropolitan areas. (*Closing the Gap 14*)
- Most concerning to many is that “by the age of 15, more than one-third of Australia’s Indigenous students “do not have the adequate skills and knowledge in reading literacy to meet real-life challenges and may well be disadvantaged in their lives beyond school”. (qtd in De Bortoli and Cresswell 11)

One of the biggest questions is why are Indigenous literacy rates are so poor? This question can be answered to some extent by the following statistics:

- More than half of Indigenous families living in very remote communities speak an Indigenous language in the home (ABS, *Population Characteristics*). Their children need extra assistance at school and from the community to learn English as a second language.
- Indigenous homes, particularly those in remote communities, have fewer books, computers and other educational resources than non-Indigenous homes. All of these factors are linked to children’s achievements at school and in the development of English literacy skills. (De Bortoli and Cresswell 14, 16, 32)
- Absenteeism from school negatively affects students’ academic performance. Indigenous students miss around 26 days of school per year compared with 8 days for all students. Indigenous students living in remote and very remote locations are likely to miss an even greater number of school days. (Zubrick et al. 7)
- According to the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 Report only 20% of Aboriginal children attend schools in remote areas (20% of 160,000 or 32,000). (Ministerial Council for Education, p.6) Statistics quoted in the *Closing the Gap Report 2015* show that school attendance rates are as low as 14% in very remote areas. (13)

- Opportunities to attend school in remote communities are obviously lower too. The NAPLAN 2014 report quoted only 29% of students in remote communities have a school that goes up to year 10, while only 24% have a school that goes up to year 12.

Even where there is access to schools, there might not be the required resources or teacher training. Former primary school teacher and author of the @Aboriginaloz Blog, Luke Pearson, believes he understands better than most why there is an Indigenous literacy problem:

I have also arrived at the unmistakable conclusion that schools, on the whole, are failing Indigenous students, families and communities, and just as often as not, blaming them for it. If schools were given adequate support, resourcing, staffing and training to better cater for the needs and interests of Indigenous students and families, there would hardly be any need to mark Indigenous Literacy Day.

Nutrition and health are closely connected to educational achievement, school attendance and literacy skills (*Final Report*, DEST 2003 and *Health and Welfare*, ABS 2005). The health status of Australia's Indigenous population is poor by world standards. More than twice as many Indigenous babies suffer low to extremely low birth-weight compared to non-Indigenous babies, and Indigenous children are twice as likely to be hospitalized for infectious diseases ("Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage", SCRGSP, 2005).

Upwards of 70% of Indigenous children in remote communities suffer from chronic Otitis Media, a serious middle ear disease that can cause permanent hearing loss and inhibit language and literacy development (Galloway).

It is because of these appalling statistics and realities that some of our Indigenous communities face that the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and the Indigenous Literacy Day that Pearson speaks of were established. It became clear to those who love books and reading that Indigenous *illiteracy* was and still remains a national crisis.

In 2015 the Foundation is working to provide books to remote communities in Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Western NSW and Western Australia.

Addressing the Statistics

One must wonder whether if the statistics above were attached to non-Indigenous Australian children would the issue be considered more urgent than it is currently? Would those statistics be front-page news? Would Ministers' jobs be on the line until real change had been made? Why, in the 21st century, do we have Australian children (who happen to also be Indigenous) so illiterate?

These are the questions often asked by those working for and alongside the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. The ILF aims to tackle some of the disadvantage experienced by

kids in remote Indigenous communities, whose standards of reading and writing are generally years behind those of other Australian kids.

The campaign to address literacy levels cited in the statistics in this paper began in 2004 with Suzy Wilson, owner of Riverbend Books in Brisbane. Suzy heard about the problems with Indigenous literacy in remote communities, and found it hard to believe that many children didn't get to see a book until they first went to school. She started a fundraising idea and created The Riverbend Readers' Challenge. That year 112 Queensland schools joined and school students read over 38,000 books raising \$25,000. Six boxes of books were then delivered to remote communities in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory.

Between 2005 and 2006 the Australian Readers Challenge (ARC) was launched in partnership with The Fred Hollows Foundation (FHF), Ian Thorpe's Foundation for Youth Trust (FYT) and the Australian book industry (with the support of the Australian Publishers Association and the Australian Booksellers Association). The ARC was run by a dedicated voluntary committee.

