Indigenous Literacy

Learning from the Centre not the Margin

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Main Description

Before the 1788 invasion, literacy practices were determined by the social practices of over 500 Indigenous communities in what is now known as Australia. Since 1788 Indigenous literacy has been measured against and determined by the British and Anglo-Australians. For example, Indigenous cultures have always been referred to as oral and not literate. The word art has been imposed which deligitimises Indigenous literacies. It is time that Indigenous Australians take the initiative in determining literacy learning according to their own perceptions of literacy needs and social practices in living at the interface of two cultures, their own and Western. This paper explains how some cultural issues can be counterproductive to positive outcomes in the school system. While it is important for educators to address these issues, so also is it important for Indigenous communities at the local level to determine how to address them according to each community’s specific needs. Indigenous children need to place themselves at the centre of their learning at the interface of the two cultures and not learn from the margin of Australian society.

Introduction

The research emerging literacy in New South Wales rural and urban Indigenous families aimed to understand the literacy beliefs, values, goals, expectations, experiences, practices and access to resources of four rural and five urban Indigenous families. We need to understand families’ roles in Indigenous children’s literacy learning from birth; the families’ awareness of their young children’s literacy learning and literacy modelling and scaffolding practices. Indigenous cultural perspectives, social experiences and practices should determine the means for Indigenous children to learn literacy from the centre of their own lives and not from the margin of mainstream society.

In the period from birth to three years children learn self-management routines and become fluent in a whole language and more importantly they develop their view of the world and their role in it. This all takes place within the family and the family’s cultural community. Children’s beliefs, values and social practices are shaped by those of their families. It was anticipated that the information gathered through this research may be useful for the development of community based early literacy programs, and Indigenous community workshops and education programs. This research reflected the voices and perspectives of five urban and four remote rural New South Wales (NSW) Indigenous Australian families. A sociocultural approach was taken to research literacies as social practice. The names and places were changed to protect the participants due to the sensitivity of the data.
Research challenges

Portraying Indigenous perspectives in research presents a number of challenges in terms of choices and use of methodologies, disciplines, theoretical perspectives, past research, academic writing, ethics and a number of other issues beyond the scope of this paper for further discussion. Choosing a theoretical perspective to explain issues from Indigenous perspectives proved to be difficult. Most theories are fundamentally based on Western beliefs and values to explain issues from Western perspectives for the benefit of those who generally adhere to the same, including the academy. I needed to qualify how I used Western concepts to explain Indigenous concepts. This required a very brief analysis of both cultures. Descartes’ notion of ‘I think therefore I am’ is the basis of Western philosophy (see Meyer, 1998). It is egocentric and proposes that people view the world from within ‘self’ and how it relates back to ‘self’. It emphasises the needs, desires and feelings of the individual, promotes competition between individuals and is the driving force behind capitalism, on which many of the colonising nations of the Western world are based.

Western thinking is linear, for example, recording history is based on recording precise places, people and events chronologically and these are not all essential in Australian Indigenous perpetuation of history. Western culture can also involve lateral thinking based on the philosophies developed by individuals. Western culture appears to be compartmentalised where aspects of life often exist independently from others. For example, bureaucracy isolates health, family, law, provision of needs, housing, leisure, history and education from each other. There may be some overlap but they are not all encompassing. Western culture appears to be box or square shaped in conceptual nature. David Mowaljarlai, an Elder from Derby in Western Australia provides his interpretation of Western thinking is as follows:

Triangle thinking is western culture thinking. There is always a big boss. There are other bosses who have power over people down the triangle. Triangles are about money and power. Triangle thinking separates everything into layers of power and administration. ‘Ownership’ is a triangle idea. ‘Belonging’ cannot fit into ‘Triangle thinking’. ‘Ownership’ means ‘rulership’ by the owner. Triangles are separate from each other, and separate from patterns. Triangle thinking tries to squeeze patterns into triangles. This cannot work. Patterns do not have rigid lines like triangles.

