Literacy for succeeding at school

This paper is structured to set up some propositions for consideration, to test some customary thinking about solutions and, finally, to flesh out the answer developed by Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey by drawing from material on the What Works website.

The fact that these issues are controversial in no way diminishes their importance.

Literacy for succeeding at school focuses on questions about what it means to develop genuinely effective literacy, how to become a literacy learner who has real choices, who is set up for academic success, both at school and subsequently, and success in gaining employment.

Considering these issues takes us by a fairly direct route to the basis of the Accelerated Literacy Programme which, while now operating intensively in several parts of Australia, is still something of an unknown quantity to many teachers of Indigenous young people. It deserves to be better known. The ACER evaluation of its impact was resoundingly positive.
The issue

Low literacy levels impact on all student learning

Developing literacy is one of the central challenges for teachers of Indigenous students. We know that unless age-appropriate levels of literacy have been achieved by Year 4, school will continue to be a struggle.

Nationally, in 2002, 68% of Year 5 Indigenous young people reached the national benchmark in Reading, compared with 89.3% of their non-Indigenous peers. In Writing, 76.4% reached the benchmark. The figure for the whole school population was 93.6% — a substantial gap.

The problem doesn’t go away with progression through schooling. Comparatively recent data indicates that only 30.7% of Indigenous Australian 15 year-olds had reached or passed the OECD mean for Reading literacy.1

Some of these gaps are closing. In 1999, the gaps were 27 percentage points for Year 5 Reading and 17 percentage points for Writing. The improvement in reading levels over that time, from 58.7% of students achieving the benchmark in 1999 to 68% five years later, is significant and a tribute to the efforts of all concerned — teachers, families, education administrators and students alike.

However, it is clear that there is still work to do. While students are still struggling with decoding, they will have great difficulty making meaning from written text, and it becomes a real challenge to engage in any rich way with texts in subjects or learning areas. This has considerable significance for the range of post school opportunities which become available to students. If our students are to complete secondary schooling and go on to tertiary education, it is essential that they have gained the requisite level of mastery over the types of written and spoken language required for success.

The goals which must be achieved

There are at least three major goals to be achieved if this is to occur:

• the development of the ability to encode and decode written text automatically
• the development of a broad repertoire of language practices, and
• the development of capability with ‘academic’ written and spoken English.

The ability to encode and decode written text automatically

Students who are still struggling with decoding and encoding are focusing their learning attention on those skills, deflecting attention from making meaning — the primary purpose of literacy.2 The results from many state literacy tests show that this is still a fundamental problem for many Indigenous students.

The ability to automatically recognise and spell words in the English language is never the final goal for any literacy learner, it is nevertheless an important interim goal which should not be overlooked as a means to an end.

Consequently, working on the automatic decoding and encoding of written text is an important part of teaching literacy, a goal which often needs to be worked on throughout the years of schooling, including the secondary years. Reaching that goal will not automatically mean that students are making or drawing deep meanings from text, but at least they will be able to pay due attention to making meaning.

A broad repertoire of language practices

‘Literacy’ is not one simple process or idea. While once the notion of basic skills of reading, spelling and writing might have been thought to define its nature, the roles of the literacy learner defined by Allan Luke and Peter Freebody3 remind us that the actual range of effective literate practices (coding, semantic, pragmatic and analytical) requires far more than that.

Students who rely on simple code-breaking rather than being critical evaluators of the English language, will not be able to use literacy as a strong tool to seize available opportunities and succeed with their choices. Success of this type requires a repertoire of language skills which enable Indigenous young people to be able to function in an active and critical way in many contexts.

This goal requires that students are able to decode and encode written language but also, at the same time, be able to access and critique the many meanings embedded in written and oral texts produced by a range of speakers and writers for a range of audiences. Students need a broad repertoire of language skills from which to choose, depending on the context and the audience. This broad repertoire must include the types of language and thinking to enable students to function well with oral and written language tools that will give them power in everyday life.

