Some reflections on the literacy development of children at Amata School, 1998-2000: A case study on an SRP project - ‘Scaffolding Literacy with Indigenous Children in School’

Brian Gray & Wendy Cowey, University of Canberra

Introduction: Amata and the SRP Project

Amata is a community of approximately 300 people situated to the north of the Great Victoria Desert in what are called the Anangu Lands in the north of South Australia. Amata is approximately 500 kilometres south west of Alice Springs in Central Australia and 250 kilometres south of Uluru. Economically the community is desperately poor. Health is a major issue and life expectations are frighteningly low by normal Australian standards. There are significant problems with petrol sniffing, chronic ear infection, diabetes, heart and kidney disease and so on. There are also issues with violence in the community. On another level, however, the communities across the Anangu Lands hold title over their traditional country and all children in the Amata community speak Pitjantjatjara as their first language with English as a second language.

A road through the Anangu Lands near Amata

Perhaps of all of the possible varieties of educational contexts provided for Australian Indigenous children Amata represents one most challenging and desperate even for a remote area school. The Anangu Lands in general have a long history of exposure to bilingual education. However, educational outcomes have always been extremely low and in 1990 the Pitjantjatjarra/Yankuntjatjara Education Committee which is the community body overseeing education on the Lands shifted focus to an English only approach in an attempt to secure high level literacy outcomes for their children. Unfortunately, in 1998 at
the start of the Strategic Results Project (SRP) being discussed here there was little
evidence that the shift to ‘English only’ had achieved any advance over the kind of
appalling circumstances described by Folds (1987) in a review of pedagogy and outcomes
centred on Amata School. Reading assessment carried out across the school at the
beginning of the SRP project found that only two children had reached a Grade 2
benchmarked reading level and that virtually all were achieving at a kindergarten level or
below rendering them for all practical purposes totally illiterate.

Amata School

The SRP program was carried out in co-operation with the Pitjantjatjara/ Yankuntjatjara
Education Committee and Anangu Education services, a Division of the South Australian
Department of Education and Community Services. The methodology employed in the
program was developed by Dr Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey at the University of
Canberra. It draws upon earlier highly successful work by Gray (eg. Gray 1998) with
Indigenous students in Alice Springs which has been further developed and applied
practically to achieve quite dramatic results with a wide range of educationally
marginalised students at the University of Canberra. As its name implies, the pedagogy
employs as its key element an approach to learning negotiation which has been termed

‘scaffolding’ in the context of this SRP program involves teachers in ways of interacting
with children which are significantly different from those which are currently employed in
either progressivist child centred (eg. Whole Language) or didactic (eg. traditional teacher
directed or basic skills oriented) approaches. In scaffolding interactions teachers manage
learning engagement initially through modelling and providing information to learners
rather than asking learners to ‘discover’ or explore using their own learning resources.
However, the developing interaction process in the classroom is a highly dynamic one and
the roles of teacher and learners shift as interaction progresses over time until the learners
can function by themselves without teacher help. This kind of teacher support makes
teacher expectations about the ways of learning and thinking necessary for school success
clearly visible to learners, especially those who do not have the culturally acquired
understandings necessary to ‘tune in’ to school learning without such explicit help. The
outcome is the development of students who are ‘literate’ in a sense of the term that is far broader than learning simply how to read, write and spell. While reading, writing and spelling form the core focus of the program, the program also provides a platform from which students can come to gain access to the academic ‘ways of speaking and thinking’ that are necessary for educational success. There is strong evidence that students involved in the program develop high levels of confidence in their literacy which is accompanied by heightened oral language competence.

Quite apart from the manner of teaching/learning interaction outlined above (or more correctly, because of it) a key feature of the scaffolding methodology is that the children are supported in classroom learning tasks at levels of engagement that are well above those at which they would function in more ‘traditionally didactic’ or ‘progressivist - child centred’ programs. In Scaffolding activities children move very quickly onto, for example, reading texts that are as close as possible to normal expectations for children at their particular age level. The essential rationale underlying this process is that only by working in this way is it possible to accelerate the development of the children and so allow them to catch up with their more advanced age peers. Because it lifts low performing children’s engagement with reading texts rapidly to levels which are well above those at which they would normally be assigned in class, the scaffolding methodology draws particular attention to the issue of transferability of skills beyond the texts on which the children receive instruction to other ‘unseen’ texts of similar complexity. This, of course, is an aspect of reading development that confronts all children no matter what approach to teaching reading is employed. Moreover, it is an issue that requires detailed consideration on a technical level that is outside the purpose of the present article although further discussion will be forthcoming from the project at a later time. For present purposes the discussion will trace in general terms the development of some children at Amata school who have been involved with the project since implementation commenced in the second half of 1998.