(Mowaljarlai in Blair, 2001, p.5)

Indigenous peoples’ notion of individual existence comes through others’ knowledge that ‘I’ exist. An individual’s interaction with others is confirmation of existence (see Meyer, 1998). In Indigenous cultures everything is reciprocal and all encompassing. For example, law, education, family, provision of needs, health and so on cannot exist in isolation from each other. Relationships with the land and each other are reciprocal and circular in nature. David Mowaljarlai, provides his interpretation of Indigenous thinking:

Pattern thinking is Aboriginal thinking. There is no big boss. Patterns are about belonging. Nothing is separate from anything else. This land is not separate from nature, people, the heavens, and ancient stories. Everything belongs in the pattern. There is no ‘ownership’ in pattern-thinking. Only belonging. Money cannot buy
bits of a pattern. Power runs all through a Pattern. It cannot be sold. It is not separate from the pattern.

(Mowaljarlai in Blair, 2001, p.5)

When we try to explain Indigenous (circular or pattern) concepts using Western (square or triangular) concepts, it becomes like trying to force a square peg into a round hole (Hanlen, 2002). If you force it to fit, the four points of the square force against the circumference of the circle and the circle then loses its integrity. The areas within the circle outside of the square are left unaccounted for. For example, kin relationships are deeply embedded in language and there are no Western concepts that can adequately or accurately explain them according to Indigenous perspectives (Hanlen, 2002). These issues are also important for Indigenous children in schools where the beliefs, values and social practices of the classroom are based on those of Western culture. Teachers, generally speaking, teach from Western perspectives for the benefit of children whose language, beliefs, values and social practices are the same or similar to their own. Western and Indigenous concepts can often be antithetic and this can be the basis of Indigenous children finding literacy, linguistic, social and cultural disconnections in the transition period between home and pre/school (see Harris, 1990; Rumsey, 1993).

Methodology

The most effective means to achieve the research aims and goals mentioned in the introduction were qualitative research methods, ethnographic case studies of six Indigenous women and five children in urban Kooriville, and four women and more than four children in remote rural Murritown (Aunty Alma was the primary carer for many of her preschool aged grandchildren, number unspecified in her contribution to the data). I used audio taped Yarn Times (Aboriginal English {AE} for focus group discussions) and Yarns (AE for personal interviews). AE is a non-Standard variety of Australian English that is regionally distributed. There are many varieties located on a continuum from traditional languages through to more urban varieties more closely related to General Australian English. AE is rule governed and as linguistically complex as any other dialect of English (Eades, 1995). Analysis involved explaining the issues raised within the contexts of social construction, rural and urban locations, the families themselves, comparing the differences and similarities and creating family/child profiles of literacy scaffolding, modelling, social practices and experiences. Sociolinguistics was used as a tool to accurately interpret the data that was provided in AE and which is the first language of all the participants.

Background of Australian Indigenous literacies

For at least 40,000 years in the land now known as Australia, approximately 500 different cultural communities determined literacy practices. After the invasion of 1788 anthropologists and historians imposed the word art upon Indigenous literacies. Literacies in any culture are based on the social practices of the people (Comber & Kamler, 1997; Lankshear, 1998; Luke, 1994). Most commentators refer to the perpetuation of oral histories in traditional Australian Indigenous societies but there has been little or no recognition of Indigenous literacies or value overtly placed in them by non-Indigenous society. Globally, the social construction of Indigenous
languages, cultures and literacies meant that literacy has been determined by, and measured against those of the colonising non-Indigenous peoples in what is perceived to be the literate world.

