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The 'Yes, I Can!' Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in remote EAL/D communities

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Image 1: Literacy for Life Foundation Coordinator Mary Waites (left) and graduate Connie Sullivan.
Photo: Justine Kerrigan



Research Brief

What is the problem?

The most recent available data on Australian literacy in 2011-12 shows that 44% of adults have low English literacy levels (ABS, 2013). However, the data from the 2011-12 national literacy survey is not available by Indigeneity. The most recent available literacy data for Aboriginal populations, comes from the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy which estimated that 41-47% of Aboriginal adults had low English literacy (McLennan, 1997).

However, in rural and remote areas, the level of low English literacy may be higher (Lin et al., 2020; Boughton, 2009). Difficulties in reading and writing in English in modern Australia can have significant impacts on day-to-day activities such as reading and understanding labels and signs, completing official forms and documentation, and fully participating in community life and governance.

Most adult literacy programs in Australia have poor completion rates (<20%) (Kral & Schwab, 2003) amongst Aboriginal adults due to difficulties with access. The 'Yes, I Can!' literacy campaign was based on a Cuban mass adult literacy model [Boughton et al., 2013]. Its uniqueness in the Australian adult education landscape is due to the emphasis placed on using the strengths of local knowledge and ways of learning in each community to develop a culturally appropriate program that aligns with Aboriginal perspectives and values.

To our knowledge, 'Yes, I Can!' is the first and only community-controlled literacy program delivering English-language literacy classes to Indigenous adults in Australia. The campaign philosophy is that literacy is the responsibility of the whole community rather than a problem for individuals. Therefore, engagement and collaboration with the local community is a key feature of 'Yes, I Can!'. The campaign is managed by an Aboriginal organisation, the Literacy for Life Foundation, and delivered in conjunction with a community partner, usually at the invitation of the Local Aboriginal Land Council.

What we did about it

'Yes, I Can!' was first implemented in 2012 in Wilcannia, a remote community in far west NSW. Since then, the campaign has expanded to an additional 9 communities across NSW. The first language-speaking community to implement the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign was Ltyentye Apurte, 80km from Alice Springs, NT. Early in 2021, the campaign began in a second remote and culturally and linguistically diverse community, Tennant Creek.

The health and social impacts of 'Yes, I Can!' have been evaluated in those rural NSW communities (where English is the primary language of communication) that have hosted the campaign. These evaluations, including an ARC-funded longitudinal impact study have found improvements in adult literacy levels and positive outcomes in individuals and communities in relation to self-confidence, employment, justice outcomes and engagement within their own community (Wise et al., 2018; Boughton et al., 2013; Ratcliffe & Boughton, 2019; Boughton, 2020; Beetson et al., 2022).

Recent research has also found that the literacy campaign has a significant impact on the local coordinator and classroom facilitators, many of whom take on community leadership positions and find more permanent employment after the campaign has finished (Williamson et al., 2020). However, it is unclear if the campaign will have similar impacts in the Central Australian communities where English is an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and communities are more remote than those previously engaged in the campaign. This study is investigating the impact of 'Yes, I Can!' in remote language-speaking communities on health and social outcomes.

Initiated by LFLF and partnered with UNSW, this Lowitja Institute-funded project aims to broaden and deepen the evidence base on the role of community-controlled adult literacy programs in improving health and socio-economic outcomes in remote EAL/D ('language-speaking') communities in the NT. The project is a response to calls such as those outlined in the Conference Statement put forward at The Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference 2019, specifically Point 9: "First Nations and dominant languages and literacy are fundamental rights and a foundation of empowerment. Lifting levels of literacy in our first and dominant languages is key to our self-determination and the development of our children" (The Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference 2019 Statement).

What we found

Early results drawing on attendance, participation and skills assessment data replicate those reported in previous impact studies on the Campaign in NSW communities. That is, participants in the two linguistically and culturally distinct NT communities are showing improvements in three main domains: personal (confidence, self-esteem, physical appearance, personal hygiene), social (communication, respect, teamwork and friendships) and cognitive (improvements in reading, writing, speaking, thinking and concentration). However, it is also clear that people's relationship to English and it's perceived value and actual useage is complicated by the particular language ecologies of these communities.

This study is exploring the affective dimension of language and it's implications for implementing literacy campaigns in remote multilingual communities through the use of participatory arts-based methodologies including Photovoice.

At the community level, there is emerging evidence that the community-controlled approach that the Campaign simultaneously inspires and challenges other local service providers and organisations in terms of their own operations and governance.

The bottom line

The primary aim of the project is to demonstrate the benefits of using a community-controlled approach, the 'Yes I Can!' campaign, to improve literacy in Aboriginal adults and to improve health and socio-economic outcomes in remote communities in the NT.

Image 2. Literacy for Life Foundation Coordinator Katy Jasper (right) assists graduate Sheila Adams. Photo: Adam Sharman



About the Researchers



Professor Jack Beetson

Professor Jack Beetson is a Ngemba man from western NSW who has been actively involved in Indigenous education in Australia and internationally for over 30 years. He is the Executive Director of the Literacy for Life Foundation, an Aboriginal organisation that coordinates a community-led approach to improving adult literacy. Jack's other education roles have included President of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, member of the UTS Council, adjunct Professor at University of New England (UNE), member of the UNSW Advisory Council, Arts, Design & Architecture and teaching creative writing in prisons. Jack is also the Chair of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council Economic Development Advisory Committee, a Board member of Social Enterprise Finance Australia (SEFA), and Co-Chair Just Reinvest NSW. He is one of 12 people worldwide to have received a United Nations Unsung Hero Award. In 2019 he became the first Indigenous Australian to be inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame.



Rose Amazan

Rose Amazan is a Lecturer in the School of Education at UNSW, Sydney. She has extensive experience working with low SES communities in Australia and internationally. Rose's expertise resides in two strands of research: Social justice in education/pathways to educational equity and international education and development policy with an emphasis on gender. Rose's research, teaching, and service activities are motivated by her commitment to community development and creating equitable and safe environments for marginalised and disadvantaged communities.



Sophia Lin

Sophia Lin is a Lecturer in the UNSW School of Population Health. Her research and teaching focuses on evaluation of programs which aim to improve health outcomes and social determinants of health, including literacy. Over the past 13 years, Sophia has worked with a diverse range of communities in urban and rural Australia (including Indigenous), Pacific Islands, South East Asia, and East Africa.



Frances Williamson

Frances Williamson is a researcher with the Literacy for Life Foundation, exploring the role of literacy as a social determinant of health. Drawing on her background in applied linguistics, sociology and adult learning, Frances uses collaborative and narrative-based methodologies to support remote Indigenous communities to document and sustain the impacts of adult literacy campaigns.



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