

## Chapter 17

# Afterword: Being Literate in ‘Australian’: The Future Can



Peter Freebody

*Where are the laws and the legends I gave?  
Tell me what happened  
from ‘The first-born’, Jack Davis, Noongar, 1970*

**Abstract** This chapter summarises some of the issues raised by the preceding chapters, and comments on the future of research and practice in the literacy education of Indigenous and Settler Australians. Outlined first are the categories of characters that appear across the course of this book, the actions and agency attached to those various characters, and the implications of those categorisations for our interpretation of the projects reported here. The chapter proceeds to draw out three general developments that might improve the efficacy and durability of educators’ efforts: more detailed conceptualisations of ‘community’ and more central engagement with individual communities; long-term research and development projects; and the integration of Indigenous cultural and linguistic knowledge in literacy education for both Indigenous and Settler learners.

## Introduction and Background

As an afterword this chapter needs first to recognise the mostly English-based nature of the literacy programs discussed in this volume and to acknowledge that literacy in Indigenous Australian languages, as raised later, remains under-represented in the work reported here. It is only since 2006 that there has been any substantial, sustained, system-level effort put into teaching Indigenous Australian languages and their literacies in public schools (Purdie et al. 2008; Morgan et al. [forthcoming](#)). The exception is the bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory which were established and supported by multidisciplinary teams from the

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1970s, but which have enjoyed considerably less government support over the past 20 years. Nonetheless, by 2008 there were about 16,000 Indigenous Australian students and 13,000 Settler society students in 260 schools participating in Indigenous Australian language and literacy programs (e.g. Buckskin et al. 2009; Gray 2007; Rigney 2011; Sellwood and Angelo 2013; Siegel 1999; Wigglesworth et al. 2011).

The rationale and conduct of these plurilingual efforts assume particular importance in light of the UNESCO's decades-long work on endangered languages. UNESCO has estimated that about half of the world's 6000 languages will be gone in two generations unless decisive and effective steps are taken:

With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages. (UNESCO 2018)

This stark conclusion draws our attention to the connection between documenting and teaching written forms of an endangered language and its chances of appearing in next-generation educational policies and practices. So while literacy in English is the main focus of the chapters collected here, for many Indigenous Australians, and for many from Settler societies that work with them, this focus is by no means the entire challenge. To think otherwise is to consider the efforts of English-literacy educators merely as acts of beneficence, charity work for a group that needs help 'closing a gap', rather than in helping secure and preserve a culture's heritage as it prepares its youngsters for the future.

Contributors to this book have written about improving the literacy learning of Indigenous Australian people, in and around schools and other institutional and community settings. They have given us a view of the growing body of evidence that arises from intellectual, cultural, and practical efforts of literacy educators, from Indigenous Australian and Settler backgrounds. Whatever criticisms or qualms readers will have about these chapters – and there is much here to react to – and however unfinished the program of Indigenous Australian literacy education remains, this book documents increasing levels of collaboration and intent in that program. Here I provide a sketch of some themes that arise as I read these contributions – from my perspective as an educator from Settler society, Generation: Baby-boomer – and of some general ways forward that the chapters suggest.

## **Motifs**

The contributions here are so varied – conceptually, methodologically, geographically, culturally, and in terms of their closeness to policy formation and daily practice – that a straight-up summary of common elements would likely miss some of the serious lessons. The commonalities themselves would end up being so common as to obscure the novelty and urgency that drive the projects, or so abstract as to be at the one time irrefutable and unhelpful. So the scaled-down aim is to sketch some of the chapters' less overt ideas and dispositions. I do this by trying to answer

some simple questions so that some ideas about productive ways forward might come into view.

*Who are the people here, and who does what?* The term 'Indigenous' in the title of this book draws attention to the category of people who started inhabiting this continent sometime before between 60,000 and 100,000 years ago, at least 59,770 years before another category of people, the first Settler societies, arrived from Europe. At the same time, the title shows us how decades of troubled political history can load categorisations with 'attitude', with troubled baggage. Categorisations of people are not just neutral descriptions. How we use categorisations of people in daily exchanges is not only descriptive work: 'the practical, the conceptual, and the moral are laminated together in the organisation of situated action and discourse, and in their very intelligibility' (Jayyusi 1991, p. 242). Categorisation work is 'entwined with moral ordering whereby behaviour and actions, thoughts and opinions are made normatively sanctionable' (Fitzgerald and Housley 2015, p. 100). Our practical activities in understanding one another are simultaneously descriptive and moral, and it is this moral organisation that holds everyday norms of behaviour in place, as well as the power differentials those norms embody.