**Capability with ‘academic’ written and spoken English**

Sometimes we attempt to improve student engagement through activities which are linked to the ‘real world’ because that’s the knowledge and language with which students are familiar. To engage successfully with secondary and tertiary education, all students need access to the ways of thinking and talking specific to particular disciplines. It is important to realise that these discourses need to be taught, and to take steps to do so.

The ability to read, write and talk ‘academic’ English is a fundamental requirement for success in many learning areas at secondary level, and for successfully completing final school certification, and especially the ‘high status’ certification which can lead eventually to stable, well-remunerated jobs.

The term ‘academic’ is used here as a shorthand term for the differences from everyday spoken or written English: its topics are different; its grammar is different; its word choice is different; its habits of thinking, expression and structuring of thought are different. Almost by definition these skills have been mastered, often relatively unconsciously, by teachers. We teach academic English to broaden student linguistic repertoire, and to give access and control in new and often powerful contexts where Indigenous students may want a voice. It is not a replacement for the topics, grammar and word choice of students’ home language.

**Distinguishing these goals from other important goals**

This paper is about literacy goals for Indigenous learners. But some other educational goals which are important in their own right must be mentioned because it is sometimes assumed, often mistakenly, that they will lead to successful literacy outcomes for Indigenous students.

**Social inclusion and wellbeing**

All schools who are committed to the wellbeing of their Indigenous students want them to feel included, to feel as though school is a place where they belong. These schools work to establish good relationships between students and staff, to ensure that processes are in place that make the school a safe place for students, and to ensure that students have a voice in the values, beliefs and operation of the school.

If social inclusion strategies are working, students will want to attend, will feel valued and respected, will know to expect the level of support they need to stay at school, and will view school as a site of positive experiences in their lives.

However, social inclusion and academic inclusion are not the same thing. Social inclusion is an important foundation towards literacy success, but it is quite possible for students to feel included while still achieving poor literacy outcomes. Social inclusion is vital, but not sufficient.

**Strengthening identity**

The strengthening of Indigenous learners’ identity is an important goal. Student wellbeing is supported by a strong sense of self, of heritage, culture, and a strong place in the world in interactions with others.

In part, that sense of identity comes from recognising and affirming the qualities and beliefs that establish Indigenous students as Indigenous. However, if students are to be successful at school, their sense of identity needs to expand so that students develop a self-concept that includes an affirmation of themselves as successful readers, writers, and speakers in a wide range of settings, where they have confidence that they have control of a wide range of language and behavioural resources.
Our understanding of identity should not mean that student choices are confined to a certain set of recognised cultural behaviours. Some Indigenous leaders have clear and emphatic opinions about this need to expand identity to include new ways of operating. Noel Pearson, lawyer and leader of Cape York Partnerships, is one of these. For Pearson, having high expectations of Indigenous students, and having control over academic English are certainly not assimilationist: ‘Complete command of English and knowledge of European culture can be combined with an Aboriginal cultural identity’.

He argues that successful education is ‘about making everybody an able player on the market’, and that students need access to powerful ways of using the English language if they are to take a strong role in determining their futures.

Martin Nakata, Director of Indigenous Academic Programs at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney, is critical of the school of thought that identifies cultural differences as the reason for Indigenous students’ failure in literacy. He suggests that students’ sense of identity cannot be confined to their heritage. Nakata argues strongly that a student’s sense of identity must include the future as well as the past: English literacy and understanding the world beyond our communities,… is as critically important for our future survival as understanding our traditional pathways.

**Engagement**

Engagement is the state where students are actively interacting with the best features of the formal education. When students are engaged, they are ready to commit the necessary brainpower to taking on new learning and making sense of it.

Discussion on this topic often suggests that the way to engage students at school is to find activities and learning experiences in which they are already interested, which link with their home and wider world experiences, or to find practical activities that they can do with their hands, and to base new learning there, thus getting them out of the ‘classroom’. The problem with this is how to sustain that interest and enthusiasm when the time comes for working on the literacies that accompany those activities.