In 2007 Indigenous Literacy Day (ILD) was launched in partnership with The Fred Hollows Foundation and \$250,000 was raised. The following year, Thérèse Rein, successful business woman and wife of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, became Patron of ILD and 300 schools, 300 booksellers and publishers from around Australia raised over \$300,000 on Indigenous Literacy Day. At the time, Rein said:

“Shared children's stories and rhymes are the foundation of culture. The Indigenous Literacy Foundation not only provides much needed resources to remote communities and promotes the joy of reading in the broader population ... it provides a new generation of Indigenous children with the passion and pride in their stories that I hope will flow to the general community in the form of beautifully written and illustrated books.” (ILF website)

An early literacy project, *Book Buzz*, was launched in three remote locations in WA, NSW and NT in 2009. A full time Literacy Co-ordinator was appointed by FHF and then in 2010 the program expanded dramatically. Over 60,000 books were delivered in 24 months to over 200 communities in WA, SA, QLD, NT and parts of NSW. At the end of 2010 FHF, however, moved out of the field of literacy to concentrate on its core business of 'eye health'. However, they encouraged and assisted the Indigenous Literacy Project to become an independent Foundation.

The ILF was launched as an independent, not-for-profit charity of the Australian Book Industry in 2011 with Juliet Rogers (then CEO of Murdoch Books) as its Chair. In that year alone 20,000 books were delivered into remote communities across Australia. The ILF conducted five ambassador field trips in Warburton, Gove, Manyallaluk, Wilcannia, and across the Kimberley from Broome to Wyndham. Books were published in three Indigenous languages and three community literacy projects were undertaken. *The*

Naked Boy & the Crocodile (a collection of stories written by Indigenous children in workshops run by Andy Griffiths) was launched at the Sydney Opera House. In the same year, the Governor General Quentin Bryce launched Indigenous Literacy Day at Parliament House with over 300 students from schools all over Canberra. By the end of the year the Foundation had raised \$550,000.

In 2012, Professor Martin Nakata (Chair of Australian Indigenous Education and Head of the Nura Gili Indigenous Centre at the University of NSW) joined the ILF Board and the Foundation launched its new strategy for 2012-17 focusing resources on early literacy. A major ILF evaluation was undertaken, field and program visits occurred in key *Book Buzz* communities including Yakanarra and Warburton; and two books in dual language were launched in Menindee and Wilcannia. The ILF also began translations and publications of *The Honey Ant Readers series* in Central Australia.

In 2013, Sharon Galleguillos joined the ILF Board. Galleguillos is a lecturer whose educational background includes working on the 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy in NSW and as an adviser on the Books in Homes program. In the same year Facebook Small Business manager, Nick Bowditch, also signed up to the Board. The Foundation gifted 25,000 books to 250 communities across Australia, published and funded eight community literacy projects (two in Walmajarri language), and trialled the new *Buzz 3* kit for early literacy. The Foundation also travelled to the Tiwi Islands for their annual Ambassador visit and attended GARMA with Ambassador and Australian Children's Laureate Alison Lester. Indigenous Literacy Day on 4 September was celebrated with students and teachers from Tjuntjuntjara Remote Community School (WA) at the Sydney Opera House. The successful *Great Book Swap* campaign was conducted nationally.

In 2014 the ILF generated \$940,000 in donations and supplied 30,000 books to more than 230 remote communities around Australia.

In 2015 the Foundation is working to provide books to remote communities in Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Western NSW and Western Australia

Karen Williams, Executive Director of ILF, says that addressing the literacy crisis is 'everybody's business'. All Australians, no matter what their role or status must become actively involved.

We need to work together to ensure we help improve education outcomes and that all starts, as stated in The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010" with good early childhood development, effective parenting and strategies to ensure kids are ready for school. (Email to the author)

The work of the ILF

The ILF relies on a cross-sector partnership, working closely with the support of the Australian Publishers Association, the Australian Booksellers Association and the Australian Society of Authors, along with a team of ambassadors, volunteers and three and a half full-time staff. Each year, ILF invites communities to engage in the program

and order books direct. These orders are then gathered and sent to a centralised warehouse, UBD, in Melbourne where they are dispatched across the country to crèches, schools, libraries, women's centres, and youth drop in centres as well as to Service organisations that operate in remote communities. For the past two years not one single order has been returned. That's an amazing fact when you consider that it takes Australia Post 10 days to deliver a book to the Antarctic and 14-15 days to deliver an order to remote communities.

