

Emergent literacy, Indigenous children and families

A discussion paper on practice and principles

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Executive Summary

The importance of literacy for later life is well canvassed by the literature. Literacy acquisition is one of the most important developmental milestones for young children and impacts on a wide range of long term social, physical, mental health and economic outcomes.

For Australian children as a whole, the international comparisons on literacy are reasonably favourable while on broader measures of wellbeing Australia could do better by its children. However the results for Indigenous children are considerably below that of their non-Indigenous peers on many indicators. The evidence of a gap in outcomes for health, income, wellbeing and a wide range of educational outcomes suggest that the gap starts early and continues throughout life for many Indigenous children (ABS, 2006a; ARACY, 2008a; AIHW, 2009).

There is also evidence of differences between Indigenous people in major cities compared to those in rural and remote areas of Australia (Productivity Commission, 2009), with employment and literacy outcomes better for Indigenous people living in major cities.

Factors associated with better literacy outcomes include family income, employment and parent literacy as well as child health and wellbeing. It seems that children who fall behind do not necessarily catch up later.

There is growing evidence that those children who approach school primed for literacy acquisition are most likely to begin well and continue well and this has led in recent years to exploration of factors that support children in the years prior to school.

Emergent literacy principles are based on the view that children's parents and early caregivers are crucial to their learning but that sharpening the literacy environments and practices in a wide range of settings where young children and their families are found — preschools, childcare services, libraries, baby health and other community services — can bolster literacy acquisition for all children.

The skill sets of an emergent literacy framework include (CCCH, 2004) language abilities, knowledge of letters, ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language and an understanding of print conventions. As well as these, the child's literacy environment has been shown to be important: a knowledge of books, favourite books, number of books in the home, hours spent in shared reading and other home literacy activities such as library visits are associated with literacy outcomes.

While universal principles underpin early childhood literacy there is a great diversity in how language, word and literacy skills are developed and supported in different contexts. Literacy skills can be built in many ways using song, games, DVDs and other fun activities. Creating a love of books and pleasure in reading is an important part of learning to read and reading for life.

We understand from parent and service feedback that Indigenous parents want their children to have strong Indigenous identity *and* to be able to participate in wider education and other opportunities.

Increasing the funding to services or expanding their number and location is not enough. To improve Indigenous access to services, it is important that both Indigenous-specific and mainstream services are safe, comfortable and meet the cultural needs of Indigenous families and children (FAHCSIA 2009).

Already a large number of initiatives and programs are underway around Australia in urban, rural and remote areas — among them PaL, SWIRL, HIPPO and *Let's Read* — that have lessons for

fostering emergent literacy and working with Indigenous children and families. They include the importance of 'working with' not 'doing to' Indigenous communities and finding out the unique features of families, their communities and what they want. Working to build trust, strong relationships, identifying significant people and 'champions' as well as building on the positives of Indigenous identity are also crucial.

The *Let's Read* program was developed in response to findings about emergent literacy skills in very young children in 2003 and 2004. In the current context, it addresses itself to the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the Victorian government's Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and the protocols for working with Indigenous families (DEECD 2009, 2007). Yet a distinguishing feature of *Let's Read* is its comprehensive exploration phase, which maximises understanding about the families, children and communities and builds on existing infrastructure and values. *Let's Read* is both intensively local while applying universal knowledge about children's literacy, early childhood and Indigenous engagement.

While it is too early in the life of the Cluster Randomised Control Trial to be definitive about *Let's Read*, data from trials in three areas in northern Queensland are promising. They demonstrate the strengths of the program — particularly its adaptability to most settings, in part due to its comprehensive exploratory phase — and point to future directions.

The strength of the national and Victorian policy agendas for early childhood mean that Victoria is equipped with the frameworks and the knowledge to make a difference to Indigenous children's emergent literacy.

Emergent literacy and later life

In 2004 when the first *Let's Read* literature review (CCCH, 2004) was conducted, evidence was steadily amassing on literacy as an indicator of outcomes for school age children and for whole of life experience.

It is five years since the initial *Let's Read* review and the development and trial of the *Let's Read* program in eleven communities. In the meantime there has been an unprecedented focus on Indigenous issues and investment in early childhood by governments everywhere. A 2008 report on children's wellbeing (ARACY, 2008a) and recent Australian Productivity Commission ((PC), 2009) figures show wide differences in experiences and outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and between Indigenous peoples in regional and remote areas and major cities. It is an appropriate time to take stock of what we have learned that could enhance literacy initiatives for young Indigenous children in urban and regional Victoria.

Literacy and whole of life

The importance of literacy for later life is well canvassed by the literature across many disciplines. Literacy acquisition is one of the most important developmental milestones for young children and is the key to educational success. In turn literacy and educational success impact on a wide range of social, physical, mental health and economic outcomes.

Children with low literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to leave school early, and more likely to experience unemployment later in life (ARACY, 2008a). As the first *Let's Read* literature review (CCCH, 2004) showed, national and international research point to poor literacy skills as disproportionately associated with children from low socioeconomic and / or educationally disadvantaged homes. It is a factor in perpetuating the poverty cycle and is linked to multiple disadvantage in later life such as lower income and decreased productivity, high unemployment and rates of welfare dependency, substance abuse and teenage parenting (p5 CCCH, 2004).

The most recent literacy figures for Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006a) confirm a continuing strong link between literacy and educational attainment, employment and income. And while overall literacy figures for Australia are reasonably favourable (ABS, 2008; AIHW, 2009) particular groups of children are disproportionately represented at the lower end of outcomes and in factors associated with lifelong effects of lower literacy such as early school leaving.

The link between falling behind and continuing to fall behind begins early with most research showing that children struggling with literacy in grade 3 are not likely to have caught up by grade 5 (AIHW, 2009).

On the other hand those children who approach school primed for literacy acquisition are most likely to begin well and continue well.

A clear and well-documented relationship [exists] between children's preparation in the home and their ability to benefit from standard literacy practices' in early primary school (Rose 2005).

Australia and literacy

The most recent ABS survey of adult literacy (ABS, 2006a) shows a staggering 46 per cent of Australians aged 15 to 74 years had scores, on two of the five measures of literacy, that were below the level considered necessary to meet 'the complex demands of everyday life and work in the

emerging knowledge-based economy' (using the prose scale and measures of document literacy (ABS, 2006a, p5).

According to the survey, since 1996 there has been a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of people at the lowest level of two measures of literacy: prose literacy (from 20 per cent in 1996 to 17 per cent in 2006) and document literacy (from 20 to 18 per cent).

There were statistically significant increases in the proportion of people attaining Level 2 and Level 3 for prose literacy (from 28 to 30 per cent and 35 to 37 per cent respectively). Around 37 per cent (5.6 million) of Australians were at Level 3 while 16 per cent (2.5 million) were at the highest levels (4/5) for prose literacy, with similar results for document literacy.

There was a strong association between educational attainment and achieved literacy levels. People who had completed a qualification generally had higher literacy scores.

While above the national average on most measures, the figures for Victoria reflected national trends.

International trends suggest that Australia is not alone among developed nations in facing concerns about maintaining and improving literacy standards. World-wide, one in five adults is illiterate and more than 75 million children are out of school. Fifty years ago this was seen as a problem of developing countries. However since the 1990s even developed countries have become concerned about maintaining literacy and the skills needed to face the demands of a globalised and knowledge-based economy (UNESCO 2008).

For Australian children as a whole, the international comparisons on literacy are reasonably favourable. ABS figures show that Australian children attained a good overall result in 2003, on science and mathematics literacy scores and on average children attain expected reading benchmarks. However when these data are disaggregated the picture is not so healthy. Achievement for literacy varies according to social and demographic factors such as sex, socioeconomic status, family background, teacher characteristics and school setting (ABS, 2006c). Children in particular locations, population groups and family circumstances are disproportionately represented in the lower percentiles for educational outcomes (ABS, 2006c, AIHW, 2009, Indigenous Literacy Project (ILP), 2009).

Indigenous Australia

Recent research shows that the gap continues between outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on many measures of socio-economic, health and individual wellbeing.

The Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (PC OID 2009) has thrown light on differences not just between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians but also on the different experiences and outcomes of Indigenous peoples living in remote and regional areas and major cities.

According to the Productivity Commission's Key Indicators report (PC OID 2009), three quarters of Australia's Indigenous population live in regional areas or major cities. Indigenous people in major cities are less likely to have completed year 12 and more likely to have significantly lower incomes or be unemployed than non-Indigenous people in major cities. However in a few areas such as some housing, economic and education indicators, Indigenous people in major cities have better outcomes than Indigenous people living in regional or remote areas. For example the proportion of Indigenous people with a Certificate Level III qualification or higher increased between 2001 and 2006.

