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Warning: please be aware that this document may contain references to Aboriginal people who may have died.

Literacy Empowerment Project: Literacy Backpack Program

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Summary

In 2004, it was established that most homes in the remote communities east of Katherine in the Northern Territory were virtually bookless. The Literacy Backpack Program was designed to foster a community approach to reading through supplying books and magazines to schools and homes.

Target student group

The Literacy Backpack Program was implemented in the Katherine Group School, which consists of 16 remote school campuses in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory. The schools were:

- Amanbidji
- Barunga
- Bulla
- Bullman/Weemol
- Jilkminggan
- Kalkarindji
- Manyallaluk
- Mataranka
- Minyerri
- Ngukurr
- Pigeon Hole
- Pine Creek
- Timber Creek
- Urapunga
- Wugularr/Beswick
- Yarralin

The Literacy Backpack program fell under the umbrella of the Literacy Empowerment Project, a project implemented in 2005 to support early learning, reading, writing, community storytelling, digital learning, cultural education and school engagement in remote communities. In the Northern Territory, this involved approximately 1,480 students from Foundation year (Transition) to Year 12, and their families.



Method

The Literacy Backpack Program focused on providing:

- reading and education resources for classrooms and school libraries
- books for students, and newspapers and magazines for families
- book orders and awards for students
- creative writing workshops.

In the classroom

The PM Benchmark Kit was provided to all schools. Together with the Key Links program, this provided engaging, age-appropriate – and, more importantly – targeted reading materials for students.

ESL teachers piloted reading programs at three schools using the Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills program (THRASS); a combination of THRASS and Letterland; and Get Reading Right. For the last two years, the Katherine Group School has been working towards adopting Get Reading Right as their common reading program. Get Reading Right is a program that emphasises the teaching of phonics.

The PM Benchmark Kit assessment was conducted at the end of each semester by class teachers in the remote community schools, and by an ESL teacher based in the Katherine Group School office. The ESL teacher was responsible for recording the results. Benchmark data was established in some schools at the end of 2010.

The backpacks

From Monday to Thursday, students took home a spelling sheet and an age-appropriate reader from the PM series in their backpack. Parents or carers heard the students read and signed off on a recording sheet. Backpacks were also used to deliver newspapers and magazines to parents and carers.

Book awards

A reward system allocated students points; for example, students were given points for each book signed off, or each spelling sheet completed. These points earned the students gift vouchers (funded by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth), which they exchanged for a chosen book prize.



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This created great excitement among the students, and their families were very proud of their achievements. A lovely spin-off of having the books set up at the school was having families begin buying books for themselves. It is not that families don't want to read, but that they had no access to reading materials.

Creative writing workshops

The creative writing workshops involved authors such as Alison Lester, Anne Godwin, Rosemary Sullivan and Leonie Norrington coming into the communities. This created an opportunity for cultural exchange and hearing and telling stories. Students met the authors of books they had read and saw the authors as 'real', which is an important connection to the larger world for children who are so isolated. Students created their own small, self-published books and these went on the school library shelves and home to be shared within the communities.

Practicalities

A project coordinator worked across the 16 schools to assist staff with reading programs, purchasing resources, setting up school libraries, coordinating the ordering of books for students to take home and delivering magazines and newspapers to families in the remote communities.



Students from Bulla Community with their backpacks.



Results

In 2012 David McClay (ACER) spent time at the Urapunga School assessing the Literacy Backpack Program. He observed that among the critical success factors identified by teachers was 'having an extensive supply of levelled readers with at least 20 to 30 books at each of the 30 levels in the PM reading scheme'.

Simply sending home books in the backpacks almost at random is going to do very little – it needs to be age-appropriate material. Random books in the home are better than no books in the home, but for maximum effectiveness they need to be part of a sequenced reading program. (Staff member)

All students involved in the program were ESL students and most had multiple learning difficulties. All were below the national averages [National Minimum Standard].

Oriel Hawke, the ESL specialist for the Katherine Group School, observed that:

Indigenous student outcomes are improving, and this is evident in the Reading Recovery levels we have for each student in the Katherine Group School region. Most students have moved forward.

In particular, schools that had access to direct professional training by ESL specialists were able to clearly identify individual student levels and needs. Teachers in these schools report that students are making steady progress despite their low starting points:

One student that I have been working with suffers from sensorial neutral loss, speech impairment and trauma. He has an EAP [Education Adjustment Program] in place to address his curriculum needs and has been sitting at PM Benchmark Reading Level 1 throughout his schooling. He is in year 6. This semester, with the use of the Getting Reading Right program, this student has made significant gains with reading. He has gone from PM Benchmark Level 1 to PM Benchmark Level 5. He attends school every day without fail. (Special Education Teacher)

Manyallaluk is a small two-teacher school. It has taken us some years to get the kids to the independent stage of reading. At this point, the school has few materials to support the kids at the 'higher levels' of reading because up until now there was not the need. Joy, oh joy, now there is! These kids are now at or above National Benchmark [National Minimum Standard]. One student is right on the tip of being off the scale in the spelling area. He has been reading dictionaries since year 3. He was over the moon when I introduced him to a thesaurus! (ESL specialist)



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The independent ACER assessment also reported that the Literacy Backpack Program allowed schools to run a successful homework program by providing a consistent way of getting material backwards and forwards between school and home. (The ACER report was commissioned by Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and is not publically available.)