The OECD’s international research into middle school education, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) identifies engagement as an important goal for the middle school, but one that does not necessarily translate into positive academic outcomes. *Student engagement is necessary but not sufficient for success in literacy.* It also requires teachers to have excellent pedagogy to assist in that learning.

Any literacy strategy should be related explicitly to particular literacy goals.
**Getting to the goals: what have we tried?**

What strategies have had currency in schools with high Indigenous populations over the past decade or so, and which of the goals listed above might we expect to achieve from employing such strategies? The list below is not comprehensive, but represents some of the different attempts made by educators in the attempt to resolve this issue.

In the light of the proposition that *any literacy strategy should be related explicitly to particular literacy goals*, it will be helpful to test these strategies by asking not ‘does this work?’ but rather ‘What work does this strategy do?’

**‘Affirming first language’ strategies**

Enlightened school personnel have made every effort to ensure that Indigenous learners feel welcome and valued at school: from the raising of the Aboriginal flag, to the creation of the ‘Koorie Students’ Room’ where students can retreat when they need help with work, or when there is trouble in the classroom; to erecting welcome signs in the local Indigenous language, to holding ‘mother-tongue’ classes for language retrieval or maintenance; to employing Indigenous adults in the school as Education Workers to support students with their school work.

Many examples of these strategies can be found on the *What Works* website at [www.whatworks.edu.au](http://www.whatworks.edu.au).

The belief underpinning these practices has been that students who feel welcomed, with a strong sense of identity and with community members employed to help with the transition into school, whose home cultures are valued, will feel safe and affirmed. There is good evidence that this is true.

Part of this group of strategies has been the belief that the recognition and valuing of Indigenous students’ home language, frequently Aboriginal English, is an important factor in strengthening identity and self-esteem. As a consequence, teachers have seen value in encouraging early childhood students to ‘write as they talk’ as a way into learning a new mode of communication.

Workshops and websites have been developed, for example, to point out the dialectal differences between Aboriginal and Standard Australian English so that teachers have the knowledge to be able to talk about it with students.

**What work does this group of strategies do?**

They work toward the important goal of social inclusion. A strong sense of identity in students may lead to improved engagement. These strategies provide a more important and valued place for Indigenous adults in the school, contributing to transition and wellbeing, and being a cultural broker and interpreter for families and school. They are crucial foundation practices for schools. But helping students to feel at home is only the first step in working towards successful literacy outcomes. Depending on the way that linguistic and dialectal differences are talked about, students may develop a ‘meta-understanding’ of language differences and be involved in making choices about appropriate dialect. However, a student’s awareness of dialectal differences does not provide access to academic discourse. The demands and language differences are complex, and require understanding of new topics, vocabulary and grammar. In fact, as Noel Pearson implies above, Indigenous students need to move *from* the familiar if they are to take on new literate practices, new ways of thinking, and apprenticeship into new disciplines.

**‘Bonding in the bush’ strategies**

It has been a long-held belief that getting out of the classroom, doing the things that students already love to do is A Good Thing. Students need real life experiences to make sense of school. Students who are not engaging in the classroom may well behave in different and more positive ways when taken out into contexts which already have meaning for them.

A more formal program with the same intent is ‘Contextual Teaching and Learning’ where students and teachers plan their learning around an event or project, identifying and using literacies and numeracies for their own social and academic purposes.

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What work does this group of strategies do?
They are a very important tool for social inclusion, for developing relationships between teachers and students, and for assisting students in seeing themselves as able to operate in the wider world. Some trips to places familiar to students provide the opportunity for students to take on the role of teacher, sharing their own knowledge with others, and thus strengthening their sense of identity. These strategies could, and often do, include some literacy activities. Sometimes workbooks are prepared to accompany the activity, sometimes students are asked to write about their experiences on return. Some contextualised programs embed the literacies as part of the activities. They provide opportunities for students to be exposed to a wide range of everyday literacies, to see how useful they can be to achieve social goals.