Categorisations are choices that give us practical ways of acting in various settings of use – public, national, cross-community debates versus informal, local, within-community negotiations. So we can ask questions such as: In which forums is 'Indigenous' a standard or preferred reference? By whom? In what contexts does that term adequately perform the work at hand, the work of, for example, distinguishing the groups to which a policy or program might refer from the 'others'? In which other settings is this categorisation not preferred, perhaps precisely because of its connection to bureaucratic, non-local usage, or because of its troubling national breadth – perhaps in favour of 'Aboriginal' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' or 'First Australians', or others? We also find, especially in the chapters by Djabibba, Auld and O'Mara, and Davis and Woods, that what is preferred is categorisations that refer to particular clans, nations, or peoples, in these cases, Kunibíjji and Durithunga. These variable levels of categorisation get different descriptive-moral work done at different times, in different places; they have histories of use that are brought to bear on those occasions.

A question is also raised about how we categorise the 'others', the not-Indigenous Australians? In an everyday, practical way, a categorisation provides its contrast category – Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations versus non-Indigenous, non-Aboriginal, invaders, Settler societies/communities, Settler colonials, and so on (as, e.g. in Mills and Dooley and Ma Rhea and Anderson). Again, these have histories of use for different occasions. In this case, because they refer to majority, 'mainstream' collections of people, even their mention, let alone their use, can introduce political and moral trouble.

Contributors collected here use a variety of ways to distinguish between, on the one hand, those categorisations with agency and, on the other, those acted upon or acted with: Who's here and who does what to and with whom? Even a cursory view

across the chapters shows that patterns of agency are attached not only to a variety of individuals and collectives but also to institutions, programs, packages, and even tests (NAPLAN ‘does’ things).

Here is a sketch of the cast of agent characters: Oldfield and Lo Bianco invest agency in ‘policy and the work of social agents’; Djabibba, Auld and O’Mara invest agency in young Kunibidji people; for Shinkfield and for Cooke and Piers-Blundell, it is young children and their parents; in the piece by Scull and Hannagan, it is early-years Indigenous Australian students; Wheldall and colleagues show the agency of programs, drawing an analogy between the relationship of a program and students and the relationship of an ambulance and casualties; chapters by Mills and Dooley, Parkin, and Parkin and Harper largely invest agency in text-oriented programs in the hands of students and teachers in remote Indigenous Australian schools; for McCollow and for Boughton, it is formal organisations, such as The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, Queensland Department of Education, the Good to Great Schools Australia program, and Literacy for Life Foundation, that administer reform through particular approaches to teaching and are variously supported or critiqued by influential individual community leaders.

Davis and Woods show the effects that can emerge from ‘communities brokering relationships with other systems, approaches, and researchers’ on pre-service teachers, community members, and school personnel, while Rennie and Ma Rhea and Anderson provide the two individual close-ups of the collection, showing us the agency and accommodations of Millie and her two educator-coaches and of a supervisor and doctoral scholar.

Conceptual and methodological differences aside, variations in the ‘width of the lens’ and its ‘depth of field’ are impressive when it comes to the categorisations that have agency. ‘Schooling’ and ‘governing’ provide the frameworks for much of the categorisation work here, but one of the characteristics that distinguishes this collection from comparable anthologies on literacy education in general is an alertness, even across such diverse pieces, to the importance of community; community is taken to be both a source of support for literacy teaching and learning and itself a setting that can be enhanced by more effective work in schools. Throughout, the potential for initiatives by communities, networks, and culturally based organisations stands out.

*Where have the people here been; what is the ‘story so far’?* The stories of past educational efforts to provide literacy education to Indigenous Australian people that we find in these chapters show us historical challenges, obstacles, and sticking points among the various agents. Some contributors place a protracted series of neglected aspirations and recommendations at the centre of their narratives. One discernible line here is that it is inaccurate and probably unproductive to proceed – including with a research project – as if constructing better literacy education for Indigenous Australians is a new idea, an activity that takes place in a previously unpopulated zone, another *terra nullius*, with little to build on. As Oldfield and Lo Bianco note, even the policy initiatives of the Whitlam government were ‘belated responses to years of advocacy, research, conceptual innovation, and organisational

demands at grassroots levels', an observation reworked by Boughton in his description of unheeded adult literacy programs and recommendations.

A recurring motif also emerges of a combination of urgency, haste, and short-termism in policy formation (e.g. in Davis and Woods), including a failure to work patiently on developing coherence between the community and educational policy and practice (e.g. in McCollow). Oldfield and Lo Bianco name what seem, at first glance, to be the almost perverse about-turns in policy and the absence of long-term commitments and interventions that allow time for realistic evaluation. These authors also set out obstructions to that commitment, most prominently the ongoing resistance to formalising the rights of Indigenous Australians, the marketisation of educational provision, and an unorganised array of targeted literacy programs and commodities – a 'pattern of erosion'. Consequences of oscillating policies at the school level are made evident in the chapter by Davis and Woods, where we are shown haphazard accumulations, 'a variety of isolated "programs" and new – old – approaches that layer on top of each other'.