The program provided us with an incentive to organise homework. This was a challenge, but it has been successful. (Teacher)

Anecdotally, the program has developed a love of reading and of books. The students *own* their bags and these provide a sense of their own personal space. Many homes are overcrowded, with no personal space for the child to put their books; the backpack became that space. Some families purchased shelving and plastic crates with lids to store their treasured books. Some feedback from students:

I keep [the books] under my bed where no-one can see them. (Student)

We keep them in a box and Mum puts the box up on a shelf. (Student)

The backpacks? I don't think it's a good idea ... I think it's the best idea. (Student)

Finally, the delivery of newspapers and magazines to communities provided schools with valuable opportunities for conversation, and for getting to know families outside the school.

Lessons learned

With the large injection of reading materials into the school libraries, someone on the ground is needed to catalogue and shelve the books. In small schools the program is more manageable, and many schools had students order and catalogue their books as part of a class activity in literacy and numeracy. Larger schools often find that they need assistance; over the years, schools have become very creative in their approaches, and using community volunteers is a valuable way of engaging families.

Many projects deliver books, but they are of little use if students are unable to read them. A levelled reading program was fundamental to the success of this initiative, as was the relevance of texts so that students could use their knowledge to 'bridge' from the known to the unknown. For example, students used their experience of going crabbing to help understand information in *Robotic Crabs*, a text about underwater robots. Where possible the project used books by Australian and New Zealand authors.



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Very small schools, such as Pigeon Hole, would not have been able to purchase the Reading Kits and associated resources from their allocated school budget. Additional funds provided to the school by the federal government and Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth allowed Pigeon Hole and many other small remote schools to provide the best resources and deliver a reading program that is lifting students' literacy levels.

Next steps

The Katherine Group School has continued to work on raising literacy levels in remote schools. The Katherine Group School has backtracked to develop students' phonics skills, and phonological and phonemic awareness skills, with an emphasis on teacher professional development and on developing resources for use in the classroom. This is just starting to 'bite'.

The Katherine Group School has been approached by many schools (both remote and urban) asking for support to develop the program in their schools. Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth has developed a kit that outlines how to implement the project, based on how they went about it at the Katherine Group School. To make the project successful, funding is required to purchase materials and to support student and family learning. An injection of funds and resources is crucial to back teachers and families in the work they are carrying out in remote community schooling.

Research base

In 2004, Dr Jerry Schwab and Dale Sutherland of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU) wrote *Literacy for life: a scoping study for a community literacy empowerment project* in Wugularr, Northern Territory. This study underscored the link between a 93 per cent illiteracy rate and the wide gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. In this region, the critical literacy required for finding a way out of a maze of poverty and welfare dependency was simply not there.

The study established a long list of local proposals to close the space between the home and school and improve learning in the community as a whole. Among the projects recommended was a Literacy Backpack program.



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After further consultation with Aboriginal community leaders and interested parents in the Jawoyn Communities east of Katherine, it was decided to build the Literacy Empowerment Project. The project consisted of four separate but vitally connected education programs: an Early Learning Program; a Literacy Backpack Program; a Community Storytelling Program; and a Children's Cultural Support Program.

When the project began in 2005, the Katherine Group School ran surveys in the four communities of Wugularr, Bulman, Manyallaluk and Minyerri, asking how many pieces of reading material were in the home. Most had between zero and three pieces; these included old torn newspapers and magazines. There was little chance for home learning or even parental involvement, with children struggling to read because of the absence of any kind of reading material.

The Literacy Backpack Program was designed to engage a community approach to reading. Having children see reading materials in the home – and seeing their parents reading – would model an interest in reading. The aim was to supply books, magazines and newspapers into the home, and to fill the schools with relevant and much-needed reading and education resources.

Further reading and links

Get Reading Right: www.getreadingright.com.au 

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth: www.ianthorpes-fountainforyouth.com/programs/literacy-backpack-project/literacy-backpacks 

Key Links: www.keylinks.com.au/about.asp 

Schwab RG, Sutherland D 2004, *Literacy for life: a scoping study for a community literacy empowerment project*, the Fred Hollows Foundation, ANU Press

Contacts

Michelle Flaskas: ffy@fountainforyouth.com.au 

Oriel Hawke: oriel.hawke@ntschoools.net