The ILF has had some strong literary and community supporters during its existence. The first patron of the ILF was Thérèse Rein (between 2008-2013). The current Patron is the Honourable Quentin Bryce AD CVO, who said she cared deeply about equality of opportunity for Indigenous Australians, and especially in education, in giving children the best start:

We know that literacy is the key to choice, to income security, to developing potential –and it is the key to an enriching and rewarding life. That is why the work of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation is so important. (Quentin Bryce qtd in "ILF Appoints Bryce")

The ILF also enjoys the support of some high-profile authors, artists, musicians and sportspeople as Ambassadors flying the literacy flag. Current Lifetime Ambassadors include Debra Dank (a Gudanji woman, from the Barkly Tablelands), Kate Grenville, Andy Griffiths, Anita Heiss, Alison Lester, David Malouf, Josh Pyke and Richard Flanagan. Other Ambassadors have included Adam James, Geraldine Brooks, Sally Morgan, Kaz Cooke, Leonie Norrington, Katie Noonan, May O'Brien, Felix Reibl, Tara June Winch, Michael O'Loughlin and Felix Riebel.

Munaldjali/Birri-Gubba Juru poet Samuel Wagan Watson is also an Ambassador. He offers the following endorsement for the ILF:

When I was a kid, I learnt of a man who couldn't read or write. He was sent to jail for a crime he didn't commit, yet the police forced him to sign a statement that incriminated him. He did several years in jail until the real culprit was found. How could he have been convicted, when he couldn't even write, let alone read his own apparent confession? When I see Indigenous writers in front of an audience and the punters are hanging off their every word, I think of that man and similar correlations of today's society and how literacy can save an individual's life. That's why I write, and that's why it's important for my children to be able to grasp the written word and to understand what reading and comprehension can do for them - no one should ever have to pay for the crime of being illiterate. (ILF website)

Ambassador Musician Adam James adds his voice:

Growing up I was pretty lucky to be part of a family that encouraged reading. Two of the most important skills associated with being a

singer/songwriter/entertainer are the ability to read and a command of the English language. Without these skills I could not write my songs. It is my belief that through reading children not only learn to read and write, they also learn to use their imagination. They can imagine their future and dream about the possibilities. Maybe I can be a doctor or a nurse or a singer or an author? Please give your support to the Indigenous Literacy Foundation so that the first children of this nation can dare to dream and achieve. Dreams do come true... (ILF website)

Tina Raye is the ILF Program Manager who belongs to the Bardi and Jabirr Jabirr people, north of Broome and the Arabuna people near Lake Eyre. She has worked in both urban and remote communities in the Northern Territory. Most recently she worked on the Tiwi Islands and in 2012 was the Accelerated Literacy Project Officer for the Arafura Directorate, for the NT Department of Education and Training. In this role, Tina worked and travelled primarily working with six remote Indigenous schools across the Top End. She says:

As a Teacher of students where English is often a second or third language, I have seen the joy that books can bring. An opportunity to experience another world, character, experiences or events which can take the students on a journey or adventure; a story that provokes emotion or action. The engagement and experiences that quality literary texts bring to students minds is truly rewarding to experience! (ILF website)

Impact of the ILF the community level

The success of the ILF in impacting on not only literacy levels but also on increased engagement for kids in schools is due to the respectful consultation and collaboration process the ILF employs to engage with members with local communities. Practical support through providing resources and getting books into the hands of our most disadvantaged has shown that Indigenous children in remote communities are keen to read, learn and explore through books.

In 2012 Book Business, a nine-month evaluation conducted by two academics specialising in early childhood education found that the Foundation was having a positive impact on literacy in remote communities. The report applauded the ILF's level of engagement with communities and flexible approach:

As we have seen the work of ILF described and celebrated in print – and in action – during visits to programs in remote communities, the impression we have consistently gained is of ILF's ability, through the way it engages and communicates, to facilitate timely value-adding 'ripple effects', 'networks' and 'distance defying feats'. In our view, ILF does this by responding openly and flexibly to possibilities as they arise, then thinking creatively, planning 'how to' strategies and acting locally with communities to 'make things happen' for literacy. (Gahan, D and Broughton, B. 184)

Recognising the need for greater evaluation, the Foundation started formally gathering testimonials, asking communities how and if the book supply program had impacted on literacy in their communities.

While there is still data evaluation to be carried out, the testimonials from educators and workers on the ground tell of the impacts at the community level for aspects of the ILF's work. The following two testimonials (of many received by the Foundation) demonstrate the gratitude on the ground for the work and positive change the ILF is bringing to remote Australia:

Thank you again for your visit, and the positive impact it has had on the Tjuntjuntjara students and school. We really appreciated you bringing Ann James with you as an artist, teacher and illustrator, her skills and abilities benefitted not only the students, but also gave the teachers a new palette of ideas and resources with which to nurture the obviously very talented artists in the classroom!