Considering these hesitations and reversals, it is not surprising that the collection presented here – like the variety of educational sites it shows us – is neither built on nor itself builds a coherent, programmatic set of criteria for evaluating different approaches and outcomes. One message is that this patchwork is a product of the history of Indigenous-Settler relations as those relations have acted out in educational settings.

*What do these chapters show us about what literacy education is for?* More so than any other educational domain, literacy has been taken to signal development, civility, community well-being, economic productivity, and most other desirable social attributes. These attachments to literacy lead educational authorities to assert their commitment to progress in the literacy learning of youngsters. They have also often led systems away from the contexts of everyday literacy activities and capabilities, toward a functionally autonomous, unidimensional skill, mobile, measurable, and unmoored from the times, places, and bodies of knowledge in which it has been put to work (Street 2012).

Literacy is the communication medium on which Australian schooling is almost entirely dependent at this point in its history. Most chapters here assume that it should be part of preparing individual youngsters and communities to be citizens; part of accessing and developing their heritage, especially via their use of mobile online technologies, and connecting with international heritages and movements, as well as hobby, leisure groups; they can learn how to act effectively to preserve and enhance their own freedoms of participation and choice.

As historians of literacy across the ages have found, however, literacy can do other, darker things too. Here is Thomas on a 'fascinating tension' in the use of literacy in the ancient Mediterranean region:

...different potentials are seized upon by different communities. In some, writing means bureaucracy, control and oppression by the state, in others an enabling skill that frees an individual's creative potential. (Thomas 2009, pp. 13–14)

Here is Eisenstein on the contradictory effects, a millennium later, of the invention of the printing press:

We still seem to be experiencing the contradictory effects of a process which fanned the flames of religious zeal and bigotry while fostering a new concern for ecumenical concord and toleration, which fixed linguistic and national divisions more permanently while creating a cosmopolitan Commonwealth of Learning. (Eisenstein 2012, p. 311)

And here is Graff on what motivated twentieth century literacy campaigns:

...a relatively low level of mass literacy contributed more to social order, cultural cohesion, and political stability ... the dominance of a single standard of language, heritage, history, values, and personal characteristics ... in the face of the diversity of society divided by class, race, ethnicity, national origins, and gender ... mass literacy required social and individual controls. (Graff 2010, p. 644)

Whatever components and consequences of literacy learning are to be assessed, prior questions include ‘what kinds of literacy? what kinds of capabilities?’

Chapters by Boughton and by Cooke and Piers-Blundell name the literacy-dependence of both contemporary schooling, and in broader civic and economic life, as the key to understanding effective participation in Australian society. As Boughton puts it, in a ‘highly-literate settler economy and political system’ the majority of Indigenous Australian people are ‘unable to participate effectively as citizens in the institutions which are meant to guarantee their rights’. And for Cooke and Piers-Blundell, the ‘paradigm’ on which Australian schooling is based is key: ‘Whether one subscribes to this paradigm or not, it is difficult to dispute the need to understand it, in an attempt to participate in its systematic constructs such as employment and health services’.

Subscribing to the ‘paradigm’ brings with it a precarious dialectic, knowing, as the participants do, that, historically, its ongoing core project has been assimilation. Ma Rhea and Anderson assert that a more overt ‘sovereign rights-based pedagogy needs to underpin the learning theories’. This statement is one of the moments in the volume where the ‘lamination’ of descriptive, moral, and political activities onto the organisational and procedural details of daily teaching and learning is made explicit. Ma Rhea and Anderson challenge the view that teachers and researchers are neutral agents in the delivery of the neutral technology of literacy. Some researchers here have used literacy as a device to deepen community-pedagogy connections and partnerships. This broader-based educational use for literacy has implications for our understanding of schooling and its effects on the production of a citizenry.

*What kinds of projects are reported?* One continuum on which these literacy scholars can be spread has, at one end, a focus on literacy policy formation and, at the other, an inquiry into what occurs in the settings that are the targets of those policies. From among the chapters, we find a distinction between scholarship aimed at demonstrating efficacy, at capitalising on and developing diversity, and at reshaping policy.

Contributors might have all of these aims in mind at once, but the design of a study necessarily brings with it a distinctive set of priorities; method is choice – of people, practices, and horizons of outcomes and timing. We can see research aimed

at improving literacy education for Indigenous Australian communities as a paradigm case of the need to think hard about the tension between site-specific and scalable, 'legislate-able' literacy education. How specific do the directives of policy – national, state/territory, or regional – need to be in order to remain evidence-informed? versus politically useable? How deep does, and should, the 'leverage' of policy reach? Research and development on any area relating to language and literacy in contemporary Australia necessarily encounter deep and longstanding patterns of diversity; but the connections surrounding institutionalised literacy education for and with Indigenous Australian communities present additional, highly localised layers of challenge, not only to teachers on site but to the policy-makers and curriculum designers charged with supporting them.

