



## **Early Years Access to Books and Reading in Northeast Arnhem Land, Australia**

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**Abstract:** East Arnhem Shire Council (EASC) in partnership with Northern Territory Library (NTL) delivers library services in remote Northeast Arnhem Land, Australia. The population is primarily Indigenous people who have strong oral traditions. Programs focus on early years learning, promoting reading and increasing literacy and school readiness. Strategies include supporting caregivers to nurture literate behaviours and practices; providing access to age-appropriate books and resources; development of own language material; and training local Indigenous people to facilitate family-oriented early learning activities.

**Key words:** Indigenous, literacy, Arnhem Land, reading, Yolngu.

“Yapa, these kids don’t know what you’re saying!” That’s what I was told by Yolngu women at Yirrkala over three years ago when I started reading to a group of children and their carers for an outreach reading program in the community.

Why didn’t they understand?

The reason was quite simple - the children didn’t understand English. For the Indigenous people of this region English has never been their first language. So from then on as I read each page in English, a Yolngu woman, Djanambi, would translate.

To effectively promote literacy and reading, I needed to completely rethink how to provide a meaningful early years storytime session. From this uncertain beginning there has developed a regional early years’ literacy program delivered by local Indigenous women to families in their communities.

### **The people and the place**

The majority of people in East Arnhem Land are Indigenous Yolngu and Anindilyakwa people who have highly-developed oral traditions, cultural practices, land-owning structures and laws. Local languages are very strong, with many children under school age having little or no English. There are very few children’s books produced in language and very few books owned per household. Of the nine remote communities East Arnhem Shire Council (EASC) is responsible for, only five have a community library.

EASC is partnering with Northern Territory Library (NTL) to deliver library services in its communities in the East Arnhem region. Through this partnership I have



been seconded from my position as Manager of Nhulunbuy Community Library to EASC as their Library and Knowledge Centre Regional Manager.

EASC was formed in 2008 and inherited basic library services in five communities, incorporating inadequate infrastructure and services with minimal support and training. Staff are local Indigenous people for whom English is their second, fourth or even sixth language.

### **Government Framework**

The East Arnhem Shire is actively supporting and developing Library and Knowledge Centres as a core service at the same level as other programs in its Community Services directorate.(EASC, 2009) As the level of government closest to the community, the Shire has extensive knowledge about current services and infrastructure and, in consultation with community leaders and other levels of government, is establishing priorities for development.

The Shire is proactive about advocating on behalf of communities about the specific needs and wants of each community and is collaborating with current initiatives by Australian governments to improve the health, welfare, education and general standard of living for Indigenous Australians.

The Federal government, in its *Closing the Gap* Remote Service Delivery strategy, has identified six communities in the East Arnhem Shire for priority investment and the Northern Territory Government (NTG), in its *Working Future* strategy, has identified these same six as ‘Growth Towns’, plus one other, as communities where services, buildings and facilities are to be brought up to a standard comparable with any other country town in Australia. (Australian Government, 2009 and NTG, 2009)

### **‘Born to Read’**

I started the ‘Born to Read’ early years’ storytime program at Yirrkala community as an outreach service from Nhulunbuy Community Library. It was developed over three years and ensued from the need to provide library services to the Indigenous population around Nhulunbuy. Yirrkala Storytime is a mobile service which



can be set up and delivered in a designated building or at outdoor locations around the community, for example, in a park or under a shady tree.

As a bilingual storytime for children aged 0-5 years it provides access to good quality books, story-reading in two languages (English and the local Indigenous language), craft activity and play with early learning toys at each session. The involvement of Indigenous reading mentors and family members is an integral part of the program. Talking about the pictures, pointing to animals and whatever is on the page, or making up a story will engage the child and foster a love of books and reading when it's done in a loving family and community environment.

In 2009 the EASC received grant funding to implement 'Born to Read' in all their communities and to provide a collection of age-appropriate good quality books and early learning materials. Through a partnership between EASC and NTL, training was provided for selected Indigenous people to enable them to facilitate family-oriented early learning programs in their communities.

The training commenced with a workshop in Nhulunbuy for existing community library officers and others who were interested in taking on this role in their communities. One or two people from each community came in for two days of learning, role-play and hands-on activities. An additional benefit was the opportunity it provided for people from the different communities to form friendships and networks.

I have followed up this initial training by visiting each community to help start the program on the ground and provide ongoing mentoring in community with regular visits and phone contact. In communities that don't have a library, Indigenous family reading mentors are employed to run the program regularly each week. With support from the community shire office and collaboration with other service providers, these local Indigenous community library officers are continuing to provide regular early years' storytime sessions for their people.