Australian Indigenous societies, pre and post invasion, have had their own literacies that have fulfilled their functions as well being a means of self-expression, and have contributed to the perpetuation of their dreamings, histories, education and laws for at least 40,000 years. Australian Indigenous literacies consist of two main groups Inspirational Literacies and Environmental Literacies (Hanlen, 2002). Inspirational Literacies involve the transference of thoughts or ideas into decontextualised forms. These forms include rock, tree and wood carvings, message sticks, charcoal drawings, symbols, icons, symbolic paintings, ‘x-ray’ ‘art’, stencils, soil-etchings, colours, body painting and body marking (see Ellis, 1994; Isaacs, 1999). Oral literature and songs can also be included in this group (see Dixon, 1980). Environmental Literacies include reading the stars; the sun for the time and the seasons; the environment for food, water and shelter etc.; weather; body language (NSW Board of Studies, 1995b); landmarks; tracks or markings in the sand, dirt, scrub or bush and many others. Learning requires many years of contextualised education and practise in relation to social practices to achieve competency (see Isaacs, 1999).

The skills required to learn Inspirational and Environmental Literacies include elements of concentration, patience, perseverance, stealth in body and mind, steadiness of hand, patience, observance, memory, imagination, analysis and self-discipline, which are gained through formal and informal means in life long education in the process of everyday social practices. The same skills are required for Western literacy learning and practices. Deficit in cognition is not the reason for poor Indigenous literacy outcomes in Australian schools.

After the British invasion of 1788 Western beliefs, values, literacy and social practices were imposed on Indigenous peoples who were perceived as ‘problematic’ for the British and later, Anglo-Australians. The protection and assimilation policies between 1880s and 1960s, including many education sub-policies were introduced to rid Australia of Indigenous cultures, languages and peoples. The attempts failed but they left an enormous social impact on Indigenous communities and individuals. Indigenous Australians remain the most disadvantaged group in Australia in every aspect of life.

The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so. (Borock & Gramsci in Gee, 1996, p. 36)

It was never intended for Indigenous Australians to learn the same form of English or literacy standard used in mainstreamed society. What they were taught, and the means of teaching were only tools to systematically control and manage Indigenous peoples for the benefit of the mainstream (see Donaldson, 1985; Fletcher, 1989). According to C. Richards (in Donaldson, 1985, p. 84), Europeans would not acquire the native language[s], [and] the blacks had to learn English, which they readily did’. And R. and F. Hill (in Donaldson, 1985, p. 84) state that ‘For all their readiness, the
blacks were not to be encouraged to use a variety of English that they [English speakers] spoke themselves’.

Indigenous Australians live at the interface of their own cultures and Western culture today maintaining their own identities and cultures but they need to be competent in Western literacy and social practices to compete for educational and employment positions in order to improve their social conditions. Greville provides a good description of the interface of two cultures.

Garma,’ in a language of north East Arnham Land, means ‘the meeting of river of salt and fresh water, the turbulence of which produce lines of foam where the streams interface’ (Marika et al. in Greville 1997)... two different cultures are seen as two streams meeting together, interacting, and making up a ‘complex pattern of turbulence’ (Greville 1997:33). It is not that the smaller stream is integrated into the bigger stream but that the two streams interact and contribute equally. Both sides, people from both Aboriginal and Western culture, ‘can benefit from theorizing over the interaction between the two streams of life’ (Marika et al. in Greville 1997:33).

(Greville in Tauchi, 2000, Segment 4.3.2)

Literacy benchmarks have been set for all Australian children in schools but the means to achieve them are still denied to Indigenous children and the evidence for this is in the outcomes (DETYA, 2001). Past research mainly referred to Indigenous Australians as ‘the other’ and all the well-intentioned policies and programs based on previous research since the 1960s have not produced positive outcomes. We need to understand how Indigenous families situate themselves with literacy practices and learning, and build on their knowledges and experiences to accommodate the literacy learning needs of their children from the centre. New South Wales has the largest Indigenous population in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998), the poorest literacy outcomes (Ministerial Council on Education, 1996) and the least amount of research (Hanlen, 2000). For these reasons my research focused on the Australian state of NSW. There were many issues raised of specific significance to policy and curriculum planning and development; for teaching strategies and teacher training in providing literacy, linguistic; cultural and social connections for Indigenous children in the transition period between home and pre/school. However, the main focus of this paper is to identify those cultural and social issues raised by the families, that are often counterproductive to outcomes in the classroom and school system. While it is extremely important for educators and practitioners to be aware of these issues it is more important that Indigenous communities at the local level understand how these issues play out for their children in the school system and suggest means to address them. In this way linguistic, literacy, social and cultural connections may be established for Indigenous children in the transition period within the community and later in partnership with the pre/school.
Research outcomes