Second, many of the contributions here centre-stage the relational aspects of research and development in literacy education for Indigenous Australians. Ways of communicating, knowing, and 'weaving' appear as three versions of a strong motif about strengthening partnerships through knowledge of communities: Boughton's 'ethics of solidarity and care' in adult literacy education, Rennie and Anderson's 'paramount importance' of 'the need for pre-service teachers to have a level of cultural competence', and networking and weaving in Davis and Woods' chapter on Durithunga, where the 'weave' strengthens the sustainability of practices and processes across various networks.

Some contributors treat partnership with the community as an already-known feature of the work, a resource to be worked with. For others, it is a set of locally variable processes to be discovered, documented, and analysed in the here-and-now, not only as framing the project but as an integral part of the project's workings. In some descriptions, the site-specific qualities of Indigenous Australian communities are highlighted, and others assume some generic features of 'community' as part of the setting. As with the categorisation and naming issue, the strategic deployment of the diversity-commonality contrast operates to remind us of the extent to which standard macro-policy in education has long been built on a determined reliance on the mirage of Australia's monolingual monoculture (Clyne 2005); however, much it has been accompanied by acknowledgements of the need for responsive educational practice.

Third, while several chapters refer to the significance of Indigenous Australian languages, few directly recruit local languages as part of a program of literacy education. Shinkfield's piece stands out here, with Ngaanyatjarra parents teaching in the mother tongue as a way of preparing their children for school. There is now a substantial research literature supporting the value of parent-child reading in the early years and of the development of youngsters' sense of story structure (see, e.g. the volume edited by Wasik 2012). For Shinkfield, 'it is only when experiences are embedded in family and community practices that they can become part of a young child's daily experiences within their family'.

The relevance of family and first languages appears only rarely. Similarly, while storytelling is not highlighted in Scull's review of the literacy programs, her 'first principle' is 'maintain children's Indigenous languages and ensure opportunities to



become proficient speakers of English to build dual language competence as a strong foundation' (and see Scull 2016, p. 57). In Indigenous Australian communities, with adults who speak a local language, or a version of Aboriginal English, 'mother-tongue' is about sustaining that language and about the respect paid by the school to its local Indigenous Australian clients. Further, Davis and Woods show how developing and spreading Indigenous Australian language, in this case Yugambeh, can form part of a coherent, locally embedded, patient initiative, largely independent of the vicissitudes of government funding, and built instead on local community support.

But the concept of a plurilingual nation, so unproblematic in many contemporary countries, seems a distant aspiration in the Australian policy setting. That distance persists despite more widespread recognition not only of Indigenous Australian languages but of the many languages spoken and even taught at the present time in Australian educational institutions.

Finally, rarely do we find here studies that focus on multimodal aspects of how Indigenous Australians have and might put a variety of semiotic resources to educational work. Mills and Dooley draw our attention to the opportunities that arise if educators give 'priority to the sensorial dimensions of the body and its role in communication in literacy practice', reminding us of the degree to which conventional curriculum is language-saturated and abstract (Freebody et al. 2013; McKee and Heydon 2015).

Almost every chapter folds back onto questions about encounters with the people – an array of individuals, cultures, and communities. A fundamental element of these encounters is literacy as a mode of presenting, sustaining, and passing on their knowledge, beliefs, and moral and social orders. The 'kinds of projects' becomes effectively inseparable from the 'kinds of people' in them, as communities, teachers, and learners, and often as all three.

*What is the conceptual reach of these projects?* Recurring across these chapters, generally in the background, is a sense that literacy has, for individuals and communities, a significance beyond fluency in the activities of reading and writing, however multilingual or multimodal those activities might be. We encounter frequent references to ways of knowing, to a sense of identity and belonging, and to individuals or communities maintaining themselves and learning to flourish, within their own cultural heritage and as those heritages interact with neighbours. Djabibba, Auld, and O'Mara comment that the youngsters they worked with brought literacy knowledge from home 'but also an ontological sense of what it is to be and become a member of the Kunibíjji community. This membership carries responsibilities of integrating knowing and being'.

There is further 'reach': As Djabibba, Auld, and O'Mara show, the local, day-to-day realities of teaching and learning, when closely observed, can exercise assimilative work over the learning events. In their chapter, we meet students who 'were repeatedly demonstrating that literacy learning for them was underscored by relationships with country, food, family, and peers', rather than, say, 'underscored' by test results; the assimilation tables can be turned.



So one accomplishment of the chapters collected here is to invite the Australian community and its educators – parents, teachers, school leaders, professional learning support staff, policymakers and advisors, teacher educators, and researchers – to reflect on the challenges presented by improving Indigenous Australians' literacy learning, conceived broadly as providing a comprehensive view of literacy's effects on individuals, cultures, and nations. They also invite us to ask how well equipped Indigenous and Settler educators are to meet those challenges either through their own professional preparation (see Young et al. 2010) or in light of the policy pressures on them to focus on constrained skills in literacy at the expense of other necessary components (Luke et al. 2013; Paris 2005). This in turn leads back to questions about reliable, patiently acquired knowledge from research and development projects.