The intention is that the program will be extended and delivered at several locations in the community to reach children and families who wouldn't otherwise participate. As well as helping children develop essential pre-literacy skills, it assists the development of family literacy practices that will make it easier for parents and carers to engage with and participate in their child's education once they go to school



### **Books in own language**

Access to own language material is very important in early literacy. A 2002 study by Dawson R. Hancock found that children exposed to books in own language scored significantly higher on a test of pre-literacy skills than did their classmates who were exposed to books written in English. (Hancock, 2002: 62)

EASC has a project underway to produce a professionally published baby board book and CD in Yolngu Matha. Story and artwork has been developed in consultation with community representatives at Yirrkala and Gunyangara, which are Indigenous communities close to Nhulunbuy. The book is titled *Njanapu ŋuli marrtiji diltjiyi* which means *We go out to the bush* and publication is planned for mid to late 2010. Books will be given to new mums of Yolngu families in the region.

In developing own language books for children aged from birth to preschool it's worth remembering that, while it must appeal to the child, you really need to pitch the content and illustrations to the parent or carer. They are the ones who will pick up the book if it appeals to them and sit down and look at it with their child. I know when my children were very small, I read them the books that I loved best. It's only when they're older at school that the child does more of the selection. In the early years this family participation is essential if we are to engage parents and carers in early learning and family literacy practices.

### **Issues and Challenges**

Remoteness is a major challenge. Five out of the shire's nine communities are island communities accessible only by air and in the wet season the roads are cut for months to another two. The expense of simply getting there and back has a big impact on the amount of visits that can be made to each community to provide ongoing mentoring and support.

Visits to community are supplemented by phone calls and email communication when available. Completion of the rollout of remote internet access will provide a lot more options for training and mentoring of remote staff, such as VOIP, use of smart boards and webcams.

The different language and culture is a continuing challenge and we take advantage of cultural awareness education that is available from local Indigenous



organisations. Programs are developed using guidelines from the ATSilIRN Protocols, particularly the section on accessibility and use which stresses the importance of creating an environment that Aboriginal people feel comfortable in as well as the importance of having Aboriginal people on staff. (ATSilIRN, 2005)

Family reading mentors are all local Indigenous people. To further develop their knowledge and skills EASC is implementing traineeships, with Indigenous employees undertaking place-based certificate level training wherever possible. We're working to empower families so they are confident to participate in their child's education at school. Regular interaction with print materials doesn't just help the kids – it allows parents and carers to brush up on skills that they haven't used much since school in a safe, fun way.

Evaluation, or *are we making a difference?* To assist with evaluation we maintain statistics and attendance records with the intention of tracking progress into school. This also provides feedback about how the program is being received in the community. If mother and child keep coming back it shows that not only is the child enjoying it, but mum is as well.

### **Partnerships and Collaboration**

Development and delivery of effective library programs requires partnerships and collaboration with many stakeholders and at all levels, both government and non-government. Elaine Henry, who is the CEO of The Smith Family, calls this the “cascade of relationships” (Henry, 2010).

In delivering the “Born to Read” Early Years Literacy Program we have developed many different partnerships and collaborative arrangements.

In Milingimbi the library is joint-use with the school and works collaboratively with the Families as first Teachers (FaFT) Family Educator's playgroup. Ramingining Library is incorporated into their new multi-media centre and works collaboratively with the FaFT Family Educator's playgroup there. At Yirrkala, where the program was first developed, there is ongoing collaboration between Nhulunbuy Community Library and EASC. Angurugu Library participates in the local Early Childhood Reference Group which is very proactive in exploring ways that early childhood service providers can work together to provide the best outcomes for the community.



In communities that don't have a library the program is delivered in cooperation with existing organizations, such as the crèche at Gapuwiyak, or on the Shire office verandah at Milyakburra. In all communities we encourage the library to link with schools to help develop pathways from home to school. These are just a few of the collaborative arrangements we currently have in place.

### **Conclusion**

To effectively promote reading and literacy in minority groups such collaboration is essential. Compare one person working alone to many people working in partnership. The amount that we can achieve increases incrementally the more we collaborate and work together.

Creating a truly inclusive society means providing all people with the skills they need to fully participate. Literacy and reading are essential skills that empower minorities to remain culturally strong and determine their own future in today's world. Collaboration, which includes representatives from all stakeholders, can make this happen.

One of the great benefits of attending conference such as this is the opportunity it gives us to increase our networks of people with whom we can work in the future.

Collaboration starts with a single conversation – who should **you** be talking with?

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