Continuity in Indigenous literacies

There were instances that suggest the continuity and perpetuation of Indigenous literacies despite the constraints placed upon the peoples in NSW, to speak their languages, practice ceremonies or interact with the land and each other as their ancestors had done. The constraints were due to the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their land and communities under the protection and assimilation policies and colonisation (Fletcher, 1989).

Belinda from Kooriville

Belinda is the 21 year-old mother of two-and-a-half year-old Alicia. She recently gave birth to a stillborn son, Tyrone. Her grief was profound and she found it difficult to cope and recover from his death. During the social practice of grieving, Belinda drew on a number of literacy practices to help her in the recovery process. Her mother painted the family dreamings that presented each family member, including Tyrone, in their place in the dreaming and in relationship to each other. It was a permanent tangible and decontextualised account of Tyrone’s life. She also communicated regularly on the Internet with a young mother from the United States who had also recently given birth to a stillborn son. When she no longer had access to the Internet, she wrote letters to the woman’s home address. Belinda also wrote diary accounts of her pregnancy, Tyrone’s birth and death and numerous amounts of poetry. This demonstrates how Indigenous Australians living at the interface may use both Indigenous and Western literacies related to social practices.

Aunty Aileen from Kooriville

Aunty Aileen is a grandmother whose daughter and grandson were also participants in the research. The family provided an account of beliefs, values, social and literacy practices over six generations. Before participating Aunty explained that she would not be any good to this research saying, ‘I don’t have any culture, Love’. However, she was recruited through the local Indigenous community and her contribution was considered as highly valuable on this basis. The family only discovered that they were Aboriginal six years ago. In order to prevent the family being ‘stigmatised’ and disadvantaged, Aunty Aileen’s father and his sisters had told the family that they were ‘French Black’. During her Yarn Aunty told the story of her paternal grandmother’s death. The story itself is hers, but it had elements of Indigenous culture embedded in it. However, it was the manner in which she relayed the story that was so important. She used her entire upper body, hands, facial expressions, eye movements, pitch, intonation and tone for dramatic effect in a manner that is uniquely Indigenous. There were enough indicators to suggest that the perpetuation of Indigenous oral literature styles occurred despite the fact that the family was unaware of their Indigeneity. Oral literature styles belong to Indigenous Inspirational Literacies. This is an important issue, particularly in NSW, as most non-Indigenous people there believe that Indigenous Australians no longer have any culture and are often not really recognised as truly Indigenous. We need to recognise that Indigenous Australians living at the interface maintain their identity, culture and
social practices whether they provide external indicators to others around them or not: or whether they engage in practices in Western contexts for example, banking, shopping, in the workplace and so on.

Environmental literacy practices

Families from both Kooriville and Murritown still practice Environmental Literacies to varying degrees and types. These include hunting, collecting bush food and reading their own traditional country. They are practised by Marlene from Kooriville; and Tanya, Tamara and Aunty Alma from Murritown. While there is evidence to suggest that there is some continuity in Indigenous literacy practices it is unfortunately premature to suggest that Western literacies have become the third set of Indigenous literacy practices at this stage as evidenced in literacy outcome statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) DETYA, 2001.

Counterproductive cultural and social factors

There were a number of cultural and social issues identified by the participating families that can be counterproductive to successful literacy outcomes for Indigenous children. These include the cultural practice of shaming, changes in learning contexts, roles in teaching, critical literacy, purpose and incentive, racism, survival strategies and Western concepts of preschool education.

