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Interrogating Indigenous Student Literacy Programs

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Introduction

This chapter explores the dominance of particular styles of literacy programs designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ children and teenagers that appear to be in favor with government funding bodies. It refers to the findings from a systematic review on literacy programs designed specifically to improve the literacy outcomes of Indigenous students (Gutierrez et al., 2019), some of which have received significant funding from the government. Trying to ‘fix’ literacy for Indigenous students has been a significant focus for the government for decades, with significant

¹ Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are two specific Indigenous groups located within Australia. When the term ‘Indigenous’ is used in this chapter, it refers to traditional peoples from these two groups.

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investment (Johnson et al., 2016). National testing by the government paints a grim picture, and the *Closing the Gap Report* (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC], 2019) suggests that high investment in trying to find the magic fix (Luke, 2012) has not been successful. In addition, Fogarty et al. (2018) argue that standardized testing has led to generic pedagogic approaches, the politicization of literacy learning for Indigenous students, and an over-reliance on metrics to compare literacy learning outcomes of Indigenous students with non-Indigenous students. They also emphasize the danger of relying on these metrics for widely implemented literacy programs, and the deficit discourses they encourage.

This chapter considers voices across Indigenous literacy and literacy discussions to consider how the ideas from these authors have been represented (or not) in the peer-reviewed publication of findings on the literacy programs. This helps to highlight what worked, what didn't work and why, and gaps between literacy research and the literacy programs. It asks why these gaps exist, what seems to be prioritized, and the implications of the gaps.

Methodology and Method

Critical Indigenous Methodology

The systematic review was a part of a larger project investigating issues in education for Indigenous students. It was important for the project to take a holistic perspective, which is linked to critical Indigenous methodology (see Chap. 2). In the context of literacy programs, this methodology has key links to the imperative in literacy literature and by literacy experts on the goals of literacy to improve social justice outcomes, access to power, recognition of literacies that recognize the multiplicity of identity, and

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multiplicity of text types. Authors such as Daniel (2011), Johnson et al. (2014), Lowe (2017), and Riley and Webster (2016) argue for valuing of diversity in literate experiences and opportunities for these diverse voices to have agency and control to represent their own experiences and cultures.

Positioning

It is particularly important in Critical Indigenous Methodology for the authors to disclose their position. The three authors in this chapter come from various backgrounds. Amanda is a non-Indigenous woman from an Anglo-Saxon background. Throughout her academic life and research, she has been committed to interrogating her ‘white’ position in classrooms and exploring literacy approaches that encourage critical engagement with texts and society to understand how literacy can be used to access and maintain power. Her research includes a critically reflexive interrogation of a critical literacy pedagogy implemented in a remote North-west WA school. Kevin is a Gubbi Gubbi man from southeast Queensland. He is a Scientia Indigenous Research Fellow at the University of New South Wales, working on research to develop a model of sustainable improvement in Aboriginal education. John’s position in this paper is as a non-Indigenous researcher. As such he is not intending to represent the views or standpoints of First Nations Peoples. Rather, his intention is to critically examine publicly available data in ways that challenge conventional wisdom about the role that education plays as a pathway to employment and economic prosperity. Having worked in remote contexts with First Nations Peoples he is reflexively conscious of his ontological alignment with hegemonies that continue to marginalize, discriminate, and ‘other’ First Nations Peoples (see also Guenther et al., 2013).

Method

This chapter utilizes a systematic review method to help categorize and synthesize peer-reviewed literature on literacy programs. The search was limited to Australian peer-reviewed articles from the years 2007–2017. We also included gray literature that was of relevance to the focus of the

systematic review. The database searches were conducted on reputable databases that specifically related to the field of Education. We identified 3315 initial results; duplicates were removed (638) using Endnote software and article abstracts were scanned using Covidence systematic review software. The filtering process for this stage of the review is included in Fig. 10.1. A critical appraisal assessment process was then applied to the remaining articles, which decreased the number of papers to 28 (see Fig. 10.1).

