





# The literacy question in remote Indigenous Australia

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## HOW DO WE MAKE SENSE OF THE LITERACY DEBATE IN REMOTE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA?

Public commentary commonly attributes blame to inadequate teaching, poor resourcing of remote schools or even lack of parental support for school attendance. In a recent review of education in the Northern Territory (NT) Dr Chris Sarra, from the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute in Queensland, accused NT educators of expecting less of their Indigenous students and inadvertently creating an underclass (ABC News April 13 2009). Why? Because the 2008 national English literacy and numeracy benchmarking tests indicated that the NT had some of the highest illiteracy rates in the country.

With its singular focus on schooling, benchmark testing and attendance, the drive to increase literacy in remote Indigenous Australia tends to ignore adult literacy. Yet, Australian of the Year Mick Dodson has just declared that adult literacy is the key to closing the gap in Aboriginal life expectancy (ABC Online April 17 2009).

The literacy debate rarely addresses the critical social and historical factors that also account for why literacy levels among remote Indigenous youth are lower than their mainstream, urban, English-as-a-first-language speaking counterparts. The focus on schooling obscures the less obvious fact that we must also be cognisant of the broader sociocultural factors associated with literacy acquisition, maintenance and transmission in newly-literate contexts such as those of the remote Indigenous world. There are many complex and intersecting factors that can be attributed to the lower rates of literacy, many of which actually have little to do with the quality of teaching or resources, school attendance or lower expectations of competence.

Let's look at just a few.

## THE NEWLY-LITERATE CONTEXT

It is commonly assumed that schooling alone will achieve uniform high levels of literacy competence without acknowledging that Indigenous people in the remote world made the transition from an oral culture to a literate culture only relatively recently in comparison to most Western or other major literate cultures. In some remote

sites, this generation of school-attendees may in fact be only the first, second or third generation to pass through schooling, and literacy is being learned in contexts where there are few antecedent social literacy practices. Literacy in English as we know it today has taken more than a thousand years to evolve and we still have not achieved universal literacy, despite a long history of schooling interconnected with family and community literacy practices developed over many centuries. In fact, the 2006 national Australian (i.e. mainstream, not remote Indigenous) Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey found that 16% of the adult population has reading, comprehension and maths skills so low that they would be required to undertake a Certificate I or II basic education course to attain the employability skills required by modern industry (*Literacy Link, Newsletter of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, March 2009, Vol. 29, No. 1., p.1*).

## THE ASSUMPTION THAT LITERACY LEARNING IS DEPENDENT ON SCHOOLING ALONE

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Academics from the disciplines of history, anthropology, linguistics and literacy studies commonly view literacy as social practice. For them, literacy cannot be understood simply in terms of pedagogy, as it is part of other, more-embracing social institutions and conceptions. From this perspective initiatives to increase literacy also need to take account of broader issues such as the connection between language and identity and what people actually use reading and writing for in everyday life, beyond the parameters of schooling.

Researchers recognise that children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process. That is, being literate involves more than having individual technical literacy skills, it also depends on the relationship between language behaviours and supporting social relations and cultural practices. These cultural practices are what people use reading and writing for in adult everyday life in different social and cultural contexts: at home, at work, in church, and in recreational and leisure pursuits. For example, many remote Indigenous adults with strong literacy skills often did not learn to read or write well at school, but strengthened their literacy through adult participation in Christian literacy activities (such as Bible study or translation) or involvement in employment or governance roles requiring literacy.

Cultural practices result from the acquisition and transmission of everyday social habits and routines over successive generations. If the current generation of remote Indigenous children is to acquire a set of cultural practices where reading and writing are integral to everyday life—in the way that literacy is assumed practice in most European Australian families—then we also need to pay attention to incorporating literacy into life beyond the school boundary.

Following on from this, it is well understood that family literacy is an important antecedent to school success. If this is so, why are we not concerned that Indigenous families have few locations in their community to buy or access home reading materials? Community stores commonly stock DVDs, CDs and occasionally magazines, but rarely children's books, educational activities or writing materials. In the bid to improve literacy in remote communities, why is the government not ensuring that community stores also sell affordable child-oriented reading and writing resources? Likewise, why is there not the demand that every remote community have a public library so that reading materials can be accessed in the out-of-school hours and borrowed by families for home literacy activities? In a number of remote communities Libraries and Knowledge Centres have been established by the Northern Territory Library, but they are unable to service every NT community.