The report also shows that in major cities learning outcomes for Indigenous students are lower than for all students, with a lower proportion of Year 9 Indigenous students achieving the national minimum standard for reading compared to same age non-Indigenous students.

In major cities, Indigenous people are also less likely than non-Indigenous to have completed school and are less likely to hold a tertiary qualification.

In 2006, the employment rate of Indigenous people increased with their level of schooling. More than half of Indigenous people who completed schooling to year 10 reported having a job compared to 26.5 per cent of Indigenous people who had completed schooling only to year 8 or below. About 68 per cent of Indigenous people attaining year 12, reported having a job (PC OID, 2009).

ABS 2006 Census data shows the links between household income and education. About 59.1 per cent of Indigenous people who had completed schooling to year 8 or below were in the lowest income quintile while only 2.7 per cent of Indigenous people who had completed schooling to year 8 or below were in the highest income quintile (PC OID Report 2009).

Examining the wellbeing of Australia's young people and children the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2008a) cast its net wide to include measures of material wellbeing; health and safety; education, training and employment; peer and family relationships; behaviours and risks; subjective wellbeing; participation; and environment.

It showed that Australia, despite being a prosperous developed society, was not the best performing country on any single measure.

Indigenous children were below the national and international averages for reading, science and mathematics at age 15 although the biggest gap in outcomes was in the areas of teenage pregnancy, infant mortality and contact with the juvenile justice system.

Some positives include that rates of immunisation against disease are reasonably high and are comparable between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. For relationships, Indigenous children reported more time spent with parents 'just talking' yet they were more likely to feel 'awkward at school' at age 15 compared to the total population of same age children (ARACY 2008a).

A recent collation of MCEETYA data on national achievement benchmarks (2002 and 2005) suggests a higher proportion of students in Year 5 than Year 3 were unable to meet the relevant reading and writing standards and identified a decrease in the three years from 2002 to 2005 in the proportion of Year 5 students meeting these standards. The aggregation of data between urban and remote Aboriginal students further obscures the results for particular Indigenous populations. However it is clear that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students emerges early, with Indigenous students lagging in benchmark tests for reading, writing and numeracy in Year 3 and Year 5. By Year 7, the gap has widened, particularly for numeracy (DEET, 2006 in ILP, 2009).

For Indigenous children in isolated areas, literacy rates are even lower. In the Northern Territory, only one in five children from very remote Indigenous communities can read at the accepted

Some facts

Indigenous people living:

*in remote areas 25 %
in regional areas 43 %
in major cities 32%*

Year 9 students who read at national minimum standard:

*Indigenous 78 %
Non-Indigenous 94 %*

In major cities 2006, 19 year olds who had completed Year 12:

*Indigenous 44%
Non-Indigenous 77%*

Indigenous people employed & school level:

*completed to Yr 8, 26.5%
to Yr 10>50%
to Yr 12, 68%*

(from Productivity Commission, 2009)

minimum standard. By Year 7, this has dropped from 20 per cent to just 15 per cent, well below their urban Indigenous peers and even further behind non-Indigenous students (DEET 2006, in ILP, 2009).

Emergent literacy

The *Let's Read* program was developed in response to growing evidence not only that literacy significantly affects later life and that some children are missing out, but that certain factors affect the development of literacy skills in very young children well before they reach school age. Known as *emergent literacy* these factors are the skills, knowledge and attitudes seen as developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing and the environments that support these developments.

The children most likely to be primed for reading prior to school are those with more than 1000 hours of parent /adult reading time and who come from middle class families. Least prepared are children from 'oral tradition households' (Rose, 2005; Grant, 2001). Describing a sequence of mother and child reading interaction in which the mother constantly primes and prompts the child for literacy, Rose suggests that parent-child reading and mass schooling 'have co-evolved over the past two centuries'. The reading practices of some parents now ensure their children are optimally prepared to benefit from teaching practices at school and at the same time, teaching practices have evolved to take advantage of these parental preparations. He goes on to conclude that children who do not come

... from this kind of background may be excluded from this equation, most particularly those from oral family backgrounds whose cultural practices have not co-evolved with those of school (Rose 2005).

Educational approaches have usually grappled with how home reading practices in non-middle class families can be changed to increase children's school readiness. Rose argues that this response is flawed and is reflected throughout the education system in the frequently repeated view that students should have been better prepared for study during previous stages: before school for primary school, in primary school for secondary school and in secondary school for universities and colleges (Rose, 2005, p 11).

Emergent literacy principles are based on the view that children's parents and early caregivers are crucial to their learning but that sharpening the literacy environments and practices in a wide range of settings where young children and their families are found — preschools, childcare services, libraries, baby health and other community services — can bolster literacy acquisition for all children.

The skill sets of an emergent literacy framework that were identified through and helped build the *Let's Read* approach (CCCH, 2004) include:

- Language abilities — vocabulary, understanding narrative and story and capacity for explanatory talk
- Letter Identification/knowledge — knowing the names and sounds of letters
- Phonological awareness/sensitivity — the ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language
- Understanding of print conventions — such as writing functions and the relevant print-on-page forms such as left to right, top to bottom, front to back reading (in western-based societies)
- Literacy environments — indicated by knowledge of books, favourite books, number of books in the home, hours spent in shared reading and other home literacy activities such as library visits.

These factors continue to be predictors not just for literacy acquisition at school but for overall and ongoing school achievement, with implications for whole of life wellbeing, wealth and health.

However what sits behind these formal descriptors of emergent literacy is the concept that reading can and should be *fun* for children and for those reading to them and that this pleasurable experience fuses our best learning to date about the meaning of literacy for later life and the significance of children's first experiences (particularly birth to three) in shaping the whole person. In recent years a huge increase in knowledge of the brain and its functioning and the factors that support children's development and wellbeing (e.g. McCain and Mustard 1999) means that acquiring literacy skills can be a warm, positive and nurturing experience that contributes to the child's self identify and confidence as much as to later academic and vocational capacity.

This is reflected in recent discussions of emergent literacy skills and the foremost goal of *engaging* rather than *teaching* children (Fox, 2001). In recent years governments (UK, 2005; Australia, 2005) have picked up this theme, identifying the multiple dimensions of literacy and the centrality of 'the pleasure of reading' to the child's development of reading skills. Alongside skills of decoding, comprehension, understanding of narrative and structure the UK government places 'familiarity with books and other printed material: a culture of wanting to read and enjoying it' (UK, 2005).

However for the experience to be positive and pleasurable for both child and adult, it needs to reflect their context — their family and community of origin, concepts of adequate literacy and learning style. Text selection is crucial to this. The most effective picture books target the 'adult as reader' and the 'child as listener' while beginner reader texts (those aimed at children from pre-school to 8 years, taking their first steps in reading) aim to maintain interest for both child and adult through a narrative that balances accessibility and challenge for the child reader.

Acquiring literacy skills can be a warm, positive and nurturing experience that contributes to the child's self identify and confidence

Universal principles in diverse contexts

While universal principles underpin early childhood literacy there is a great diversity in how language, word and literacy skills are developed and supported in different contexts. Some researchers question whether literacy is a single, uniform skill (Street, 1993).

The concept of literacy relies on systems of signs and codes that are culturally evolved and understood. They emerge from 'the historical development, cultural institutions, and philosophical traditions of a people' (Brown, 1998). While neuroscience investigations of brain function indicate that humans may be wired in ways that 'pre-determine the range and shape of human mental constructs' it is social systems and cultural practices that form 'the unique conventions and particular expectations' of reading and writing in particular groups and societies (Brown, 1998).

Underlying literacy in all societies are a large number of presumptions about what constitutes literacy, conventions of print and writing, learning styles, age appropriate skills and the respective roles of those involved in children's early lives. In modern English-language societies such as Australia it includes less overt concepts such as linearity and conventions of rhetoric and logic (Brown, 1998). In some cases assumptions may not be fully articulated or understood by those shaping children's literacy development including parents, government and service agencies and even some early childhood practitioners. School curricula can include expectations about specific reading and writing skills that apply to whole-of-education learning yet these may not be explicitly addressed beyond lower primary schooling (Rose, 2005).

What is striking in a cross-culture glimpse of literacy is the diversity of ways that language acquisition and literacy can be supported across cultures and time, from ancient traditions through to mass

education. In contemporary western societies such as Australia the approach is heavily book-based but many societies emphasise oral traditions, memory-based learning and multi-language skills. Other traditions from ancient to present times (Persia, India, Indigenous Australia, ancient Greece and Rome) emphasise oral traditions, rhythm, music, memorised narrative prose and poetry as important components of learning. In fact, in Ancient Greece, a society where individuals were commonly able to hear and memorise thousands of lines of verse, the advent of writing was viewed by the philosopher Plato as a risk to highly valued oral traditions, to memory and the exchange and preservation of meaning between orator and audience (Ong, 2001, p 79).