Review Question

This review was framed using the following question: “which literacy programs have demonstrated improvements to Aboriginal students’ literacy acquisition, and under what conditions did this occur?” In addition, the review used the following sub-questions to refine the focus:

- what literacy-specific programs have been identified as being successful with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?;
- what literacy-specific programs have been identified as not successful?;
- under what conditions is success evident?;
- and how is success being measured?

It was considerate of developing a culturally responsive methodology, in that it primarily focused on practical implementation of literacy programs, the quality of these programs and the associated training, rather than the student. This review considered the stakeholders for whom this area is of importance, such as teachers, schools, families, and policymakers.

The Literacy Context and Framework for Analysis

Political Approaches to Indigenous Literacies

Approaches to improving Indigenous students’ literacy outcomes are shrouded in politics and continuously used by both politicians and the media to leverage political debate. Government reports such as the

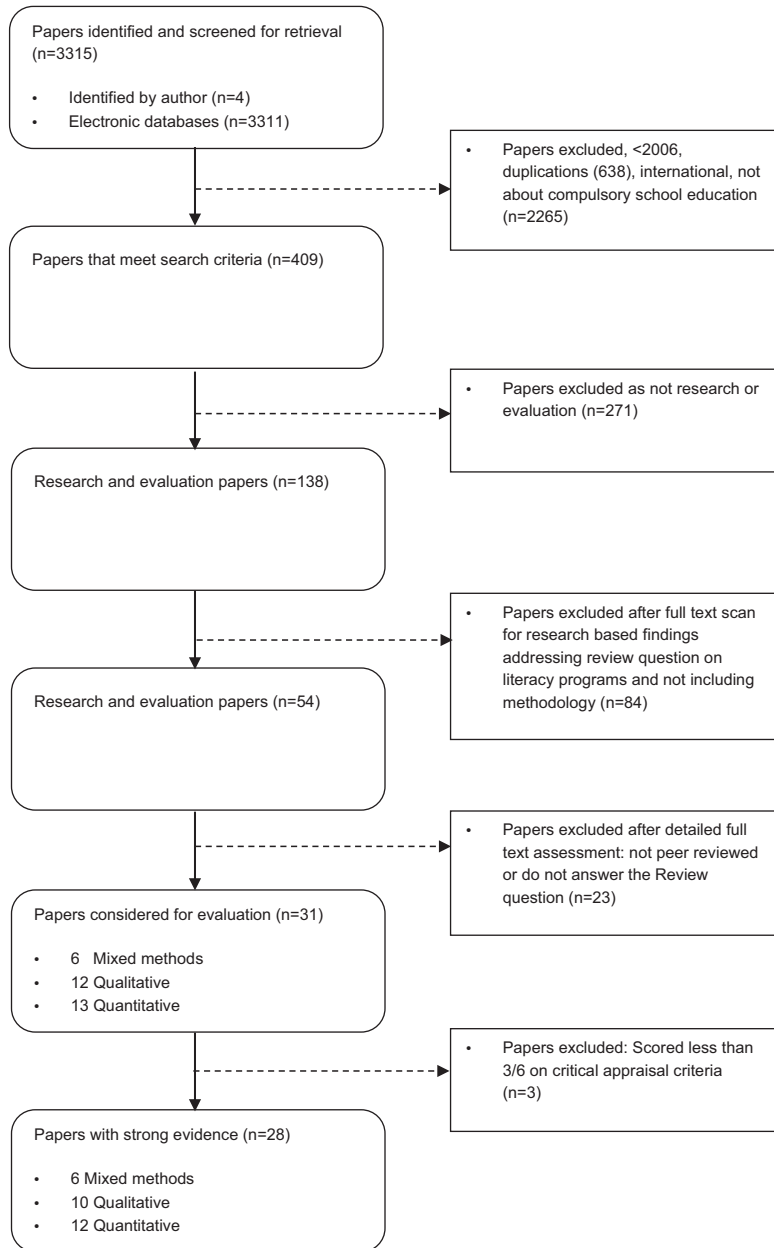


Fig. 10.1 PRISMA flow diagram representing inclusion and exclusion process. Note. Adapted from this figure, in "Indigenous student literacy outcomes in Australia: a systematic review of literacy programmes", by A. Gutierrez, K. Lowe and John Guenther, 2019, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, doi:10.1080/1359866X.2019.1700214, p. 4