Thank you for the Buzz resource boxes for Tjitji Kulunpa. As you were able to witness, the little ones are keen to engage with puppets, books and puzzles which stimulate their ever growing appetite for learning and exploring. The resources and books will be well used by these children and all the future little students. They were particularly thrilled to take home books they already know and love, and they loved having visitors who were keen to read to them and play with them. We also appreciate the time and effort that your team took in making your way to Tjuntjuntjara, it's a long way to travel in anyone's shoes. And thank you to the many donors, with whom you work so hard to fundraise to make all this happen.

Remote indigenous students should not be disadvantaged when it comes to accessing books. Nurturing children's love of learning through encouraging and developing their literacy and reading skills is the key to their future success. Every child deserves that. (Monika Klein, School Officer, Tjuntjuntjara School, Tjuntjuntjara, NT)

And from Yakanarra, Western Australia:

The Indigenous Literacy Foundation has been instrumental in providing practical support to children and families at Yakanarra. Representatives from the Foundation have spent time in the Community to assess the needs, and then worked tirelessly to address these needs.

Children here have been exposed to the writing of Australian Authors, and have been involved in a workshop for emerging writers. These events were organised and co-ordinated through ILF and offered children an experience they would otherwise not have access to.

In a Community visit, ILF brought with them some indigenous recipe books which have become very popular through the community and are used on a daily basis for providing lunch for the children through a community homemaker.

It is perhaps the insight shown to the needs of the people living in such a remote community, coupled with the willingness to listen and a passion to help that are the strong characteristics of the group. These are the qualities that mean that the contribution is not only appreciated but useful and significant. Our School Library is now a functioning and welcoming place thanks to the hard work and generosity of members of the ILF.

ILF has realised that literacy is about more than providing books and that success will come when relationships are forged and support is given to the whole community and the families that are part of that community.

We are proud to be associated with this group and are confident that the practical support that has been given will be enduring. Yakanarra Community School is indebted to this support. (Helen Unwin, Principal, Yakanarra Community School; Mary Vanbee, Chairperson, Yakanarra Community School, Yakanarra, WA)

Conclusion

The purpose, the strategies, and the people engaged to fulfil the visions of the ILF all collectively contribute to the success of the Foundation. The ILF's work approach to tackling literacy rates is one very important model for change.

The other essays in this collection provide useful guides to discovering and using texts to address literacy levels in Indigenous communities and expand awareness in schools Australia-wide.

Note:

For media coverage:

- <http://www.indigenoussliteracyfoundation.org.au/media.html>
- <http://www.indigenoussliteracyfoundation.org.au/media-archive.html>

Works Cited

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2001*. Canberra: ABS, 2003. Web. <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4713.0200> > 21 April 2015.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. Canberra: AIHW, 2005. Web. <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=6442467754>>. 21 April 2015.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). *NAPLAN Achievement in Reading, Persuasive Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2014*. Sydney: ACARA, 2014. Web. <<http://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports.html> > 21 April 2015.
- Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). *Final Report of the National Evaluation of National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. Australia: DEST, 2003. Web. <<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/42032>> 21 April 2015.
- De Bortoli, Lisa, and John Cresswell. "Australia's Indigenous Students in PISA 2000: Results from an International Study". ACER Research Monograph 59. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004. Web. <http://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/1> 21 April 2015.
- Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006-2009*. Northern Territory: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2006. Print.
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015. Print.
- Galloway, Ann. "Conductive Hearing Loss and Aboriginal Students." Western Australia: Department of Education and Training, Western Australia (DET WA), 2006. Web. <<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/detcms/aboriginal-education/apac/teaching-aboriginal-students-docs/conductive-hearing-loss-and-aboriginal-students.en>> 21 April 2015.
- Gahan, Deborah, and Beverley Broughton. "Book Business." *Indigenous Literacy Fund*, 2012. Unpublished report.

“ILF Appoints Bryce as New Patron.” *Books + Publishing*. 17 February 2015. Web. <<http://www.booksellerandpublisher.com.au/item/32391>> 20 April 2015.

Mellor, Suzanne, and Matthew Corrigan. “The Case for Change: A Review of Contemporary Research on Indigenous Education Outcomes.” *Australian Education Review* 47 Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004. Web. <<http://research.acer.edu.au/aer/7>> 21 April 2015.

Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*. Australia: MCEECDYA, 2010. Web. <<http://scseec.edu.au/archive/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Education-Action-Plan.aspx>> 21 April 2015.

Pearson, Luke. “Making Indigenous Literacy Day Obsolete”, *Eureka Street* 24.17 (1 September 2014). Web. <<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=41924#.VTWP-JOBoyB>> 2 March 2015

Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP). “Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005.” Australia: Commonwealth of Australia, 2005. Web. <<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/keyindicators2005>> 21 April 2015.

Zubrick, Stephen R. et al. *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. Perth: Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2006. Print.