Those Australians old enough to remember rote learning of tables, the alphabet or long tracts of poetry will agree that some emergent literacy skills are recognised and favoured over others at different times and places.

Australia has always been diverse, with more than 500 language groups in existence at the time of European contact in the 1700s and evidence of ongoing interaction between Indigenous peoples and other groups prior to this. It continues to be one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world with hundreds of languages spoken, most world religions practised and about a quarter of the population born overseas (ABS, 2006b). The reshaping of countries such as Australia since World War II through changes in migration and workforce patterns, greater mobility, an increasingly globalised economy and human and natural calamities has implications for how a wide range of social, educational and health services are designed and delivered. In the early childhood and education fields there is a growing awareness that universal assumptions about development and parenting do not account for all population groups (Moore, Morcos and Robinson, 2009).

In particular, Goodnow ((1999) in Moore, et al 2009, p7) writes that *cultural pluralism* should support 'groups and individuals ... to hold on to what gives them their unique identities while maintaining their membership in the larger social framework.' Their discussion points to mutual respect and an expanded definition of 'what is normal' as the keystones for early childhood practitioners rather than the language of the 'deficit model' that characterises different family, cultural and health practices as 'defects or inadequacies'.

The 'Aboriginal way of raising children' with 'its complex kinship systems ... is ... often mistakenly labelled dysfunctional rather than simply complicated.' Working with Indigenous families requires that early childhood practitioners who promote the primacy of parent as a child's most enduring teacher need to have an expanded concept of parent, kinship and significant individuals in the child's context along with broader understandings of family and identity (FaHCSIA, 2008).

A growing body of work in the social services and health sectors holds governments, professionals and service providers 'accountable for meeting the needs of all members of the communities they serve' (NHMRC, 2006, p4). More than mere 'cultural awareness' concepts such as *cultural competence*, *cultural match* and *cultural pluralism* put the focus on the capacity of organisations and systems to integrate culture and improve outcomes in their services to communities rather than the 'failure' of individuals to connect with or make use of services (Moore et al, 2009).

One commentator proposes the term 'culturally engaged' education over 'culturally appropriate' as a better description for the 'intercultural zone where the global world and western education meet the Aboriginal world and culture' (Pearson, 2009, p 58).

Initiatives to increase social outcomes are based on growing awareness of those people who are not benefiting from the advantages available to others in the community. Inclusive services move beyond 'us and them' or bringing people into the mainstream, and begin with respect for and learning from other approaches. This has implications for Indigenous emergent literacy.

Among the features of culturally competent systems are a holistic approach that values diversity, is 'conscious of the dynamics that occur when cultures interact', that integrates cultural knowledge into institutions and can adapt service delivery so that it reflects an understanding of the diversity between and within cultures (RACP 2004, in NHMRC, 2006, p7).

Finding ways to support emergent literacy means engaging with parent/caregivers, families and others in the child's context that are significant to their early development and ensuring that literacy skills are experienced as meaningful and positive.

Most successful approaches have in common a respect for the curiosity of the child and their needs, incorporation of significant adults into the learning experience and valuing of the culture of origin of the child — both their family culture and broader context.

Australia's first people occupy a unique position in any discussion of the interaction between universal principles of early childhood and literacy and the diverse cultural, family and individual needs of particular populations.

Focus on Indigenous emergent literacy

The period since *Let's Read* 2004 has seen 'an unprecedented national focus on Indigenous affairs' alongside a growing commitment to early childhood issues at the national and state levels. Prominent among these are the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) by the then Australian Government; the Victorian Government's Early Years Learning and Development Framework; ARACY's 2008 Report Card on the Wellbeing of Young Australians highlighting considerable lag in outcomes for Indigenous children on some measures; the Productivity Commission's Report into Indigenous Disadvantage (2009); and, most recently, the launch of the Australian government's National Early Childhood Development strategy which includes bi-lateral agreements between the Australian government and all states and territories. It commits to ensuring that all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years, access to preschool programs for every child in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling by 2013 and halving the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.

Two longer term initiatives have commenced which will help provide important information about the early childhood experience for Indigenous populations. These include the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) and Footprints in Time, a longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC).

Australian Early Development Index

Following the successful piloting of the Australian Early Development Index in 60 communities across Australia, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has recognised the need for all communities to have early childhood development information, and has endorsed the Australian

Culturally competent systems:

- *have a holistic approach that values diversity*
- *are conscious of the dynamics that occur when cultures interact*
- *integrate cultural knowledge into institutions, and*
- *can adapt service delivery to reflect diversity between and within cultures.*

(from NHMRC, 2006)

Early Development Index (AEDI) as a national progress measure of early childhood development. The Australian Government has invested \$21.9 million to 30 June 2011 to implement the AEDI nationally. In 2009, the AEDI was completed for 261,203 children in the first year of full time school nationally. Results from the AEDI (a population measure of children's development) provide communities with information about how local children have developed across five areas of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge, by the time they start school.

Footprints in Time

The Footprints in Time – the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) project was first funded in 2001. When fully operational it will help inform how governments, service providers and practitioners can work for the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. LSIC invites Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from all over the country to participate in a series of annual interviews to help better understand what impacts on their children's lives as they grow up. It examines factors such as children's family, their communities, their culture and the use and effectiveness of services. It will explore how children can be better supported to grow up strong and resilient regardless of location by examining what fosters children's good health, safety and happiness, and their ability to learn at school and participate in their community (FaHCSIA 2007).

What the research says

While we wait for the data sets to mature, there are concerning signs of a literacy decline between years 3 and 5. The data comparisons between 1996 and 2005 are problematic due to data measurement changes yet the suggestion is that Indigenous students are three times less likely to reach the Year 5 reading benchmark when compared to students as a whole.

On some wellbeing indicators it is clear that there is not enough data to understand how Indigenous children are faring, however on one measure Indigenous young people and children outranked national and international averages: the percentage of children who have fewer than 11 books in their home (ARACY, 2008a).

As we know from the earlier discussion, poor literacy environments and delays in learning to read and write translate into lifetime catch-up in skills that are known to be essential for full participation in a range of economic and social settings and are also correlated with poorer outcomes on health, education, economic and other wellbeing indicators.

However improving access of Indigenous children and families to services that support them to improve literacy is not simply a case of providing more funding or increasing the number, location and type of services. Previous initiatives show that it is important that 'both Indigenous-specific and mainstream services are safe, comfortable and culturally appropriate for Indigenous families and children' (FAHCSIA 2009).

As the current paper was being finalised, a national discussion was stirring on Indigenous education prompted by the Indigenous leader Noel Pearson. He argues that the oral transmission of culture is under pressure from contemporary lifestyles and the increasingly globalised wider culture in which Aboriginal identity is immersed in many settings (Pearson, 2009, p 56-57). According to Pearson multi-media methods should be harnessed to support cultural identity and improve Indigenous educational outcomes.

Let's Read was designed and trialled to explore emergent literacy factors and to target children most vulnerable to poorer outcomes. This includes Indigenous children in a variety of contexts – remote communities where English may not be the first or even second language and where literacy

traditions differ from emergent literacy principles — but also regional and urban settings where the statistics show that outcomes for Indigenous students are improving but still below that of their non-Indigenous counterparts (CCCH, 2004, p 28).

The challenge is to find approaches that apply universal principles of emergent literacy in ways that support learning, Indigenous identity and wellbeing as well as improved outcomes for Indigenous children. Pearson (2009) argues for 'bi-cultural capacity' so that young Cape York people — and by extension all Indigenous young people — are able to be:

completely fluent in their own culture and the wider culture — and to move with facility and capacity between the two worlds.
(Pearson, 2009, p57)

He argues that steps to preserve and maintain distinct Indigenous cultures should be taken but Indigenous peoples should also 'see the external culture as our right and inheritance: it is a world heritage' (Pearson 2009, p 57).

The dichotomy between different approaches can lead to a devaluing of one over the other and 'either/or' choices in the design of literacy programs:

In modern thinking, Aboriginal peoples' stories are a narrative that is spiritual or traditional, and the nation-building narrative is one of economic growth or development. From the modern-thinkers' perspective these narratives cannot co-exist: one must be sacrificed for the other ... this way of thinking is false, and, critically, disables our responses (Weir, ABC AM, 2009).