The success of such strategies as a goal for broadening literacy repertoires, or for providing access to academic English depends on careful planning by the teacher. For example, the value of a contextualised program, where students are faced with a social task, like inviting parents to school for a concert, lies in the opportunity for students to look at the range of literacies, both oral and written which might be useful. There are opportunities to broaden literate repertoires, but only if thought is given to how these new literate practices will be explicitly taught, and how a teacher might ensure sufficient repetitions for mastery.

Successful mastery of academic language requires teacher and student to ‘re-frame’ everyday experiences through different lenses — to move from common-sense talk to the language of particular disciplines. That means that teachers have to ensure that even the talk in context, i.e. while the activity is going on, is representing the experience in new, academic ways, and that sufficient repetition is provided, both during and afterwards, to ensure that students are able to master the new language and ways of thinking.

‘Inclusive reading material’ strategies
Many attempts have been made to engage students in reading by providing more relevant or culturally-appropriate reading materials. Because it is recognised that many students are unable to easily decode, this strategy has included sets of ‘phonics’ readers which students should be able to decode because of the simple words included in the text. Other forms of reader have been the ‘culturally inclusive’ reading materials which represent some Indigenous experiences in illustrations and text. For older students with low levels of literacy, ‘high interest – low level’ reading materials have been produced in the hope that more mature subject matter, represented in simple English may make reading accessible to these readers.

What work does this group of strategies do?
They may all assist students in the goal of decoding, described above as an important literacy goal but an interim one. The ‘culturally inclusive’ reading materials may contribute to students’ sense of identity and wellbeing: they may support the goal of social inclusion. It is important that all our students see their lives or the lives of people with whom they identify as worthy of recording in literature.

However, because such reading materials are intentionally simplified and written as ‘talk-like’ texts, devoid of many of the language features that rich literate texts display, and with which students need to engage, they are unlikely to contribute to the goals of expanding the repertoire of literate practices, nor will they provide access to academic English.

‘Shoosh and colour’ strategies
Teachers who are desperate for activities in which all class members can successfully participate, may resort to the ‘worksheet’ strategy where students are required to perform low-level activities where they fill in one- or two-word answers on a worksheet, and spend a great deal of time colouring in or making borders. The ‘copy off the board’ strategy is included under this heading. Teacher writes the news of the day on the board, or in older classrooms, prepares blackboards full of notes, and the students copy them letter for letter into their books and illustrate. Many students enjoy ‘Wonder words’ where they are asked to find strings of letters making up a word in a letter grid.
What work does this group of strategies do?
If students are unable to read back and make deep meanings from what they have done, then only very limited literacy goals have been achieved. Worksheets can be seen as a behaviour management strategy. There is no threat or challenge here, so students will often be compliant in such situations. Can these activities be described as either teaching or learning? The answer must be, no.

‘Literacy through information technology’ strategies
The use of information technology is a valuable tool to assist in the goal of engagement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Indigenous students are prepared to take risks when engaging with information technology, to ‘have a go’ and subsequently ‘be successful’. Students’ confidence grows, and their sense of identity expands to see themselves as powerful users of technology.

What work does this group of strategies do?
Computers and software are tools, and as such can be used in useful and less useful ways. Just because students are engaged in front of the screen does not ensure that they are learning. Teachers need to carefully evaluate just what goals are being worked towards.

An increasing amount of software is available to assist students with learning literate practices through interactive computer activities. Some activities are designed with the intention of supporting the goal of improving decoding skills, some are designed to support the goal of broadening literate practices, and to demonstrate to students how literacies can be used in the workplace. Whether the software is useful for teaching new skills, or most valuable for consolidating previously taught skills in an engaging way, is still under question.

If students are not literate enough to engage with the software independently, they can also interact mindlessly, finding the correct answers through trial and error, reading and understanding very little.