## **Futures: Concluding to Continue**

These words are my last stand

The past can't be changed, but the future can

Nooky with The Herd, Radical Son & Sky'High, Reconciliation Week, 2012

What ways forward do these contributions offer teachers, researchers, policy-makers, and the community? However significant the work reported here, and however broad the range of approaches, engaging with Indigenous Australian literacy education makes possible some lines of productive thought and work that, I believe, have received less attention than they deserve. Here I suggest three general directions that such an engagement might offer, framed here as revisions: the first is a revision of literacy as a set of resources that help us access the contemporary *communication environment* as it is reshaped by languages, cultures, and communities in digital, online, and mobile environments; the second is a revision of current approaches to *research and development* on literacy for Indigenous Australians to highlight the need for projects that use more extensive, patient, and diverse methods and methodologies; and the third is a revision of literacy education that calls for a more overt conceptual *integration of communities, cultures, and learning*. One aspect of this third revision is the suggestion that educators help the Australian community at large acknowledge the need to 'Close The Gap' but also that 'The Gap' works both ways: Indigenous Australian languages, literature, music, dance, and art are not only sophisticated and intriguing; they are also unique to our country and part of Settler heritage. For the most part, however, we Settlers have been either distracted or resolutely looking the other way. Over the generations, Settler societies have developed and inherited powerful institutionalised, standardised ways of teaching literacy; but that literacy need not be only a print-based, technical challenge, a module of skill uncoupled from learners' individual and collective daily experiences in and out of school.

## *The Communication Environment*

Understanding is replaced by books

Technology replaces timelessness

from ‘Your way – our way – the truth’, Zelda Quakawoot, Bailai, 2012

Educating with Indigenous Australian communities, teachers, and students helps us rethink literacy as a way of engaging traditional, dominant, and emerging communication settings. Two aspects of these settings are mentioned here: plurilingualism and the digital, online, mobile environment – the DOME.

The value to policy, pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment of recognising the importance of the plurilingual and multi-dialect environment of Indigenous Australia extends to Settler Australians. Dhunghutti-Biripi man Craig Ritchie, the Chief Executive Officer of AIATSIS, recently outlined the three objectives of the AIATSIS Indigenous Languages Strategy: ‘documenting every Australian language for use by current and future generations; building the capability of every language community to strengthen their language; and providing opportunities for every Australian to learn and take pride in an Australian language’ (Ritchie 2018).

The language-education realities, official and informal, that have been in place in many countries suggest that a research-based understanding of the value of plurilingualism is now widespread (Bialystok and Barac 2012). So too is the practice of educating in a range of official languages along with a widespread acceptance of a common national or state language (Heugh et al. 2017). The extent to which the AIATSIS objectives seem aspirational is a measure of Australia’s troubled reaction to the idea of plurilingualism.

We are reminded often that the digital, online, mobile environment continues to reshape social experience. Some affordances of the DOME (Carrington 2017; Dagenais et al. 2017; Leung 2009) speak directly to Indigenous Australian learners and their teachers, including accessibility, anywhere, anytime; portability; personalisation, including multimodality and real-time translation possibilities; and immersion in real or augmented or virtual reality, fictionalised or fantasised. Clearly the collection of network and software products the DOME provides has educational potential for people living in remote settings, including new translation-supported, multimodality-based connections to online or blended learning opportunities for school students and their teachers and parents, to affinity and leisure groups, and to nearby or distant cultural and employment opportunities (see, e.g. J.P. Gee 2005; Gee and Gee 2017; Pellegrino 2018). But these features, and the DOME more generally, have surprisingly little visibility in the selection of literacy education projects reported here.

The DOME can present its users with challenges and threats – sexual exploitation, the attachment of young users to commodity brands, and fake news. There is a growing body of evidence that supports some of these anxieties. Vosoughi et al. (2018), for example, analysed, fact-checked, and tracked about 126,000 stories tweeted by about 3 million people more than 4.5 million times. They found that

falsehood diffused significantly further, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information. The effects were most pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. Further, they established that it was humans rather than robots that were responsible for this wildfire spread of 'the fake'.

So what would be a curricular, pedagogical response to these potentially dystopic features of the DOME for Australian Indigenous learners and their teachers? There is a knowable 'system-logic' to the DOME, even if we cannot capture it via any single popular examples, or somehow 'average' its features across providers and users. The basic algorithms used in search engines, advertising programs, charity drives, crowdsourcing, and the rest are not impenetrable; they are, in fact, well-known, widely discussed in alcoves within the DOME and available in accessible publications.