Closing the Gap report (DPMC 2019) illustrate the overall lack of improvement in literacy outcomes for Indigenous students, stating that the government is not on target to meet its goal of halving the literacy gap. The kinds of literacy skills that are used as evidence in these reports link to those that are assessed in national testing such as NAPLAN (ACARA, 2017). Assessment like NAPLAN tends to use a definition of literacy that focuses on structural, formulaic, and mechanical skills of reading, writing, grammar, and spelling (Frawley & McLean-Davies, 2015). Frawley and McLean-Davies (2015) criticize the test as promoting “a particular set of skills and practices that do not easily correlate to students’ experiences (and needs) of literacy in their school, home and community” (p. 87). The regime of NAPLAN testing has increasingly influenced literacy practices over the last 10 years and is clearly evident in the focus of many of the literacy programs reported on in this paper such as the Direct Instruction and MultiLit programs.

Many authors working in the area of Indigenous literacies argue for a more developed understanding of the complex factors that come into play when implementing literacy pedagogies and policies for Indigenous students. For example, Prior (2013) and Wolgemuth et al. (2011) argue that influential factors such as attendance, health issues, lack of highly skilled literacy teachers, staff turnover, and limited understanding of Indigenous culture and learning styles need to be taken into consideration. They also argue that literacy intervention needs to be as early as possible (Wolgemuth et al., 2011; Prior, 2013), especially considering the gap in achievement widens between the ages of 3 and 7 (Klenowski, 2009). In addition, authors such as Fogarty et al. (2018) argue that both historically and currently literacy policies are done ‘to’ rather than ‘with’ Indigenous communities and “do not match with the linguistic, cultural and social contexts that young learners inhabit, particularly those living in remote communities” (p. 192).

Literacy Debates and Research: The Foundation for the Analysis Framework

Literacy has been a highly contested field for decades with multiple debates and literacy ‘crisis’/literacy ‘wars’ (Snyder, 2008) influencing mainstream delivery of literacy. Over the last thirty years the ebb and

flow of political and media attacks on literacy education has attempted to characterize literacy educators as “postmodern radicals”, which has “had repercussions for policy decisions and funding” (Snyder, 2008, p. 9). The various public debates most significantly represent nostalgic desires to return to traditional approaches to grammar, literature, and values education. There is a tendency to set up binaries, such as basic reading skills versus critical literacy skills (Howie, 2006) and phonics and traditional grammar versus whole language (Snyder, 2008). The findings from this review make clear that, as Snyder notes, these debates may have influenced policy and funding. Indigenous literacy programs including explicit phonics teaching feature heavily in many of the intervention literacy programs for Indigenous students.

Setting up binaries in literacy is counterproductive and fails to recognize the significant literacy work by researchers and educators over the last thirty years to represent the multiplicity and socially situated nature of literacy. There has been considerable work to develop balanced literacy models that take these factors into consideration. Some of these models have had a pronounced impact on literacy teaching in Australia (and other western nations). Of particular importance to this chapter are the four resources model (Freebody, 2007; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke, 2000) and various multiliteracies models (e.g. New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2000; Unsworth, 2008). These models reflect the historical evolution of definitions around literacy which have been influenced by systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), genre theories (Badger & White, 2000; Hyon, 1996), critical literacies (Freebody, 2007; Green, 2006; Gutierrez, 2014; Luke, 2014, 2018), and multiliteracies.