From the literature on emergent literacy *Let's Read* was designed as an early intervention program to include:

- *shared reading* between child and parent / caregiver
- community wide *distribution* or easy access to age appropriate *free* books
- *professional involvement* to convey *guidance messages* and *model* shared reading practices to parents
- an emergent literacy framework, which promotes emergent literacy knowledge skills and environments including language abilities, letter sound/name knowledge, phonological awareness and print conventions
- *community involvement* to assist in the sustainability of a community-based early literacy program

(CCCH, 2004)

The next sections examine components of this approach in a range of case studies including the Cape York, Far North Queensland and Torres Strait Islands *Let's Read* trials (Foster and Sheppard, 2008) to see how these principles work in practice to support children's wellbeing and literacy development.

A discussion of early learning frameworks, protocols of Indigenous service provision and the evidence on successful practice in Indigenous services follows, to see how these can inform emergent literacy for Indigenous children in Victoria.

Criteria from existing programs

A number of criteria have been shown to predict success in implementing programs for young children and their families in Indigenous populations in Australia in the 0-8 year age range. The section below examines a few initiatives and highlights the lessons from each.

Some are directed at early childhood specifically, others use a mix of strategies, ages and practices. Some are locally designed and evolved, while others have been adapted from international research on emergent literacy. There is a mix of urban and non-urban examples but all are concerned with improving literacy and each has something to offer about working with Indigenous children, families and communities to achieve better outcomes for children.

Case studies

Literacy support in a high-Indigenous population, urban school — Tranby Primary Perth WA

While this is a school-based program some of its features demonstrate how existing organisations and services can reorganise their approach to increase literacy outcomes and ensure greater engagement of Indigenous children and their families. Features include supporting teachers in literacy practices, collaboration and greater sharing of information and developing more appropriate resources and practices that build enjoyment for students and more effectively engage parent/caregivers.

A small, inner suburban Perth school, Tranby Primary School has a student population of around 170: half Indigenous, half non-Indigenous. Its literacy program, *Getting it Right*, emphasised developing oral language, building students' interest in reading and writing and developing strategies such as 'word attack' skills. A specialist teacher supported Kindergarten to year 3 teachers in improving the literacy outcomes of students through a collaboratively developed workbook that outlined expected student outcomes, teaching strategies, ways of assessing students' progress and possible resources for reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing skills.

Lessons from Tranby

A strength of the Tranby approach was the dedicated specialist teacher working with teachers and using strategies to support teachers in their literacy practices.

A small but significant change in practices was the shift from student portfolios, which had become collections of worksheets, to 'learning journeys'. On designated afternoons or evenings students' work was displayed around the school in ways that showed each child's development. Parents were able to walk around the displays and speak to the teachers as they chose. Results indicate that parents found this 'less confronting' than formal parent teacher interviews and were more likely to participate.

Other strengths included:

- greater collaboration and information sharing between the specialist teacher and staff and between staff across the school,
- development of more appropriate resources and practices that build enjoyment for students and more effectively engage parent/caregivers.

(Meiers, Ingvarson, Hogan and Kleinhenz, 2005)

A community-driven in-home literacy program —Parents and Learning (PaL), Napranum QLD

The Parents and Learning Program (PaL) is a home-based, community-driven program initiated by parents in the rural northern Queensland community of Napranum and run through the local preschool.

Over a two-year period, PaL volunteers deliver educational kits that promote emergent literacy skills to families with young children aged 4-6 years. The kits include books, games and other activities. Parents agree to read the stories and carry out the activities with their children. Books, in English, are chosen by the community and contain Indigenous content where possible.

Beginning in 2001 with funding from Rio Tinto, the PaL program has since been established in urban and rural communities in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales, including Echuca (2004), Newcastle (2005), Hopevale (2006), Mapoon (2007) and Roebourne (2008). In each of these communities, up to 15 families participate in the program, reaching around 50–75 per cent of children in the target age group. More than 6,000 stories and books have been distributed to children's homes. Evaluations in 2003 and 2005 of the Napranum program found it to be highly successful.

The PaL program, by fostering contact and collaboration between parents, preschool staff and external early childhood workers, is a good example of how schools can engage with indigenous families to build genuine relationships based on respect and cultural understanding.

Lessons from PaL

A powerful feature of PaL is the role that tutors play. Tutors are volunteers from the local community, paid casual wages, who help build relationships and trust over time. They make short visits to families to share information about the kits and discuss with parents how the activities promote emergent literacy.

Other important factors in PaL's success are that it:

- is community-driven, initially arising from parents' desire to be involved in preparing their children for the school environment
- is relevant and responds to the community's understanding of their own needs and what works for them – for instance, that materials are designed for use at home and do not require parents themselves to be literate
- can be adapted to a variety of settings and communities, urban and regional
- encourages parents to recognise the crucial and positive role they can play in their children's education, particularly literacy
- reflects the research showing that schools and other early childhood services need to be welcoming and inclusive of Indigenous families – not only their children – to support improved literacy outcomes.

Story Writing in Remote Locations (SWIRL) – Northern Territory

The SWIRL program (Storry, 2006) has been operating in remote Northern Territory communities since 1996, with funding from IBM and, since 2004, the Northern Territory government. It was developed by Victoria University education academic Lawry McMahon in response to the 'absolute lack of Aboriginal faces in class books and kids' stories' that he encountered on a visit to a remote community (Storry, 2006, p 5).

Teams of volunteer students, most of them studying teaching degrees, travel to remote communities such as Alice Springs and the Barkley Tablelands to work with children, their families

and community elders. The volunteers collect stories, which are then turned into laminated, printed and bound books. Each child receives a copy of the book and a copy is also donated to their local library. By 2006, around 300 student volunteers had participated in SWIRL, 30 of whom later returned to work in remote communities.

Lessons from SWIRL

Important factors in the impact of the SWIRL program are that:

- it addresses the lack of characters and stories that Indigenous children can relate to
- it engages children *and* their communities by involving them in telling their stories, selecting and creating the resources and enhancing the interest and relevance for early readers
- it operates on a basis of respect for Aboriginal cultures, stories and modes of expression
- children's self-esteem can be enhanced by feelings of pride and a sense of achievement through knowing they have helped create something tangible and beautiful (a book)
- it builds up the whole community's literacy resources as books are donated to the local library. (One of the key issues identified by the *Let's Read* and similar programs is that there is often nowhere to buy books and libraries often have a limited range and/or are not valued or visited by the target population.)

As with many initiatives directed towards Indigenous communities, a systematic evaluation of the program's outcomes would help in assessing longer term impact.

Library-based partnerships for literacy – Indigenous Knowledge Centres, QLD

In partnership with local governments and the State Library of Queensland (SLQ), a network of 17 Indigenous Knowledge centres (IKCs), owned, managed and staffed by local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Councils has been established in remote and regional communities across Queensland — Cape York, Northern Peninsula, Torres Strait Islands and Cherbourg — linked to the *kuril dhagun* Indigenous Knowledge Centre in Brisbane.

The State Library provides supports such as set-up materials and staff training while local councils are responsible for the physical infrastructure, staffing and day to day operations of their IKC.

The IKCs provide a large number of services by and to Indigenous people (as well as non-Indigenous people wishing to learn about Aboriginal culture). Along with usual library services — internet, books magazines, computers etc., they also offer:

- information technology, literacy and other programs for early childhood and adults
- a centre for bringing the community together for activities such as movie nights and community morning teas
- resources to local child care centres and kindergartens in Hopevale and Aurukun, which also aims to bring children into the service.

Lessons from IKC

The documentation of the IKCs indicates that:

- Effective programs for children, their families and communities combine promoting a sense of cultural identity with literacy and emergent literacy skills.
- Diverse and imaginative strategies can support Indigenous emergent literacy. Examples include:
 - *Keeping Culture Strong*: building community-based collections of material objects and digital records of photographs, videos, stories and songs, managed by local advisory groups.

- *Away With Words*: promotes intergenerational sharing and builds literacy by bringing together community elders and school-aged children in writer and illustrator workshops to create narrative stories.
 - *Children's Picture Diaries*: encourages children to tell their stories of growing up in Queensland, combining visual arts and writing to create books and exhibitions.
 - *I Can Sing, I Can Read*: promotes reading and self esteem through the fun and vocal expression of karaoke.
 - *Culture Love*: engages children during school holidays to compose and choreograph hip hop for performance at home and away at community events and festivals.
- A clear vision and strong philosophical base helps celebrate Indigenous identity and culture while building literacy — the IKC philosophy that Indigenous culture is a 'a vital source of individual and community strength and pride' helps to strengthen it as a living culture (SLQ, 2009).