What this means is that educators can become informed about the key features of this body of specialised knowledge relating to system-logic and use that knowledge to help learners understand how for-profit, not-for-profit, and political provider groups, and others, use and misuse that logic. Needless to say, it is also a rapidly evolving body of knowledge, but it is only through engaging literacy as the DOME is reshaping it that practicable educational responses can be developed to the challenges that DOME literacy itself presents. The need for ongoing research and development for and with teachers, and for regularly updated teachers' development programs, is clear. The digitisation of social, commercial, economic, and curricular communication is expanding its reach, so the resources of literacy – breaking the codes, participating in the meaning patterns, using a variety of social applications, and analysing the critical demands of communications – are evolving. Avoiding the exclusionary effects of the 'digital divide' in this environment is about more than providing equipment and 'signal'; it is about educators helping communities capitalise on the DOME's advantages in their daily social activities, including their school-based activities (Warschauer 2003) to ensure that Indigenous Australians, particularly those in remote communities, are not marginalised but can participate in these rapid evolutionary processes – not left with the literacy basics of the 1960s.

### *Approaches to Educational Research and Development*

So listen very carefully now  
As you walk upon our land  
from 'Songlines', Nola Gregory, Kija (2017)

Educating with Indigenous Australian communities, teachers, and students helps us appreciate that research and development projects in literacy take place in cultural and linguistic settings that are diverse, complex, and changing. That appreciation is growing partly because of documented classroom innovations (e.g. Chelsea et al. 2018; Stevenson and Beck 2017). If we take this collection of contributions to

be representative of research and development work in the area, then we find literacy education for Indigenous Australians to be a topic in search of programmatic conceptual and methodological ways forward, ways that can permit some cumulative build-up of conceptual and methodological know-how. This is a statement about the current state of affairs – conceptual, methodological, and practical; it is intended to raise questions about the ‘scaling up’ of research and development findings in educational environments that are diverse in ways yet to be described and understood, ways not adequately addressed front-on in the chapters here. ‘Scalability’ itself needs to become a topic for inquiry, case-by-case, rather than an imperative in the policy-pedagogy relationship.

There are current international parallels to this concern. In concluding their detailed review of the hundreds of studies comprising the US Department of Education’s *What Works Clearinghouse* (WWC), Malouf and Taymans (2016) documented deep flaws in the logic and the reporting of generalisability in the studies summarised in the WWC. They concluded that educators, including policymakers, should re-examine their reliance on experimental impact research as the basis for gauging effectiveness. This policy tends to perpetuate the chronic weakness of the evidence base as well as endorsing evidence with questionable relevance to practice (p. 458).

Over a third of the studies included in their review concerned literacy education, more than for any other topical area. But how has a long-established, rigorously constructed evidence base relating to the teaching and learning of reading and writing such as WWC get accused of having ‘chronic weaknesses’ and ‘questionable relevance to practice’? Malouf and Taymans emphasise the importance of local educational conditions and ‘building collaborative partnerships’, not just for differentiated practice but also for research and development projects’ basic design validity, to be ‘better suited to typical school settings’: ‘Experimental impact evidence might better be viewed as one component of an overall “effectiveness argument” that provides a logical framework for considering disparate general and local elements in making meaningful predictions of effectiveness’ (p. 458).

Deutsch’s landmark study of the significance of theory in scientific inquiry amounts to a plea for prioritising the search for better explanations, rather than the mere collection of unconnected empirical demonstrations:

There is no such thing as a purely predictive, explanation-less theory (p. 15) ... one must also be seeking a better explanation of the relevant phenomena. That is the scientific frame of mind (pp. 22–23) ... The difference between humans and other species is in what kind of knowledge they can use (explanatory instead of rule-of-thumb) and in how they create it. (p. 58)

So we can ask of the collection here: Do these reports of projects offer a collection of ‘rules of thumb’ or better explanations of how teaching and learning literacy to and with Indigenous Australians? Do they set out to improve how we explain what was there before and how it was improved? Do the studies’ designs prioritise the delivery of a better explanation? Or a proof of concept in the here-and-now? Or a truthful description of a series of events?

The combination of more intensive calls for evidence-based educational practice with concerns over diversity in schooling has recently led prominent educational researchers such as Anthony Bryk to call for closer, more patient collaboration and valid, effective, explanation-oriented educational research and development. One focus (and see Snow 2015) has been on collaborations in research design:

...networked improvement communities are inclusive in drawing together the expertise of practitioners, researchers, designers, technologists, and many others ... The point is not just to know what can make things better or worse; it is to develop the know-how necessary to actually make things better. (Bryk 2015, p. 467)

The point applies with force in cross-cultural settings that have been shaped by centuries of substantial and stubborn economic, cultural, linguistic, and political differentials.

The comments by Malouf and Taymans and by Bryk are also about time: As the project described in Davis and Woods indicates, and as reflected in Ma Rhea and Anderson's chapter, the value of sustained program development 'beyond the systemic focus on the 4-to-5-year improvement cycle, instead in many cases marking a decade or generational shift within the reform processes'. Collaborations on that timescale hold a promise of increasing educators' appreciation of alternative understandings of relationships; the workings of language, power, and identity; and a reparative approach to both Australia's history and its future. Taken together, these directions, whatever else they do, speak strongly to a reassessment of the logic of current funding models for research in Indigenous Australian literacy education.