The models promote a rounded approach to literacy including an interweaving focus on code-breaking (which incorporates close language study and practice such as phonics and language awareness); cultural influences on understanding texts, and increasing the kinds of texts students are familiar with; improving students’ understanding of textual features and genres; and developing a critical awareness of the ways texts work and the reader’s position in interpreting/acting on texts and the world. As a side note, we use the term ‘text’ to mean anything that can be interpreted, which ranges from written text on a page to a person’s facial expression when they see you. These can be interpreted or ‘read’ and have

meaning. These skills are not hierarchical; rather they can work in tandem with each other, and often do. One frustration of those who promote these balanced approaches is being told that children need ‘the basics’ before they can think critically about texts. The two can happen simultaneously, and this is particularly important for children who are trying to understand the world around them. Also, work in the area of multiliteracies encouraged thought around the multimodal nature of texts students use in and beyond the classroom and the literacy skills needed for the current and future multimodal literacy environment.

Using the information provided in the articles on each literacy program, and the four resources and multiliteracies theories as tools, each program was assessed for the range of literacies being tested and reported. This is represented in the results section. Note, the CAIPE (Creative Arts and Indigenous Parental Engagement) program did not include enough information about their approach to literacy and hence could not be categorized (The Song Room, 2012).

Results

Limitations applied to this systematic review included the need for publications to provide evidence of literacy outcomes for sizable cohorts or long-term case studies to provide clear evidence of positive growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literacy outcomes. This meant other studies which discuss literacy approaches in small-scale case studies or individual teacher inquiry research projects were not included. While these studies reported on interesting findings, they were often short projects, did not include a clear comparison of literacy before and after the project, and had very small sample sizes. This is not to discount the value of these publications, as they often provide local and contextualized understandings of literacy projects.

Summary of the Literacy Programs

Table 10.1 below provides a brief summary of the focus and testing of each of the programs that were identified through the systematic review.

Table 10.1 Summary of literacy programs

Program	Location of participants	Sample age	Testing method	Brief overview of program
ABRACADABRA (7 documents)	NT, urban, remote, and very remote	Kinder-grade 3	GRADE K, PIPS-BLA	Interactive online literacy tool for students aged 4–8. Focuses on phonological and phoneme-grapheme awareness
Bilingual Education (6 documents)	NT, QLD, NSW, remote Aboriginal community	VET (ages 14–20), 1–2 and primary	Interviews, word awareness test, Martin and Pratt Non-word Reading Test	4 different projects focusing on areas such as code-switching, benefits of learning an Indigenous language, ICT and multiliteracies, and community-based stories in local languages
Direct Instruction (1 document)	Cape York, QLD	Primary	NAPLAN, PAT-R, DIBELS, Neale Analysis of Reading	DI is a highly structured, at times scripted, block approach to literacy. It focuses on the mechanics of language
MultiLit (1 document)	NSW urban	Years 5 and 6	Neale Analysis of Reading, Burt Word Test, SA spelling Test, Wheldall Assessment of Reading and Martin Pratt Nonword Reading Test	Aimed at students who are 2 years behind in reading in chronological age (low-progress readers). It is a skills-based program focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension

(continued)

Table 10.1 (continued)

Program	Location of participants	Sample age	Testing method	Brief overview of program
National Accelerated Literacy Program (6 documents)	NT	P-12	IL, TORCH, MAP, PM Benchmark Kit, GRADEK, attendance data, observation instruments	Aims to improve literacy standards for those who have fallen behind (usually 2 years). Uses written texts (mostly narrative genre) that are considered age appropriate and engaging. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept "zone of proximal development", students are heavily scaffolded through a series of routine reading and writing processes
Principal as Literacy Leader (PALL) (4 documents)	SA, QLD, NT— regional, rural, and remote	Primary	Principal evaluation reports, surveys, attendance data, case study site visits	Aimed to connect Indigenous leadership partners to principals in schools for shared leadership in developing place-based reading action plans. Focus was on rich oral language, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension

(continued)

Table 10.1 (continued)

Program	Location of participants	Sample age	Testing method	Brief overview of program
Learning to Read, Reading to Learn (2 documents)	NSW rural and urban	Years 7–10, K-9	NAPLAN, teacher tracking of growth via discourse analysis of writing assessment	Aims to develop weak students' abilities to read and write texts appropriate for their age, and to extend advanced students beyond expected levels. The program is theoretically underpinned by the principles of scaffolded learning, systemic functional linguistics, and genre approaches to writing. Teachers are trained in discourse analysis to analyze student writing
CAIPE (1 document)	QLD—urban and regional	Years 3,4, and 5	Survey, attendance, English grades, and NAPLAN results	Links to Indigenous community groups to deliver workshops on Indigenous arts, music, and culture, a creative community project and early reading program for home reading support

What the Literacy Programs Tested

Table 10.2 provides a snapshot of the kinds of literacy skills that were focused on in each of the programs. It highlights the privileging of some literacy skills over others.