Shaming

Shaming is a major, fundamental cultural factor in poor literacy outcomes. However, it is a positive powerful cultural practice used by Indigenous Australians to deal with those community members who have crossed social and cultural boundaries associated with a sense of belonging. Indigenous families live at the interface and often apply shaming in both Indigenous community and mainstreamed contexts. Those who have been wronged, their families or community, may practise shaming publicly. It can be applied where people feel shamed by poor educational outcomes in comparison with non-Indigenous outcomes. They may be shamed by family, others or just take the notion upon themselves.

There were a number of examples of how shaming, when applied in the Western contexts of school or employment, is counterproductive to successful outcomes. Tanya from Murritown explains:

See a lot o’ kids around here all say in school now, and even when I was goin’ t’ school… If you had a little bit more knowledge than them in a… [certain topic] they wouldn’t show it. They’d go down to a lower class to be with their friends, instead o’ actually tryin’ to do somethin’… they’d muck up an’ not much work was done… Or you’d get taken out o’ one class… put into a higher class… They’d think it was… “You’re a smart arse!” Playing with that group [was not good]… And that hold a lot o’ Koori (Eastern Australian Aboriginal word for Aboriginal person) kids back. (Tanya, Murritown)

Tamara was one of the very rare Indigenous students to receive the Higher School Certificate. She was successful in her application for a traineeship in remote rural
Murritown. The very fact that she was *successful* in this meant that she was proactively *shaming* her people. As a result it was the community’s cultural responsibility to shame her for humiliating them. On the way to work each day as she walked the length of the main street, community members would call out to her. “There she goes! Too good for us, she is! Miss High and Mighty!”

Shaming can also be counterproductive in assessing the extent to which Indigenous children are disadvantaged. The Basic Skills Test (BST) is a national literacy assessment of all Australian children in Years 3 and 5 in primary school. Marcia from Murritown explains what that means to her and her community.

I don’t think my child’s ready to do the BST an’ I don’t want ‘em to do it. It’s not compulsory. We had family members sit… with their kids out of class… If they do the test an’ their grades come back lower than other kids… They should give’em about two weeks… off to study for it… an’ they’re judged… not only from (through) that school… [but] all NSW… It’s really hard. (Marcia, Murritown)

Marcia’s comments indicate that many Indigenous families may discourage their children to sit for the BST and this suggests that the poor literacy outcomes may be even worse than the statistics indicate.

**Learning contexts**

Participants are concerned that the cultural contexts for socialising, teaching and preparing children for life have been either lost or severely eroded. Many adults have lost confidence and feel that they lack the means to equip their children for school or employment and the opportunity to teach children as they had been taught, has gone. They also believe that education has been imposed on their peoples by governments and that their own roles in their children’s education are devalued or are inadequate. However, education and governments have not replaced the means to equip the children to cope with life in the mainstream and have disrupted the social structure of communities so that they have great difficulties perpetuating their beliefs, values and social practices or to appropriately prepare children in community or Western contexts. Aunty Alma, an elder, and Tammy 27 years, from Murritown explain how they perceive these issues.

We used to sit around the campfire. An’ the old people sit down an’ tell us stories. Sometimes were even ghost stories. We’d be all getting frightened an’ snugglin’ up next to ‘em. Mostly the stories ‘d be about the bush though… What they done about animals. They ‘ad to kill animals in those days for food. Emu, whatever, goanna, porcupine. And then… we’d sit down an’ watch ‘em cook it. We’d be round the campfire and they’d spread out a blanket… That’d be a lot different now. Havin’ your own room… radio… An’ fightin’ over watchin’ a show on TV. (Aunty Alma, Murritown)