(Adapted from State Library of Queensland, 2009)

At home literacy and mentoring for parents and children – HIPPY, Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's (BSL) Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) works with families from Indigenous, refugee and disadvantaged backgrounds in urban and rural communities across Australia to promote emergent literacy among the 3-5 age group. A HIPPY program specifically aimed at Indigenous families operates in La Perouse, NSW.

Similarly to the PaL program, which caters explicitly to Indigenous communities, families are provided with books and 'reading and numeracy readiness' activities. This is combined with regular visits from home tutors, who are also parents completing the program with their children. HIPPY aims to develop parents' skills and confidence through these regular home visits and through contact with other parents.

First developed in 1969 as a research project in Israel, HIPPY was aimed at educationally disadvantaged children and the improved learning outcomes that could be achieved by home-based intervention. With some modifications for local circumstances, HIPPY now operates in the United States, Canada, Germany, Austria, South Africa, El Salvador, Italy and New Zealand. HIPPY's international network shares information, materials and evaluation and meets annually for an international conference.

HIPPY began in Australia in 1997 with 20 families and three tutors in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. It currently employs part-time Home Tutors, site Coordinators and works with over 400 families per year in several states.

Initially funded by the Australian Government, funding from a mix of private and government sources over several years — including from the Victorian State Government, AXA and the Myer Foundation — has enabled further development. A major expansion will see 50 more HIPPY sites established across Australia in addition to the nine existing sites. Thirteen of these new sites are commencing in 2009 with another 14 sites in each year of 2010 and 2011.

The program, largely staffed by volunteers, has expanded to include fundraising activities, book translations, a library and a toy program. Families using the program in urban Victoria come from areas such as Fitzroy, Carlton, Collingwood, North Melbourne, Flemington and Ascot Vale.

Lessons from HIPPY

With national and international sites, HIPPY has demonstrated its adaptability over time and location. It appears well suited to urban settings as well as rural communities.

HIPPY requires a high level of parent involvement and while it aims to build skills, its effectiveness is reliant to some extent on the commitment and literacy skills of parents.

No formal national evaluation as been completed on HIPPY's outcomes and effectiveness however one currently underway will track outcomes over a five year period, for a large number of families across as many HIPPY Australian sites as possible. In the meantime a series of small research and evaluation projects (see BSL, 2008) show promising signs including:

- Children's eagerness to learn new concepts
- increased self-confidence of parents
- improved communication between parents and children
- positive impact on family relationships.

(Adapted from Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2009)

A mix of strategies and strong leadership address emergent literacy in a small community – Wakathuni Aboriginal Community: Kids Maya, West Pilbara region, Western Australia

Located about 30 kilometres out of Tom Price in the West Pilbara area of Western Australia, Wakathuni had no child care, school or health facilities. In 2007, wanting to improve education outcomes for young Aboriginal children, Wakathuni community leaders met with the Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (RUCSN), to discuss how RUCSN could assist the community to support their children's early years education and prepare them for school.

The RUCSN Mobile Children's Service, coordinated by an Indigenous elder, worked with the community to provide quality playgroup experiences for the young preschool children aged 2–6 years. Parents were encouraged by significant community leaders (including the Community Chairperson, a qualified teacher and lecturer in Early Childhood Education) to participate in the playgroup.

During fortnightly visits the RUCSN team focused on building a relationship with the families, and discussing the benefits of playgroup for both children and families. Over time the Community Chairperson identified several young mums who were interested in taking playgroup assistant roles within the planned onsite Wakathuni playgroup.

Key community members concerned about the school readiness and safety of young children in Wakathuni developed a concept of a 'Kid's Maya' – a safe place for children and families to come together and enlisted RUCSN's support for the establishment of the Wakathuni playgroup. A workshop conducted on school readiness focused on what parents and playgroups need to do to get children ready for school.

RUCSN provided the community with a range of monitoring tools such as attendance records and programming materials to measure the effectiveness of the strategy.

RUCSN runs storytelling workshops with children and with parents at the Wakathuni Kid's Maya. A play leader and assistant have been appointed to support the running of the playgroup. Parents participate on rosters in such activities as preparing fruit for morning tea and preparing learning materials for the next few days.

The Film and Television Institute of WA made a short film with the community on school readiness. Dressed in school uniforms, children were filmed catching the bus to school as part of the strategy to increase parental awareness of getting children ready for school.

By early November 2007, the children were attending school one day a week as part of a transition to school and in March 2008, the principal at Tom Price Primary School reported changes in children's readiness for school.

Lessons from Wakathuni

- Parents were empowered to participate in their children's learning through storytelling, participating in rosters and lesson preparation.
- Building trust and reciprocity – parent involvement in preparing their children for school, walking them to the bus and waving them off are big steps in addressing complex issues such as lack of trust in attending a 'whitefella' school.
- The use of champions, leaders and Indigenous role models (e.g. children in the film) is a significant component of the initiatives.
- The film was an important and effective strategy to engage parents because of its use of Indigenous children, relevant images and concepts that were familiar to parents and children.
- Support from significant partners, e.g. the school principal and wider school community was critical to the success of these interventions.

(Adapted from ARACY 2008b, p32)

An early childhood centre begins a turnaround in school outcomes and attendance – Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School, Bunbury Western Australia

The Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School in Bunbury, Western Australia, is a good example of the benefits of genuine engagement of Indigenous families and communities in making the connection between home and school. A range of culturally inclusive strategies has resulted in significant and sustained improvements in literacy and numeracy results for Indigenous children. It demonstrates that Indigenous children entering school can maintain their own culture, identity and self-esteem, as well as being prepared for the 'Western' schooling system.

Established in 1996 to better serve the needs of Noongar children in the South West city of Bunbury, the rationale and design of the school was based on extensive community consultation and community support to address the poor performance, low attendance, participation and retention rates of Indigenous students.

The Noongar Community of Bunbury felt that an Early Childhood Centre with strong involvement by Indigenous people would give Indigenous students a better start to their education. Beginning as Kindergarten to Year 2, the Centre was extended to Year 3 in 1999 and K–7 Primary School by 2006. The school model was developed using Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff working together to:

- improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students;
- strengthen and affirm Indigenous culture; and
- encourage Indigenous participation and increased student attendance and retention.

Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School is widely recognised as providing a caring, supportive environment for all children that:

- caters for individual learning styles
- sets high standards and has a strong belief that all children can learn

Key factors in the model are:

- the role of the School Board in creating supportive school policies and promoting Indigenous culture;

- the presence of Aboriginal and Islander education officers and Indigenous teachers;
- a strong Noongar language program and resources that see children learning and taking their language home to parents and responding with a sense of pride in their culture
- successful engagement of children and families through the provision of transport and a visiting role model and a visiting schools program that instil a sense of identity and school and community pride in their achievements;
- culturally inclusive infrastructure and curriculum that feature a cultural centre providing resources for both the Indigenous and wider community, culturally inclusive studies across the curriculum and a sense of cultural recognition;
- a distinctive contemporary cultural activity (i.e. Noyt Kobori Spirit Dancers – boys dance group) and the integration of Noongar language and other Aboriginal culture across all learning areas
- Indigenous children entering school need to maintain their own culture, identity and self-esteem, as well as being prepared for the ‘Western’ schooling system.

In 2002, the school reported attendance rates of 93 per cent, which were well above state averages for Indigenous students. The Western Australia Literacy and Numeracy Assessments (WALNA) tests confirm that students’ rates of achievement were similar to other Bunbury students in 2001 for spelling, reading and numeracy. Djidi Djidi continues to achieve literacy and numeracy results above the WALNA benchmarks.

In 2005 all Djidi Djidi’s Year 3 and Year 7 students exceeded reading and numeracy benchmarks and were in the top 25 per cent of similar schools in their band for reading and numeracy.

(Adapted from ARACY, 2008b)

Lessons from Djidi Djidi

A number of features contribute to the successful outcomes achieved by the school:

- A strong, clearly articulated vision underpinning the school’s approach: that children’s educational experiences enhance culture and they can achieve better educational outcomes if their educational experiences are sensitive to their culture.
- Strong leadership from within and outside of the Indigenous community: the role of elders and role models and the commitment of champions such as the principal and the School Board
- Staff commitment to Aboriginal education: more than half of the teaching staff is Indigenous and all have a strong ethos of tolerance, respect for diversity and working collaboratively to improve education for Indigenous people. The three key elements are *respect*, *relationships* and *responsibility*.
- Strategies to actively engage with families result in strong community engagement and in the school being seen by its Indigenous community as a welcoming place.
- A high level of parent support and participation in their children's education and in culturally inclusive school programs

A locally matched early intervention based on emergent literacy principles — *Let’s Read Trials*, Cape York, QLD

Let’s Read is a highly adaptable in-home literacy support to families with young children. It provides training, materials, home mentoring for parents and a community approach to promoting the importance of literacy through existing services. Families are given resources to help them support their child’s emergent literacy skills. The aim is to create building blocks to children’s reading and writing at school, however it does not try to teach reading before school.