### *Integrating Curriculum, Community, Cultures, and Learning*

Embattled by national educating  
Impatient implications.

These are to half our future.

from 'Waste or worse', Lionel Fogarty, Murri, 1990

Educating with Indigenous Australian communities, teachers, and students helps us integrate more strongly and overtly communities, cultures, and learning into the practice and study of literacy. As Boughton reminds us in his chapter, unevenly distributed literacy problems are problems for the whole society because they can create and entrench community divisions that need to be overcome before that society can develop more fully; and as Djabibba, Auld, and O'Mara suggest, 'the schooling system might open itself to learn from the thousands of generations of connectedness to place'.

These are two moments in the collection that recall Levinson's (2007) detailed study of the educational experiences and aspirations of English Gypsies. He found many instances of their active resistance to school-based literacy education, and his encounters led him to reflect on the value and uniqueness of their knowledge:

Against a background in which fissures are evident between pedagogical structures/beliefs and actual literacy practices, and in which (non-school) community-based knowledge has been marginalized, one might speculate as to the alternative literacies that we have all forfeited. (p. 33)

Some ideas ‘forfeited’ by many Settler and post-colonial societies revolve around the need for stronger alignments among three elements:

- What is to be learned? Communities’ general priorities for how one generation educates the next – about heritage, economic participation, social-cohesion, individual expression and aspirations, and pastoral care of the young
- How will teaching and learning take place? The pedagogies developed within the informal or formal programs that are put in place
- How will progress be monitored? How students’ and teachers’ progress can be evaluated to improve curriculums and pedagogies

It is not hard to see how literacy education has become so prone to misalignments on these counts. Having become a stand-alone, portable object, and a political hot-spot, it is prone to institutionalised detachment, not only from the languages that many learners speak but also from the ends to which literate technologies are put even by people with appropriate monolingual literate resources, in societies that depend upon or are saturated by literacy activities in their vocational, intellectual, artistic, civic, and political endeavours.

Also forfeited in many sectors of urbanised Australia is an existentially charged relation to ‘country’. For Indigenous Australians, the word *country* carries with it ‘all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features’, covering the entirety of an Indigenous Australian group’s ancestral domains (Reconciliation Australia 2018). For Australian Settler societies, in contrast, the most durable origin narratives centre on expatriate beginnings, often celebrating pioneer explorations, the appropriation of natural resources for rapid population growth, and post-colonial rites of national ‘passage’.

So one challenge that arises in studies of language and literacy in Indigenous Australian settings involves the relationship of language, and therefore necessarily of literacy education, to nationality and nationhood. From 1788 to the present, the 250 languages spoken on the continent have been taken by the Settler society to add up to neither a nation, nor a federation of states, nor 250 regions, nor any other collection of clans, communities, or peoples manageable by centralised colonial or governmental policy. These chapters show us that one of the understandings that we have forfeited is the cultural fluidity of ‘the nation’ and the ways in which that fluidity can be sustained and enriched through varied, more locally derived and managed language and literacy education – in the shadow of, but not under the operational direction of, policies and material supports from a central jurisdiction.

More durable forms of knowing, remembering, inscribing, and interpreting are also at stake: Much has been written about the complexity and significance of visual arts, music, and dance in Indigenous Australian communities, but not so much about how these might enrich the Settler society. Anthropological linguist Allan Marett, for instance, spent years with the Wangga people. His and his colleagues’ studies

show how their songs and dances enact key Aboriginal convictions about the nature of the universe, about what it is to be human, about how people should and do relate to one another, and about the nature of causality, fundamental convictions that are radically different from those of the Australian or Western mainstream (Marett 2010, p. 255; and see Marett 2005).

Marett analysed how features of the music-dance embody the relationships among the living, the dead, and the landscape. It has also been recognised that Indigenous Australian song traditions have 'documentary' status when it comes to such basic issues as the legalities of land ownership (Koch 2013). So Indigenous Australian music-dance ceremonies are, and not merely metaphorically, enacted literacies with pedagogic intent and moral purpose.

Comparable findings have been documented for the visual art traditions of Indigenous Australians by Luke Taylor, former Senior Curator at the National Museum of Australia and Director of Research at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. He studied the bark painting traditions of the Kunwinjku people of Western Arnhem Land. One of his conclusions was that:

Paintings reinforce belief in the powers of the Ancestral beings by giving visible form to key transformations. Kunwinjku artists create figurative representations which condense a multitude of abstract conceptualisations into tangible images ... paintings continue to help Kunwinjku to understand the fundamental connections between individuals and the social and Ancestral order. (Taylor 1997, p. 207 and p. 257)

Again, it is clear that Indigenous Australian paintings document core educational experiences for growing Kunwinjku, including knowledge about their own particular rights and responsibilities to know, and to transfer that knowledge across generations. These are forms of educational experiences, with varying forms of literacy, that Australian Settler society has 'forfeited' along the way.