Accelerating literacy
It was considerations such as these that led Professor Brian Gray and his colleague Wendy Cowey to develop a new approach to literacy, originally known as ‘Scaffolded Literacy’. The programme draws upon earlier successful work by Brian with Indigenous students in Alice Springs which has been further developed and applied practically to achieve quite dramatic results with a wide range of educationally marginalised students. More recently, the application of the programme in Indigenous settings has demonstrated its ability to achieve strong gains in literacy competence. It is now funded as an Australian Government programme known as ‘Accelerated Literacy’.

The following text provided by Brian and Wendy comes from the What Works website. (www.whatworks.edu.au/4_2_3_6.htm) It is followed by some extracts from a conversation between those two with Geoff Ainsworth from the same source.

Why is Accelerated Literacy more successful than other common approaches to Indigenous literacy?
The teaching approach adopted in the program takes a somewhat radical and direct approach which allows students who may be performing years below their Year level to work at, or very close to, reading levels appropriate for their age. With careful teacher management and support of learning negotiation, the students work intensively on texts which are not modified in any way and which are equivalent to those which also challenge their more successful age peers. Furthermore, the primary method of delivery is the teacher working with the whole class.

This emphasis on the whole class working on the same ‘high level’ text confronts most common contemporary approaches to literacy which, instead, focus on determining individual performance levels for each child. In ‘individualised’ approaches,
teachers are typically confronted with a wide range of ability levels. And, for schools serving Indigenous communities, the performance disparities are often wide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as well as between Indigenous students themselves across the one classroom.

The conventional approach to this wide performance disparity involves the teacher in identifying each student’s ability level and teaching to that level. Thus, if the child cannot read a book at say a Year 2 level, the conventional and seemingly common sense reaction is to place the child on an easier (Year 1) book and attempt to teach at that lower level in the hope that he or she will gradually improve. However, confining learners to low level books can cause serious difficulties.

These difficulties are especially significant when learners are required to work well below the expectations of their age level as is the case for the majority of Indigenous students. Children working on ‘low level’ books tend to reject them and at best develop ‘short cut’ ways of working that involve rote learning, other restricted memorising strategies and limited attention to decoding.

Even more important, however, is the fact that students working at low levels of text complexity cannot hope to catch up with their more successful peers. This is because at the same time, these more successful students are working on more complex language, dealing with more advanced meanings and issues and continually employing more sophisticated decoding skills. The net result is that students who start behind not only stay behind but, over time, fall further and further behind.

**How does the teacher engage the children in effective learning?**

As its name implies, the pedagogy employs as its key element an approach to learning negotiation which has been termed ‘scaffolding’. The pedagogy involves teachers in ways of interacting with children which are significantly different from those which are currently employed in either progressivist child-centred (e.g. Whole Language) or didactic (e.g. traditional teacher-directed or basic skills-oriented) approaches.

In scaffolding interactions, teachers manage learning engagement initially through modelling and providing information to learners rather than asking learners to ‘discover’ or explore using their own learning resources. However, the developing interaction process in the classroom is a highly dynamic one and the roles of teacher and learners shift as interaction progresses over time until the learners can function by themselves without teacher help. This kind of teacher support makes teacher expectations about the ways of learning and thinking necessary for school success clearly visible to learners, especially those who don’t have the culturally-acquired understandings necessary to ‘tune in’ to school learning without such explicit help.

The outcome is the development of students who are literate in a sense of the term that is far broader than learning simply how to read, write and spell. While reading, writing and spelling form the core focus of the programme, it also provides a platform from which students can come to learn the ‘ways of speaking and thinking’ that are necessary for educational success.

**How is the teaching sequenced?**

The core programme is built around a systematic and progressive approach to literacy development. The approach leads learners through intensive exploration of high level text comprehension which pays careful attention to understanding the complex grammar that is encountered in literate text as opposed to everyday speech. As students begin to engage successfully with reading following this support, the emphasis shifts to development of high level decoding, spelling and eventually to writing.