Table 10.2 Using literacy theory to map skills taught in programs

Features of recognized literacy theories				
Program	Decoding (language mechanics)	Comprehension reading skills	Understanding context of texts and using a variety of texts	Critical understanding of texts, their purposes, and how/why they work in society
ABRA	✓	✓		Multiliteracies Despite being an ICT program, no focus on reading skills required in ICT programs and no discussion on multiliteracies skills
Bilingual	✓	✓	✓ Program on code-switching in VCAL	One program explicitly focused on multiliteracies skills in a bilingual literacy program
DI	✓	✓	✓	
MultilIT	✓	✓	✓	
NALP	✓	✓	✓	
PALL	✓	✓	✓	
LR,RL	✓	✓	✓	
			✓	Code-switching identified issues with students' understanding the need to code-switch in specific contexts. No evidence of outcomes for this kind of literacy
			✓	Suggests skills being taught, but no evidence of explicit testing of this kind of literacy

Note: Adapted from Table 7, in "Indigenous student literacy outcomes in Australia: a systematic review of literacy programmes", by A. Gutierrez, K. Lowe and John Guenther, 2019, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, doi:10.1080/1359866X.2019.1700214, p. 16

Decoding of texts in relation to the mechanics of language and more mechanical aspects of comprehension strategies was evident in all programs. There was a dominance of testing on areas such as vocabulary, word recognition, phonemic awareness, and comprehension skills. Most programs provided evidence of students developing their skills in understanding structures and features of texts and purposes for texts (e.g. report is an informative text, narrative entertains, and other generic understandings). There is a clear absence of evidence across almost all programs in relation to critical understanding of how texts work, varied representations and interpretations of texts, and how and why texts have particular impacts on people, cultures, and events. There was also a significant gap in evidence around the teaching of multiliteracies skills.

What Does this Say About Programs that Focus on Indigenous Literacy Teaching?

It is important to credit the reported successful results of most of the programs in relation to the teaching of explicit phonemic, word awareness, and other early code-breaking literacy skills. There is also evidence provided illustrating success in the areas of generic and structural awareness in some of the highly scaffolded pedagogical models. What was disturbing, however, was the lack of evidence provided in the papers that demonstrates students are being encouraged to think critically about texts and their places in the world and also the gap in relation to developing understandings of multimodal texts. Texts can represent people and groups in ways that need to be questioned or exclude people and groups in a way that disempowers. People and groups can also use texts to challenge mis/representations. Luke (2018), a prominent and internationally regarded literacy researcher, highlights the importance of finding the right balance in literacy programs:

[I]n the zero-sum game of curriculum and schools—if you want to shape and apprentice a literate habitus that spells perfectly or memorises vocabulary, this can be done—but to the exclusion of other roles, practices or resources of the literate person. (Luke, 2018, p. 2)

Yes, these students need to be able to decode; having control of the dominant language is an important way to access power. However, we should not bypass opportunities to scaffold understandings in the other literacy practices.

If there is a continual insistence on designing Indigenous student literacy programs to solely focus on the basics and code-breaking, this reflects a deficit model of literacy in which the assumptions made about low socio-economic and marginalized students are that they can only handle basic literacy practices and skills (Luke, 2018). From this systematic review it appears most of the literacy programs that have been successful in receiving large government funding do focus heavily on code-breaking skills. One might ask why this is so, especially considering decades of research into literacy for disempowered youth (see, e.g., Griesharber et al., 2011; Luke et al., 2011) and research into Indigenous student schooling (e.g. see Fogarty et al., 2018; Guenther et al., 2013; Nakata et al., 2012) which argue for connection to lived realities and intellectually stimulating content that encourages critical thinking.