Aborigines… never had much opportunities… for people t’ read to ‘em. When they got of age, girls had t’ go t’ work. We sort ‘f depended on the teacher. Father couldn’t talk to us much except round the campfire… talkin’ stories… (from mission school to Murritown school). It was very frightening when we come to Murritown… An’ we had to get used to their (white) ways an’ their rules. (Aunty Alma, Murritown)
We always got told stories. We were on the road droving… like Dad an’ that used to do when they were kids. If we weren’t on the road we were livin’ out of… shearin’ sheds an’ workin’ on properties. An’ never had a television… We learned a lot more an’ we absorbed more cause it was like of a nighttime an’ it was sittin’ around an’ after tea an’ everyone talkin’… instead of… running off to [watch TV]. (Tammy, Murritown)

**Family and community teaching roles**

In Indigenous communities customarily play a role in teaching and learning (see Harris, 1990). However, most modeling and scaffolding is based on their own social practices. Note that Aunty Alma refers to a *man* in the generic sense and to a woman by her role as *Mum*. This is a serious issue for communities as the roles of Indigenous men have been deconstructed from the traditional sense and there has been nothing to replace them. This is evident in the subsequent disproportionate high rates of unemployment, imprisonment, substance abuse and domestic violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997; Lang et al., In press).

With your children I think they take notice of what you do… An’ a man does this and Mum does that. If you want the child to take notice and learn things, y’ got ‘o do things. (Aunty Alma, Murritown)

**Critical literacy**

Indigenous families are concerned that their children and grandchildren are not learning from the centre of society at school. They do not feel included in history, literature and everyday issues from their social position.

[Children] should be taught more about our way of life than what they are now… It’s too changed now. That they should know what happened years ago an’ I don’t think they’ve been taught about that. They’re just lookin’ in the future… They’ve lost a lot o’ their identity. (Aunty Aileen, Kooriville)

**Purpose and incentive**

Non-Indigenous discourses between family and children include, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” This is not a common discourse for Indigenous families as many have never worked themselves nor have their close family members. Consequently, for many boys their highest aspiration is to work for the Community Development Employment Scheme, equivalent to the mainstream Work for the Dole Scheme. The girls see their role as a mother. Many girls have several children by the time they are twenty years old (personal knowledge of Murritown). You do not need
to read or write to fulfill these aspired roles. Children and parents need to see and realise the purpose of, and find incentive in, learning to read, write and other Western literacy practices. These issues are compounded for children in remote areas.

“I’m not goin’ to get nowhere in life so I don’t need to learn to read or write. Why Bother? I can write my own name and sign a form. I’m fine!” He (nephew) seems to have realised now that he’s 18 he needs to have these skills to get anywhere. You need to go to school to get that (education)... I don’t want them (children) to live ‘ere. I don’t want them to end up in Murritown like some of these other girls (pregnant teenagers). (Tanya, Murritown)

Everythinks happening in the cities... We don’t get many people t’ come ‘ere t’ Murritown, t’ do anythink like that... Everythinks happening in the cities... We don’t get nothink down in countries. This is why I think everythink goes haywire in the country. We got no-one down ‘ere to teach our kids. (Aunty Alma, Murritown)

**Counterproductive survival strategies**

We all develop survival strategies to help us when we feel overwhelmed. Indigenous children often feel overwhelmed in the transition period and if they cannot find literacy connections their strategies may be counterproductive in the longterm.

He brings home the *home readers* from school and because he’s having trouble... we don’t even bother with... [them] anymore... Because if *he* doesn’t throw it – after half an hour I’ve thrown it. (Tara, Kooriville)

As soon as you reach Kindergarten at this school, “You must read”... I think that it’s really too much put on reading and writing now than what it used to be... They shouldn’t feel pressure in Kindergarten. (Tara, Kooriville)

**Indigenous notions of preschool education**

Indigenous families have very definite notions of how preschool education may work for their children in the physical environment, the beliefs, values and social practices of the staff and the role that parents can have in partnership with staff. This may mean rethinking the current structure of Indigenous preschool education if we are serious about achieving positive outcomes (see Fleer, 2001).