Although *Let's Read* is being implemented in a variety of communities (eleven local government areas over four years) the trials described here were commissioned by the Queensland State Government to explore more closely the needs of Indigenous populations and the implications for *Let's Read*. The trials were held in communities in Cape York, Far North Queensland and Torres Strait areas, the Cape York trials are described here as being representative of the results across the three areas.

Four Cape York communities were involved: Arakun, Hope Vale, Coen, and Mossman Gorge / Mossman (Foster and Sheppard, 2008).

Let's Read aims to promote reading with children 0-5 years. It is designed to encourage fun between parents and children around reading, develop a love of books in children and families and develop children's ability to name letters and play with words.

Components of *Let's Read* are designed to complement each other and include:

- Training for community-based people to show and support parents on a one-to-one basis to have fun reading with their child and develop their skills
- Resources are developed and given to the family
 - Resources are designed for delivery at four age points — four months, 12 months, 18 months and 3-5 years — materials are age specific. They include a reader bag with a DVD, book, parent information sheet and a booklist, and
- A community approach to promote the importance of literacy through existing services/systems, to reach as many families as possible and build in sustainability.

As with any effective program for and with Indigenous communities, *Let's Read* began with the important role of partnerships — in this case *engaging* local partner Cape York Partnerships (CYP) to give on the ground knowledge, credibility and community input through use of Indigenous staff.

Its distinguishing feature is the highly exploratory preliminary phase that ensured a proper assessment of families and the community before implementation. This takes two broad forms:

- a comprehensive family consultation, undertaken on a one-on-one basis by a CYP consultant and using a 'family consultation kit' developed by *Let's Read*
- a community audit to gather information on assets, systems and the nature of resources already available to the community as well as supports or assets needed

Together these explorations helped gather information on

- family expectations and aspirations for their children
- family background, language, home literacy and acceptability of existing resources.
- the services, programs and initiatives that had already been implemented in a number of the communities
- identifying trusted and respected community people
- additional training needs on emergent literacy messages

Assessments with parents about what was available to them helped identify issues as well as promote opportunities. For instance books are very hard to come by in some communities because there may be nowhere to buy or borrow books, magazines or other reading material. In communities with libraries, parents were asked whether they had used libraries with a response of 30 per cent. However being asked the question and learning about libraries seemed to prompt higher take up of this service and that people who took up library use tended to continue to use it regularly (Foster and Sheppard, 2008).

Assessments identified that the high emphasis on outdoor time may be a factor that makes it difficult to encourage reading. The program incorporated recommendations for books to match the preferred interests and activities of children as well as identified additional activities that families might adopt that could foster emergent literacy skills such as using cookbooks to cook with children.

CYP were trained on questions and the processes for recording responses and the resources to be distributed to families by CYP consultants.

The trial found that *Let's Read* can work with and complement existing programs such as MULTILIT, PaL and the IKCs which were already operating in some of these communities. It is adaptable to any community because it does the kinds of assessments that allow it to be tailored to local needs. It is intensively local while bringing universal strengths from knowledge gained about children's literacy, early childhood and Indigenous engagement.

It is too early to be definitive about the trials, as the longitudinal study of *Let's Read* has not yet been completed, however there are trends and anecdotal evidence. Feedback at the time of writing indicated that *Let's Read* was well received in North Queensland and in Western Australia in remote Indigenous communities. While the circumstances and needs of these communities differ in significant ways from those faced by Indigenous people in major cities or regional areas the trials highlight some important features of *Let's Read* that are applicable elsewhere and give insights for its future use (Foster and Sheppard, 2008).

Lessons from *Let's Read*

- The program investigates and uses existing infrastructure including schools, playgroups and other services wherever possible but does not presume that these will be successful platforms for *Let's Read* in every community. Trial findings included that some schools are hubs and centres of the community while others are not experienced by the Indigenous community as welcoming places.
- A considerable part of its success and adaptability to widely divergent communities and context is the emphasis and investment that the *Let's Read* approach makes in the initial pre-implementation phase. Its highly exploratory nature ensures comprehensive assessment of the wide range of influences and factors that shape children's literacy and learning. This maximises the chance for long term success.
- Its approach also reflects a long term commitment to sustainability, to meeting needs and making the program work rather than rolling out a one size fits all initiative with a short lifespan. It demonstrates respect and reciprocity and builds trust, and ensures that each community and family is assessed individually.
- An expanded concept of family is crucial to how emergent literacy programs articulate and identify who is significant to and should be incorporated into the young child's literacy learning. Feedback from the trials was that in some communities it is more likely to be a male grandparent and for others an aunt, rather than a parent, who is the person most significant to the young child's literacy experiences. This throws a different light on the oft-repeated view that 'the child's best and most enduring teacher is the parent'.
- Families' and children's preferences can be incorporated effectively, e.g. parent/caregivers in four trial communities were surveyed to find the activities they most enjoyed doing with their young children. Most preferred outdoor activities: walking, playing, swimming and fishing featured highly.
- Makes available the widest possible range of books so that children can find something that appeals to them, e.g. a book about fish if the child likes fishing.

- Among indoor activities enjoyed together by children and caregivers were some that could be said to encourage emergent literacy skills, e.g. singing, telling stories, playing board games, and also writing – so can design activities and materials to fit with these preferences.
- While surveyed parents suggested that materials could include more Indigenous families and voices to make them more interesting and engaging for kids, 98 per cent of parents surveyed indicated they found the *Let's Read* booklist helpful.
- *Let's Read* found that many of the respondents nominated storytelling as an enjoyable activity with children
- The program takes a whole of community approach. It takes steps to identify several key people in each community – their profile, role and characteristics differing from community to community – who are significant to the implementation of the program. Without these significant people, development and implementation would be impossible.
- Capacity building and working with the community through support and training of partnership staff and significant others. This included training on family consultation processes, data recording, the resources and materials for families as well as the wider importance of literacy for children.
- In the trials delivery of materials in conjunction with an extensive consultation with the CYP consultant is not typical of standard implementation and this may influence outcomes.
- Use of CYP consultants in the consultative phase had a number of considerations:
 - helped promote literacy and provide wider information about services, books and literacy
 - reduced the reliance on reading/writing of families
 - its one-on-one nature allowed individuals to speak freely without concern about judgement by other community members
 - However parents, families and caregivers may feel pressure to give the 'right' answer.

Implications and principles

The discussion of case studies and the practices within Indigenous services show factors that point to better outcomes. Integrated approaches that promote emergent literacy in the early years and build on existing initiatives and services are foremost among these. We can learn from past successes and begin to address past limitations by drawing out the principles from these experiences. This will help set the course for next steps in the Victorian context.

The following section discusses the state government's framework for early childhood and explores how key themes from the literature and learnings from the previous case studies support directions for early childhood within the framework.

Directions for Indigenous literacy in Victoria

In 2009 the State Government of Victoria launched its Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF). The Framework uses five outcomes to describe the key elements of children's learning and development from birth to eight years. They can be used by professionals and parents 'to guide their understanding of children's learning and development' (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2009).

The framework establishes universal principles for addressing children's learning and wellbeing. Within these universal principles is enshrined a commitment to what is unique to the individual and their community of origin. Of particular interest to the discussion of Indigenous literacy is the Framework's emphasis on the 'educators' knowledge of children's competence' as

'crucial to providing positive experiences and a safe and stimulating environment that will encourage children to work at the edge of their capabilities, so guiding them to expanded competencies and deeper understandings.'

Within the Framework, Indigenous children have the right to opportunities for development and learning that are engaging, culturally relevant and stimulating. This means that early learning environments need to reflect and draw on the different cultural experiences, knowledge and multi-literacies that each young Indigenous child brings to their learning whether that is storytelling, bush learning, music, dance or other cultural practices.

From the literature we know that no single approach maximises Indigenous access to services. Multiple entry points and choices matched to local needs are important. Many parents want services and education that reinforce cultural identity *and* want their children to participate in mainstream educational services (FAHCSIA, 2009).

What is culturally appropriate however is context-specific. Some families in suburban settings have shown they do not necessarily prefer Indigenous-only programs. In one project the more culturally appropriate and less stigmatising option was for the service provider to consult with the Indigenous community and adapt the existing service to be more inclusive of local Indigenous families (FAHCSIA, 2009).

The discussion below explores how literacy development for Indigenous children is enabled through each of the five VEYLDF principles. Each is examined in turn for its implications for Indigenous emergent literacy and with reference to in-home support protocols and learnings from Indigenous service provision since the first *Let's Read* initiative was developed.

