

THE CONVERSATION

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Indigenous literacy needs more than 'sounding out' words

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No one-size-fits-all approach will solve Indigenous literacy problems. AAP

Closing the gap in Indigenous literacy is a problem without a simple solution. But it can be done. As I've argued previously, we need to give up the search for a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt a range of strategies, such as:

- investing in a rich and diverse public education system,
- developing lasting partnerships between schools, governments and families, and
- addressing disadvantage and educational inequity so that all kids have access to a high-quality education.

This multi-strategy approach is hardly controversial. But in a recent article in **The Conversation** I also raised the question of whether our goals in Indigenous literacy need to be broadened.

Will our education focus have better impact if broader and more culturally-relevant perspectives are given to our teaching strategies? With English no longer being the primary language spoken in many Australian households, how appropriate is it to expect our future generations to be taught literacy using a narrowly conceived formula? How relevant is

performance in narrowly conceived English tests to a student who speaks three or four languages?

Somehow my thinking has been misinterpreted to imply that I have called for an end to English lessons for Indigenous students. Indeed, over the course of last week, The Australian published no fewer than four pieces ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) criticising me for things I never actually said. The accusations included claims that I object to improving remote Aboriginal children's literacy, that I think "Aborigines should be idle and isolated, unable to work in the market economy" and that English lessons for Indigenous students should halt. An analysis of the campaign of misrepresentation was published in Crikey.

Closing the Gap in literacy

As I've been so misunderstood, it seems important to clarify what I did say, and the strategies that I advocate.

The Australian Council for Education Research in a 2013 report on literacy learning in the early years made it clear that

the educational and cultural contexts in which students learn to be literate must be considered in planning for effective teaching and learning.

Arguing that we should have identical teaching materials, curriculum and strategies for all kids in all schools ignores the importance of community, cultural and other contextual factors that impact on learning. We should be cautious of any curriculum or pedagogical approach that limits teaching and learning to lock-step skilling and drilling.

Engaging parents in the learning of their children is also important.

The American Academy of Pediatrics states that reading to young children has multiple benefits. Home reading programs and other strategies such as outreach, family resource libraries, parent education on reading and writing all contribute to increased learning outcomes for children.

Yet too often the debate about how to best teach young children to read is reduced to a simple binary: phonics versus whole language. This reductive approach ignores the weight of evidence to show that both are essential for mastery of written language.

Allan Luke, an Emeritus Professor from the Queensland University of Technology, recently called for

a much broader conception and development of the scope and sequence of the literacy curriculum, and an understanding of where, how, all of the 'language arts' of oral comprehension, spoken language proficiency, spelling and orthography, writing and genre, and new multiliteracies fit together.

Reading requires the sustained mastery of a repertoire of practices. Decoding strategies, which are the focus of phonics-based approaches, are necessary but not sufficient for understanding.

The Australian Curriculum has a clear emphasis on literacy skills and the basics of reading. Content to be taught in the early years includes phonics, spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and comprehension as well as a focus on engaging with literature.

Phonics programs such as **Get Reading Right** clearly show the strong phonics emphasis in the early years curriculum.

Critics claiming that the curriculum has been sabotaged by whole language at the expense of the technical aspects of language acquisition are, quite simply, wrong.

While phonemic awareness, blending and alphabetic code breaking are important for mastering the technicalities of language, these are only a small part of the mastery of language that students need. One worrying concern is that students who learn to read through prescribed approaches might be capable at decoding strategies such as “sounding out” words yet lack the contextual and semantic knowledge that would help them to understand what they are reading.

Literacy is about more than reading words on the page

What then, is reading? Prominent children’s author Mem Fox explains reading as

making meaning, not sound, from the marks we see on the page.

While decoding is important, students also need to develop knowledge of semantics and contextual understanding. Grammar, genre and visual literacy are also important.

This is reflected in the definitions of literacy provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the NSW Education Department.

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority states that literacy includes

the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school.

All of these organisations support a broad view of literacy, one that goes beyond reading words on the page. Critical literacy is also vitally important for our students, where reading moves from reading the “word” to reading the “world”.

Engaging students in other ways

My research has been looking at the **connections** between music and literacy. Music is a powerful tool for social communication and has multiple links to language acquisition.

One example of using music as a way to Close the Gap is through the work of **The Song Room** who are working with schools such as **Yipirinya School** in Alice Springs. Improved literacy results, attendance, motivation and engagement are some of the **outcomes**.

Another example is a project I am working on with a remote Aboriginal community school in Western Australia's Kimberley region where we're looking at how music works as a "connector" between curriculum, community and culture. The students engage in a wide range of reading activities, involving the use of songs, poems, rhythm and movement. The community have music evenings, where students get to showcase their latest work and celebrate their learning.

While I am not claiming that such programs are a panacea for increasing literacy levels for children in remote communities, there is a clear case to be made for looking beyond one-size-fits-all approaches that teach and test a narrow definition of literacy.

Furthermore, Professor Luke says

turning the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will require school-level curriculum planning, ongoing analyses of student progress, a focus on quality teaching and intercultural relationships between students and teachers, and a substantive engagement with elders, parents and communities.

What we do know is that students learn best when they are highly engaged, deeply involved and in control of their own inquiries, regardless of where they live.