We haven’t got a Koori preschool ‘ere. Not that you don’t (do) want to divide int’ black an’ white... But they’ve got ‘em in the cities... and they get all the help... ‘Ow can our kids down ‘ere in the county get educated, keep out o’ trouble... We’ve got ‘o start now to try to get our preschool go[ing]. All those littlies that’s runnin’ around the town an’ mums ‘ere, they got nowhere t’ go an’ [get] help for them... An’ a good teacher with it... I think mums would like to go in an’ walk around an’ talk [to] their kids an’ the people that’s lookin’ after ‘em. That’ll make the children feel comfortable too. (Aunty Alma, Murritown)
Preschool’s a really... big thing [preparation] for schools... Some stories that I hear of our preschool, I’m not really comf’table of sending... Jemma there... I think it should be open... to those family members... if they want t’ sit in on the class. Not actually getting involved or being in the same room, or be a bit of distraction... T’ be really involved... in the goings and the learning... I’d be really interested t’ sit down with the teacher an’ go through what they’re actually going t’ be learning... I’d like to have a little bit of a say in what she’s going through so I can continue with that at home. (Tammy, Murritown)

Racism

Racism was another issue raised by some families. It is impossible to completely wipe out racism in schools. Therefore, we need to equip Indigenous children with the means to deal with racism as it occurs and to deal with the emotional distress that can arise as a result. Undergraduate and teachers in the field should have training which specifically addresses the issues for Indigenous children and adapt the subsequent skills to their local community’s needs.

Conclusion

The research was aimed at providing a wide-ranging holistic overview to identify the scope of factors that have had an impact on the outcomes of Indigenous students from birth and from Indigenous perspectives. The focus was on the bigger picture rather than full detailed discussion of each of the factors that emerged from the research. The areas of concern raised by the families in this research are each the basis of further research that may provide more detailed answers to equity in education for Indigenous children. This research provided evidence from the participating families that there was not one single factor responsible for poor outcomes but rather a range of historic, linguistic, social and cultural factors that together have had an impact on outcomes. It is recommended that more detailed research is needed in each of the identified themes raised in relation to the holistic range of factors and outcomes.

It is the responsibility of teachers in partnership with Indigenous parents and community to provide linguistic, historic, social and cultural connections for the Indigenous students in their school. If Indigenous children cannot make these connections from the beginning they are at risk of passing through the school system in the margin, never really engaging in curriculum or with their teachers and non-Indigenous peers. Children as young as five years have been known to ‘down tools’ (Munns, 1996). They may either withdraw into themselves or behave at whatever level it takes to have themselves removed from the class, suspended or expelled from school. Once we lose these children it appears to be permanent. Many Indigenous children contemplate leaving school from Year 5, and are leaving school from Year 8. Participation and retention rates are the poorest of any group in Australia (see Lang, Frigo, & Batten, In press; Lester, 2000). It is hoped that these would improve significantly if teachers can provide students with the connections they need to feel that the school environment is supportive and inclusive of their historic, linguistic, cultural and social needs. Training in undergraduate and in-service courses should include Aboriginal Education that would provide teachers with the strategies to provide the above mentioned connections.
The issues raised by the participating families appear to be counterproductive to children’s literacy outcomes and need to be dealt with by Indigenous communities at the local level. Workshops are the most culturally appropriate means involving Indigenous community members, Indigenous education staff and associated agencies in the planning and implementation processes. Indigenous communities must take control of and accountability for their own educational needs, goals and the means to achieve them (The World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education, 1999). Education staff need to work in equal two-way partnership with Indigenous communities. Workshops ideally would be community driven and conducted in venues that are culturally and socially comfortable for the Indigenous communities. The community members need to be involved in the planning, decision making and the implementation processes and this would facilitate Indigenous students and their communities’ need to feel an inclusiveness in the education process and the school environment.

If teachers provide linguistic, historic, social and cultural connections at school, it is anticipated that Indigenous students would feel included, supported, respected and have a purpose for learning to read and write. It would be anticipated that this would overflow to improve participation and retention rates and the realisation that they can compete equitably for tertiary education and employment positions.

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