Why are we also not noticing the important job that youth centres, media centres and arts projects in remote communities are doing to ensure that Indigenous youth have access to computers to continue reading, writing and honing their computer skills in the out-of-school hours? In many locations youth centres are seen as diversionary, rather than learning, environments. Nevertheless, in youth centres and media centres across remote Australia we are seeing young people engaging in film-making, computer editing, writing film scripts and titles, as well as writing, recording, transcribing and translating songs and other oral texts, often in their own language as well as in English. These are all activities that enhance meaningful literacy acquisition, maintenance and development. During a recent visit to NT Warlpiri communities, I noticed that youth centres had far fewer resources than schools, yet enjoyed high attendance and engaged participation in activities requiring literacy. Warlpiri communities recognise the importance of youth centres, having substantially funded and built them using their own money from mining royalty payments.

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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Indigenous futures are increasingly being oriented towards employment and mainstream aspirations. In Australia, despite our multilingual heritage, there is a sense that English is superior. More worryingly, there is an assumption that learning English will lead to literacy acquisition, and ipso facto that English literacy will result in employment and improved futures for remote Indigenous youth. Most children in remote schools come from a speech community where the mother tongue is an Indigenous language. Yet most of the teaching in remote Indigenous schools, and increasingly so in recent years, is in English. We can continue to teach more and more English, but we may never reach the desired outcomes of improved literacy and numeracy levels if we don't also take account of other sociocultural factors in the learning process, including the nuanced relationship between language and identity. For the realisation of mainstream employment goals, Indigenous families have to believe that schooling is worthwhile and that the institution respects their language, culture and community.

Recently the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (NTDET) decided to replace the bilingual education program with more intensive English teaching. There were only nine operating bilingual education programs in remote NT schools. In the Warlpiri region, the bilingual program gave Warlpiri families a strong sense of ownership and pride in their school and their children's learning. Some adults became qualified teachers, Warlpiri reading materials were produced and children observed their elders taking on responsible leadership roles and using literacy in Warlpiri (and English) meaningfully. Moreover, children attended school because they accompanied their elders who were involved in the bilingual program. The move to abolish bilingual education has, in effect, given the Indigenous bilingual educators the impression that their program was a failure. I recently conducted a survey of young adult English literacy competence in the region. The findings indicate that the English literacy levels of 16–25 year olds, some of whom went through the bilingual system, are certainly equivalent to young adults in other remote locations where youngsters have had English-only schooling. I would suggest that the bilingual program has not had a negative impact on English literacy acquisition and has also given some youth foundation skills in mother tongue literacy.

Warlpiri educators believe strongly in the importance of the Warlpiri language program and identity is at the heart of this issue. In response to consultations by the NTDET around a Regional Learning Partnership Agreement the Warlpiri have repeatedly articulated their desire to teach their children Warlpiri language, literacy and culture in school. They want the Warlpiri program to sit alongside an English language and

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**NTDET:**  
Northern Territory  
Department of  
Education and  
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literacy program. NTDET has refused this request. These experienced Warlpiri educators are so upset by this disrespect for their language and culture and their right to decide how their children should be educated that they have refused to sign the Warlpiri Regional Learning Partnership Agreement. This conflict cannot be enhancing community support for schooling and ultimately the goal of improving literacy outcomes.

## LITERACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

To assume that literacy is a simple skills acquisition process that can be delivered in a programmed way, in a short period of time, in a language not used by the learner in their speech community, and achieve outcomes comparable to mainstream standards is unrealistic. Literacy is a gradual process that cannot be speeded up. It will take more than two or three generations for literacy to truly seep into family and community practices. If we are serious about increasing literacy in the remote Indigenous world, then, in addition to thinking about schooling, we need to pay attention to providing the resources that support everyday adult literacy practices.

Adults never read and write without a purpose. For literacy to take hold in remote communities it must have meaning and purpose over the changing domains and practices that span a person's life, and this meaning and purpose must then be transmitted to the following generation. Children in remote communities need to see reading and writing as elemental to everyday life, enacted by their own community members, and not just something done by non-Indigenous experts such as teachers. Rather than focus solely on schooling and laying blame for purported failures on teachers, we could instead be considering how to make literacy integral to everyday life so that remote Indigenous youth can grow up unable to imagine a life without reading and writing.