Development across reading, writing and spelling is highly integrated. Children learn to spell and decode words they can already identify following intensive comprehension work. Furthermore, they learn to use the literate choices they have studied in comprehension activities in their own writing.
Brian: What we mean by good teaching is teaching that’s very focused and really quite intensive. When you’re working in any kind of situation where the children are coming into schools without already having the understandings needed to succeed in that situation, you need some kind of process that actually socialises the children into the literate discourse that they’re going to be dealing with. So that’s got to be built in across your teaching, in every single thing you do. Good teaching is really teaching that’s taking that into account. A lot of Aboriginal kids are outside the socialisation process that goes on in classrooms. They need to be brought in.

The term ‘scaffolding’ goes back to Bruner and others, but what we mean is just the process through which children are given access to a discourse. Sometimes we describe it as the normal way parents’ act with kids. The parent lets the child do whatever the child can actually achieve but supports the child in the things that are beyond what the child can do if left to their own resources. They work to make all of the presumptions of the discourse visible to the child. That’s what we want to do.

How do we use texts in classrooms? First of all, if children have a history of not being successful, I’d say there’s no point working with those children on low level materials. They’ve probably been doing that for years.

Wendy: It seems unbelievable to some people that we say that if you’ve been struggling with kids who can’t get past a one-sentence-a-page reader, then you’ve got to give them harder books. It stops people in their tracks. But we’re talking about dealing with texts in a very careful, structured way, and supporting children all the way to read them. Whatever age they are, kids have their own experiences and they’re developing in every aspect of their own life. And so, of course, a child who’s in Year 6 or 7 is not like a child in Year 1 for example.

Very often because they’re reading at a Year 1 level there’s a perception on the part of teachers that they’re like a Year 1 child, but of course they’re not. They need to deal with texts which are appropriate to their own age.

Brian: The focus of the teaching is directly on the learning outcomes. It’s not on forcing the children to comply with behavioural control regimes without any reference to teaching and learning. If you don’t challenge Aboriginal students you might be able to achieve a calm classroom, but all you’ve got is a classroom where nobody learns anything.

We’ve seen classrooms where the teacher spends their whole time trying to get activities that entertain the kids. For us, behavioural control is something that actually comes when children become task oriented.

It’s understandable when teachers are under pressure, that they find this really hard to deal with. It’s hard work sometimes! But teachers can very easily get pushed into a situation where they can’t really do anything in the classroom or they’re just keeping children amused.

Wendy: Another thing that teachers worry about is the notion of cultural difference.

Sometimes they worry to the point where they are very afraid and paralysed and unable to just communicate directly. They think you have to bite your tongue and hold back, because you might transgress. Then they try asking a few open-ended questions and the Aboriginal kids don’t answer, so they think, well, Aboriginal kids can’t answer these questions so it must be against the culture. But that’s rubbish! It’s just that they haven’t been taught how to do it in this particular discourse.

Of course Aboriginal kids can succeed in school but they have to be taught about the discourse. We do a lot of telling and then we ask questions. Because only if you do it that way can the kids see what you’re actually talking about. Questioning techniques are a very important part of this approach.

Brian: All of our language is part of a discourse and as such it’s patterned. Sometimes teachers learn in teachers’ college that the only questions to ask are open questions. You know… open questions are good, closed questions are bad. The thinking is that we don’t want to interfere with what the children are thinking therefore we never guide children in the interaction. So some teachers find it really hard to move away from the idea that they should never tell kids things. But it’s fundamental to our work that teachers must guide children.

[So you never want teachers asking open-ended questions?]

Wendy: No, what we say is that you have to ask closed questions as a means of teaching. Once you’ve had closed questions and the children have looked closely at the text, then that allows them to answer open questions because they then have the resources to answer them. What we’re making explicit is all the processes that are involved in doing that.
The concept and first part of the paper was developed by Bronwyn Parkin who has worked with Aboriginal learners in urban, rural and remote settings, from preschool to tertiary levels for almost 30 years. She is now the Policy and Program Officer for the Accelerated Literacy Program in the South Australian Department. Contributions have also come from the What Works Advisory Group and, where noted, the What Works website.

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