1. Children have a strong sense of identity (Identity)

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) emphasises the crucial importance of allowing children to develop a strong sense of identity, through young children forming safe, trusting attachment relationships in the family and then with caring adults outside it (VEYLDF, p 12). The VEYLDF recognises that a secure sense of belonging and cultural identity lays a strong foundation for children to learn to deal with others with care, empathy and respect.

Implications for Indigenous emergent literacy

Literacy practices are crucial to the construction of ideas of culture, gender and religious identity (Street, 1997) and emergent literacy programs working with Indigenous families and communities can foster a strong sense of identity in several ways:

- **Use materials with culturally relevant content** – The SWIRL program is a good example of an initiative that promotes cultural identity in the target age group. It used books created in close collaboration with the local people and told traditional stories from within their communities. Programs of this nature are run by Queensland’s Indigenous Knowledge Centres. Other programs, such as PaL, use Indigenous content wherever possible. General literacy and numeracy resources from other programs can be adapted to make them more relevant to Indigenous individuals and communities, for example by using Indigenous actors and voices in audiovisual materials (see preliminary feedback from *Let’s Read* Cape York trials, below).
- **Enhance community control, input and ‘ownership’** – Greater involvement and ownership by Indigenous communities over programs — the more they are run by and for Indigenous people (Behrendt, 2007) — encourages and nourishes a strong sense of cultural identity. Hence the success of programs such as PaL, Djidi Djidi School, Wakathuni Kid’s Maya, which are shaped by community needs and use materials chosen by the community.
- **Incorporate champions and role models** – leadership from within Indigenous communities to champion literacy and model successful literacy is crucial. It helps build the perception of literacy by children and families as relevant to their Indigenous identity; ‘when people are motivated to acquire information and that information is functional in their lives, they will make use of it’ (p 6, Moore, Morcos and Robinson, 2009). Examples include Queensland’s *Stronger, Smarter Realities Program*, with its mantra of ‘I’m young and black and deadly’ seeking to boost education outcomes through fostering self-esteem in young children (Behrendt, 2007, p6).
- **No ‘one size fits all’ approaches** – alongside the principle of community ownership is a recognition that the diversity of Indigenous cultures and communities and the wide range of circumstances in which Indigenous families and children live is incompatible with ‘one size fits all’ approaches to emergent literacy. As discussed above, the needs of urban and regional Indigenous children in Victoria, most of whom speak English as their first language, live in communities where social, media and other interactions are English-language and mostly do not live in majority Indigenous communities, can differ from those of children in remote areas who may have no or limited exposure to English language before primary school.
- **Strengths-based approach** – allows communities to build successful initiatives using the strengths of their particular local cultures, family and social networks and other resources. It promotes strong identity and supports the principle of community ownership, by ensuring communities decide what works for them in the context of their specific needs and circumstances.

2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world (Community)

Tied to the significance of identity and belonging is children’s ‘positive sense of identity through experiencing respectful, responsive relationships’ which strengthens the child’s ‘interest and skills in

being active participants in their communities' (VEYLDF, p 14). The VEYLDF emphasises that 'children's connectedness and different ways of belonging with people, country and communities help them to learn ways of being, reflecting the values, traditions and practices of their families and communities', to live interdependently and to respect diversity (p 14).

Implications for Indigenous emergent literacy

Implicit in this appreciation of children's connectedness with the people around them is the 'understanding that children's first and most enduring educators are their families' (VEYLDF, p 5)

- **Expanded concept of 'family'** – Initiatives targeting Indigenous families operate best using a broader understanding of family that takes into account and honours Indigenous parenting styles, kinship systems and the important role played by extended kin in raising Indigenous children.
- **Reach out to a child's whole family/community** – the most successful literacy programs are those that build the capacity of families and communities to be engaged in their children's education and assist parents to understand the importance of literacy for their children's future (p 5, ARACY 2008b). Many successful initiatives place a strong emphasis on capacity building and community involvement, whether by engaging parents who are completing the program as 'home tutors' to assist other families (HIPPIY), using resources created or chosen by the community (SWIRL, PaL, Indigenous Knowledge Centre's programs), and equipping parents with skills to foster their children's literacy and numeracy (PaL, Djidi Djidi, Wakathuni Kid's Maya).
- **Build trusting relationships** – It is vital that all service providers and educators make particular efforts to reach out to Indigenous families, build trusting relationships and demonstrate respect and sensitivity to their concerns and to Indigenous culture. Culturally competent service includes that early childhood practitioners are mindful that the experience of many Indigenous families over generations is of dislocation, forced separation and institutionalisation, systemic and overt racism and misunderstandings, and the use of the education system to dilute Indigenous culture and enforce 'assimilation'.
- **Specific Indigenous 'spaces'** – A highly recommended way to do this, according to several studies and reports, is to create culturally inclusive spaces in education settings, for instance a specially designated room, where Indigenous people feel welcome and that celebrate Indigenous culture (DEECD, 2009; ARACY2008b; Behrendt 2007). Examples where this has notably improved children's school readiness and literacy outcomes include the Wakathuni Kid's Maya, conceived as a safe place for kids and families to come together (ARACY, 2008b, p31), and the Djidi Djidi Aboriginal School's culturally inclusive building and cultural centre (ARACY, 2008b, p 35). Queensland's welcoming, community-centred Indigenous Knowledge Centres show that these qualities can be effectively fostered in non-school programs.
- **Build on strengths of Indigenous concepts of family and community** – the VEYLDF aims to foster children's sense of themselves as being connected to the physical and social world around them and the natural environment (DEECD, 2009 – In this context Indigenous cultural concepts of family, kinship, belonging and the relation of human beings to the natural environment, should be seen as real strengths and embraced by early childhood practitioners, and not only when dealing with Indigenous children.

3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing (Wellbeing)

'Early childhood is a period in which the foundations of social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing are laid down' (DEECD, 2009, p 16).

There is strong evidence that optimal conditions for early learning development are created when parents feel a sense of control and empowerment in raising and educating their children (ARACY,

2008b; 2004) and this comes where Indigenous families are involved as much as possible in the planning, development and operation of programs. Much of the literature (Behrendt 2007; DEECD, 2007; ARACY 2008a) also emphasises the need for holistic approaches that address spiritual and non-material needs as well as practical. ARACY's ground-breaking report card (2008a), dug behind material measures of wellbeing to examine among other things family relationships and children's sense of belonging.

Implications for Indigenous Principles

Strategies to enhance literacy need to identify and build on existing cultural and other strengths and incorporate Indigenous identity wherever possible:

- **Incorporate strong Indigenous elements** in materials and resources, in design and promotion of activities and in reaching out to and welcoming families and children. Examples are Djidi Djidi, 'young, black and deadly' mantra (Behrendt, 2007, p 6);
- **Community-driven programs** – such as PaL respond to and ensure families and communities are engaged in programs and:
 - have strong input
 - are involved in how programs are run
 - have appropriate means of giving feedback
- **Reach out to children and families** – individual and family sense of belonging and input may be initiated by the community but can also begin with direct efforts by the early childhood practitioner to reach out and engage with parents, families and community leaders. The Tranby School in WA is an example, where it parent/teacher contact was adapted in order to be less intimidating, more informative and more directly inclusive of Indigenous and disadvantaged families.
- **Shared respect, trust and reciprocity** – Activities that are respectful and culturally appropriate can help to build children's – and their families' – positive and trusting relationship with education, literacy and the school or preschool community. Empowering parent, family members and other community members to shape and contribute to their child's literacy skills development and in turn model the ability to contribute to and shape their environment for their children.
- **Long term commitment** – children's wellbeing thrives in an environment of emotional and social stability. Governments, individual professionals, funding bodies and service providers all have a part to play in ensuring parents, adult caregivers and role models are also supported and secure and building continuity and strength in the networks that underpin the lives of Indigenous children, their families and communities
- **Leadership, governance and clear service focus** – the literature confirms that services are most effective where they have a clearly defined vision of what it is they do, builds on strong leadership from the community and support development of good governance. Trust and accountability cannot be 'outsourced' – the challenge for early childhood services is to work with and share knowledge and respect of Indigenous processes and relationships that emphasise internal accountability alongside government emphasis on 'upwards' and external accountability, risk avoidance and compliance reporting.

4. Children are confident and involved learners (Learning)

The VEYLDF aims to encourage positive lifelong attitudes to learning, on the understanding that 'during childhood, children not only learn knowledge and skills that form the foundations of their later achievement, they also develop dispositions for learning. These dispositions are fundamental to ensuring that their learning is a lifelong process' (VEYLDF, p 18) Children need to be actively involved

in learning to develop positive dispositions towards it. Those involved in early childhood development need to create an association between learning and enjoyment in order to stimulate creative and reflexive thought and ensure that learning is an enduring pleasure.