One reason governments, and those who own the intellectual property for these programs, may continue to promote these programs is because they often provide quantitative evidence of success in literacy. Governments like to see numbers and standardized testing which show impact. However, as shown in this chapter, most of the programs only provide quantitative evidence of literacy impact for a narrow definition of literacy. There only appears to be one program that provides evidence of other domains of literacy, being the *Reading to Learn: Learning to Read* program (Rose, 2011). Providing evidence of the impact of the other dimensions of literacy can be difficult. As Luke (2018) argues, the intention of the four resources model (particularly critical literacies) was not to “prescribe or normalize a specific teaching method or approach” (p. 4); hence it was not designed for applying standardized testing models. On the other hand, testing code-breaking and comprehension skills quantitatively on a large scale is simple in comparison, and a large number of tools already exist to assist with data collection.

Implications

That leaves us with the question of how can education systems, schools, and educators move forward? Some important points for consideration arose from the research assessed in the systematic review and other research in the field of literacy and Indigenous student education. It is emphasized that school-community partnerships (e.g. see Daniel, 2011; Lowe, 2017; and the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities [PALLIC] publications, Johnson et al., 2014; Riley & Webster, 2016) are essential for programs focusing on Indigenous education. These publications highlight the multifaceted complexity of literacy learning, particularly in remote and rural communities. They also argue for contextualized literacy programs that take into account the local environments, events, and cultures, which are better understood if school leaders and staff have strong partnership connections to parents and the community. Specific examples of contextualized literacy programs and community partnerships do exist in publication and can provide a model for this work. For example, ‘The Honey Ant Readers’ (James, 2014) project created a partnership between local schools and communities to develop bilingual community stories for use in their classrooms. Utilizing partnerships to develop local literacies can assist in helping students to explore their identities and places as they relate to multiple other contexts, such as representations in national and global contexts.

The systematic review also highlighted other gaps due to a dominant focus on mechanical language skills in standardized testing. It is the authors’ opinion that policy advisors and politicians (as policymakers) should broaden their interpretation of ‘literacy’ and consider approaches that allow contextualized and balanced literacy curriculum. Rather than the continual tunnel vision on aspects of literacy that are easy to ‘test’, the focus instead should be on how to increase school and teacher agency and professionalism in making appropriate place-based research literacy decisions about their school context. As Luke (2018) suggests “high quality, high equity systems (Luke et al., 2013) like Ontario, are characterised by

high levels of teacher professionalism, and moderate levels of central prescription” (p. 9). This means providing opportunities for leaders and teachers to develop their skills in designing balanced place-based literacy programs and in implementing meaningful teacher/school/community-led research projects to inform whole school literacy planning. Also, it would be wise to take note of suggestions that will help move Indigenous literacy discourse away from deficit discourses, such as Fogarty et al.’s (2018) identification of the ‘strengths based approach’, which they argue can “provide a possible starting point for the development of literacy approaches that are more fully inclusive of community and local practices” (p. 193). A strengths-based approach focuses on empowering the individual by valuing their strengths, and viewing the acquisition of new skills as an opportunity to increase strengths, rather than viewing a lack in particular skills (often defined by the dominant culture) as being deficit.

Conclusion

In summary, the papers assessed in this systematic review provided an insight into the kinds of literacy programs that have been implemented with the aim of improving Indigenous literacy outcomes. The strongest finding from this assessment was the dominant focus in most programs on mechanical and structural (or code-breaking) aspects of language, with little consideration of other important literacy skills or contextual considerations. It is important for researchers and educators in the literacy and Indigenous fields of education to continue to emphasize the importance of balanced approaches to literacy that are context based. In addition, there is a need to fill the gaps in the research, beyond the early years, particularly senior secondary, and in spaces such as urban and Western Australian geographical contexts. It is also important to push for leaders and teachers to have training across all aspects of literacy, and research skills; time; and agency to become professional decision-makers who can build effective local partnerships and programs.

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