## **Coda: Good for Us All?**

Let us try to understand the white man's ways  
And accept them as they accept us  
from 'Let us not be bitter' Oodgeroo, Noonuccal/Kath Walker (1966)

In 1992, the then new Prime Minister Paul Keating addressed an audience in Redfern Park to mark the Australian launch of the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples:

It will be a year of great significance for Australia. It comes at a time when we have committed ourselves to succeeding in the test which so far we have always failed ... it is a test of our self-knowledge. Of how well we know the land we live in. How well we know our history. How well we recognise the fact that, complex as our contemporary identity is, it cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia. How well we know what Aboriginal Australians know about Australia ... There is everything to gain ... they have shaped our knowledge of this continent and of ourselves. (Keating 1992)



Clearly the 'gap' in literacy education is generally heard as locating Indigenous Australia on the 'in-the-red' side of the ledger. It is also clear, from this volume and many other efforts, that many Settler and Indigenous Australians have done important work to narrow inequalities in health, employment, and education. Keating, however, pointed to the need to 'close' the other 'gap' as well, a cultural gap in the knowledge of Settler Australia. Respect for a culture, a community, or an intellectual, emotional, or aesthetic tradition cannot be conjured up out of a vacuum. To pay respect to a people, a culture, or a heritage, while at the same time admitting to knowing nothing about it and having no interest in finding anything out about it, is gestural. Gestures not only provide nothing actionable to work on; gesturing can be mistaken for acting. (Sutton (2011) presents a fiercely argued case for the dangers of this mistake in the current policy management of Indigenous Australia.)

Similarly, practical reparations and resolutions need to follow promises and apologies; but sustained practical actions themselves will be the results of Settler Australians' recognising, understanding, and prizing the still-lively emotional, social, artistic, and cultural assets that characterise Indigenous Australian experience. In the case of Settler societies, the moral urge to declare respect for Indigenous Australians brings with commitment to a program of finding out about, in Keating's words, 'what Aboriginal Australians know about Australia' and about what it means to be literate in Australian.

## Postscript: The Gift of the Dayiwul

*In September 2013, on a flight from Paris, I was seated near an elderly Aboriginal lady. She was friendly, quiet, and soft-spoken. She said she thought Paris was 'just beautiful'. She slept most of the way.*

*A few weeks later, I saw her picture in a media outlet and found that she was Lena Nyadbi, a 77-year-old Gija elder from the Kimberley. For almost the entire first half of her life, Nyadbi was an 'indentured labourer' on a cattle station that incorporated her ancestral land. When she was 32 an industrial commission ruled that cattle station owners pay their Indigenous workers at the same rate as their other workers. One result was that many Gija people, including Nyadbi, were forced to leave their ancestral land and move to the neighbouring Warmun land. Warmun was then an active Aboriginal artist community, and Nyadbi spent years apprenticing with artists there. She took up painting seriously when she was 62.*

*Nyadbi was in the media because staff at the Paris Musée du Quai Branly, next to the Eiffel Tower, had enlarged her charcoal and white ochre painting 'Dayiwul Lirlmim', or 'Barramundi Scales', to cover the 720 square metre roof of the Musée. It is a permanent installation, viewable only to the seven million people a year who climb the Eiffel Tower, from Google Earth, and from space.*

*The painting tells the dreaming story of three women who catch a barramundi that escapes. It jumps across the water, rocks, and land with the women in pursuit.*

*In the process its scales are scattered across Gija land, near where the biggest diamond mine in the world, the Argyle, is now located; it is the scales that 'reflect' the diamonds.*

*The media reported that when she first saw her work from the Eiffel Tower, she said 'When I get home, I will tell them I saw my barramundi beside the river, ready to jump into the Paris river. That dayiwul, he can swim all through that whole city, all over, all the way, but that dayiwul he's really in my country', and 'I was very emotional and full of pride. At the same time, I had tears in my eyes. When I looked down, I felt sorry for my country. The landscape has been changed, but the dreaming hasn't'.*

(Sources: <https://www.gg.gov.au/speech/custodianship-ceremony>; "Aboriginal artist gets high-profile Paris display" The Japan Times. Paris. Agence France Presse/Jiji Press. 8 June 2013;

<https://www.webcitation.org/6QvEkq7g?url=http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/06/08/asia-pacific/aboriginal-artist-gets-high-profile-paris-display/>;  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lena\\_Nyadbi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lena_Nyadbi))

## Note

Sections of this chapter draw substantially on the piece by Morgan et al. ([forthcoming](#)) and in particular on the contribution of Associate Professor Nick Reid. I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Nathan Crevensten and Professor Peter Reimann in the preparation of this chapter.

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