Implications for Indigenous Principles

- **Engage children on a sensory level** – anything where children are physically involved is likely to make learning more enjoyable and meaningful for them. This could include activities that involve handling books – the PaL program, for instance, provides glossy, high quality books that are pleasurable to touch – games and cards such as those used by *Let's Read* and similar programs; and music, dance and performance based competitions. The Indigenous Knowledge Centres' hip hop community performances, children's picture diaries and *I can Sing, I Can Read* karaoke programs are other examples (State Library of Queensland, 2009).
- **Tailor materials and activities to children's interests where possible** – choose materials that correspond to children's interests and complement their increasing knowledge and curiosity about their environment, for example books about subjects that interest children or featuring characters and stories they can identify with. In the *Let's Read* trials (Foster and Sheppard 2008) parents specifically identified that more Indigenous characters included in the materials would be a way of engaging their children more.
- **Adapt enjoyable shared activities to include emergent literacy skills** – Successful programs often find ways of adapting activities that children and their caregivers already enjoy together to include emergent literacy skills. Many families surveyed for the *Let's Read* program nominated board games and other games as enjoyable shared activities, as included in the materials used by programs such as PaL and *Let's Read*.
- **Find innovative ways to stimulate children's creativity** – interactive materials like the *Let's Read* DVDs which have read-aloud stories, helping parents and kids to learn how to read together. The SWIRL program is one example of a program that engaged children in an innovative way, by getting them to participate in transforming stories they knew and recounted into a book, something lasting and tangible that they could use, share with family and friends, and be proud of.

5. Children are effective communicators (Communication)

Children have an innate desire to communicate, express themselves and connect with others socially. They respond verbally and non-verbally to their sensory environment, exploring ideas and symbols through a diverse array of media including songs and chants, re-enacting stories, role play, and creating artworks. The VEYLDF understands that early childhood is a key time for the development of language and emergent literacy skills, and that a love of language and reading must be germinated at this time by allowing children to play interactively with their peers and caregivers, explore, ask questions, and express themselves in a variety of ways.

Implications for Indigenous Principles

- **Encourage children to communicate** – As discussed above in relation to some of the other VEYLDF frameworks, successful emergent literacy programs assist families /caregivers and their young children to communicate and strengthen attachment by engaging them in fun, enjoyable and bonding activities such as reading together and playing games as a family.
- **Encourage children to express themselves in new and different ways** – several successful literacy initiatives encourage children to communicate by expressing themselves. One of these is the above-discussed SWIRL program, which engages children in the process of creating a book, not just reading one, helping them to communicate their own stories and engage with others while doing so. SWIRL is of particular interest to the current discussion as it was established by a

Melbourne academic using student volunteers from Victoria, some of whom continue their engagement with the communities they encountered through SWIRL.

- **Be open to non-book ways of developing emergent literacy skills** – While books and reading are important to emergent literacy, initiatives need to incorporate the understanding that children develop these skills in a range of ways and through exploring a variety of media. An assortment of materials and activities alongside the provision of books can supplement book-focused approaches. Examples of other media include DVDs, audiotapes and activities centred on children making artworks and explaining the stories they tell in words. In particular, early childhood practitioners need to be alert to the kinds of non-book based skills and experiences Indigenous children may bring to learning. The *Let's Read* questionnaire found many Indigenous children may be exposed to a rich oral tradition of storytelling. While not print-based these foster a love of language and narrative skills that are important for acquiring literacy skills, and which are transferrable to books and reading.

Links with *Let's Read*

Preliminary feedback from the *Let's Read* explorations highlights links with the VEYLDF and Indigenous service principles.

VEYLDF Principle	Features identified through <i>Let's Read</i> trials
Identity Children have a strong sense of identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community feedback suggests some cost effective adaptations could enhance the capacity to reinforce children's identity through simple measures such as Indigenous voice-overs for audiovisual and similar materials Recognises and draws on community leaders and role models within the child's environment Supports identity by its philosophy that 'one size <i>does not</i> fit all' – local assessment of each community's needs, family aspirations and literacy skills as well as who in the community the program needs to work with.
Community Children are connected with and contribute to their world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audits of assets prior to commencement <i>Let's Read</i> works on an expanded concept of family and encourages identifying who is significant/ should be incorporated into the young child's emergent literacy development Involves, consults with and trains a broad range of people in each community (varying according to the structure and nature of the community) Uses strategies that build up the local library and contribute to the whole community's literacy resources by working through children's access to books.
Wellbeing Children have a strong sense of wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to foster children's love of books and reading Emphasises fun, confidence-building and connective activities Builds trusting relationships through home visits that model and encourage parents to enjoy reading with their children Commitment to sustainability, continuity with existing programs and <i>Let's Read's</i> long term perspective builds on children's need for certainty and for secure, safe environments
Learning Children are confident and involved learners	<p>The design of <i>Let's Read</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draws on a variety of media and activities — such as DVDs, books and board games — that are attractive to children and build on existing confidence and competencies Emphasises discovering what activities children enjoy and are actively involved in, and tailors resources to match Encourages making available the widest possible range of books so that children find something that matches their interests and appeals to them Provides relevant, interesting and engaging materials for children and guidance to parents through a booklist.
Communication Children are effective communicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporates story-telling and other activities that are highly valued and enjoyed by children and their families Promotes communication between children and parent/caregivers through sharing activities

Discussion

The research is clear that early childhood is a critical time of development. Conditions that prime children at this point affect their development and outcomes throughout life. While neuroscience explores exciting potential for humans to recover and rewire their capacities in the wake of injury, disease and disability there is no excuse for ignoring our best knowledge about what the very young child needs in order to grow and flourish. We owe it to our community to look at the data on who is missing out at this beginning stage of life and who is falling away later.

These data tell us there is an unacceptable gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia on literacy as well as many other outcomes.

As a large land mass with a dispersed and diverse population, Australia will always face challenges in offering to all what it offers to one. The physical size of our country, its layers and different systems of government, the differences between the needs of urban, regional and remote communities pose very different challenges from those faced by government in other developed countries such as New Zealand or the UK. Australia's context for implementing long term change can, as a result be piecemeal. By contrast the state of Victoria has a large, more evenly distributed population and significant well established infrastructure such as the maternal and child health network.

Another frustration is the cycle of focus and investment. Many initiatives begin well but without the ongoing gaze of the public and the energy of successive governments, service providers and practitioners, they can languish. Not because they can't work, not because we don't know what to do. Sadly it could be because in part it is always easier to move on than to repair or maintain.

A long history of interventions, engagements and initiatives tells us some of the things that work and some that don't work.

We have sufficient information about what is happening for children around Australia now and what they need — and are building the capacity to know more.

Two factors bring Indigenous children and their literacy needs to our urgent attention. An explosion of knowledge, in the last ten to 15 years, about the importance of children's earliest experiences and a renewed commitment by governments world-wide to step up investment in this area. These, combined with an unprecedented focus on Indigenous children and families at this time in Australia's history, mean we can no longer ignore the gap between evidence and outcomes. While we are still piecing together data, we have considerable information about the particular context of Indigenous populations. We can use this to plan and work on improving outcomes in early childhood and emergent literacy for Victoria's Indigenous children.

It is also clear that Victoria has the means to act. Australia is a prosperous and developed country, which remains true despite recent world-wide financial events. In recent years we have begun to put in place some of the structures within which investment for Indigenous children's early years can take place and take hold.

There is the potential to deliver outcomes in the Victorian context that takes account of current policy and practice initiatives here and around Australia. This paper attempts to bring together some the key themes of those policies and practices and findings from work in Indigenous communities across the country. Reverberating among these themes are:

- Getting the groundwork right — understanding the history and dynamics of the communities and families, putting the time and energy into preparation and building relationships, assessing and asking what is needed.

- Taking a long term perspective and sustainability — means that funding should be for continuing and evaluating what works, not just for starting.
- Working 'through and with' not 'doing for and to' Indigenous communities.
- Attending to the practical details — thinking about transport, access, ways of welcoming and reaching out to families, in home visits as well as outreach programs.
- Respect, trust and reciprocity — relationships, identity and significant community people are the cornerstones to engaging with Indigenous children, families and communities along with the need to shed narrow concepts of family and belonging.

The infrastructure exists in Victoria for continued close work between Indigenous communities and the services that aim to support them so that Indigenous children, whether in cities, suburbs or small towns, can have what we know is possible.

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