The Children

During 1998 a number of children were marked for careful follow through primarily because they appeared to have relatively strong residential ties within the community and because their attendance, while not exceptionally strong, indicated a reasonable degree of regularity. These factors provided some degree of promise that they might be suitable subjects for more detailed longer term monitoring of progress. In addition to whole class assessments, an attempt has been made to ensure that the development of these targeted children was monitored and recorded on video when possible. This discussion will consider the reading development of 4 children all of whom appeared to be at considerable risk at the beginning of the project. Their names are Leah, Donna, Daniel and Isaac. All of these children speak Pitjantjatjara as their first language and all could be considered seriously ‘at risk’ at the time intervention commenced in their 3/4/5 composite grade classroom. Their names have been changed in this discussion.

The two girls at the Start of the Program

In July 1998, prior to program implementation Donna and Leah were considered to be two of the best readers. Unfortunately, this judgement did not indicate much in terms of their overall literacy competence. Neither child could read at a level beyond what would normally be expected for children in Kindergarten/Reception (ie. The entry level) in a mainstream school.
In her individualised and graded reading program at that time Leah was reading a very basic book called ‘A Scrumptious Sundae’ (Literacy Links, Rigby, 1989). This book had a simple two or three word phrase on each line, for example, “some ice-cream”, “some nuts” etc. The text is shown below.

Sample text and illustrations from ‘A Scrumptious Sundae’

Leah at that time was half way through Grade 4 in her fifth year at school. And, while she could read this book, she did so from her memory of the simple repetitive format and by looking at the pictures for cues. When she commenced on the new program, Leah had been working on this same text in class for over three months and could not read any other books even at this basic level. Although Leah had actually learned some basic sound/symbol correspondences taught as ‘phonics’, her use of phonics had become limited primarily to initial letter identification. Furthermore, because she was confined to such basic texts, she was not learning to build the kind of high order decoding skills necessary for fluent reading. Leah’s average attendance in 1998 was 84% (approximately 4 days per week).

At the same time, Donna who was also half way through Grade 4 in her fifth year of schooling, was reading ‘Grandpa’s New Car’ (Sunshine 3 in Ones, Wendy Pye Publishing Limited, 1992) a slightly more advanced text. However, this is a text that one would normally expect children to read by the end of their first year at school. Donna could not read it confidently and her errors as she read pointed to a lack of flexibility in applying decoding and comprehension strategies. Like Leah, Donna could not transfer her reading at this level beyond the book she had become familiar with in the classroom. Donna’s average attendance was 93% (approximately 4.5 days per week).
In the classroom both of the girls were reasonably cooperative with classroom organisation, and for much of the time would remain within the activity organised by the teacher. Thus, while the girls would frequently chat with other children or focus on other things during a lesson, they generally maintained a semblance of compliance with the teacher’s directions.

**The two boys at the Start of the Program**

Isaac who was in Grade 3 was a year younger than Leah and Donna and half way through Grade 3 in his fourth year of schooling. He could read late Kindergarten/early Grade 1 texts he had been taught above a 90% accuracy level in a manner similar to Donna. However, like Donna also he could not read unfamiliar texts of this kind with this level of accuracy. Isaac’s average attendance in 1998 was 40% (approximately 2 days per week).

Daniel at the beginning of the project was a year younger than Leah and Donna and half way through Grade 3. Daniel’s previous 3 1/2 years at school had made very little impact on his literacy development. There were no books he could read even at the most basic level. And, while he would conscientiously copy from the teacher’s writing on the blackboard, Daniel could identify nothing he copied. Daniel’s average attendance was 75% (almost 4 days per week).

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**Yesterday we made cookies for the class. Today some more people will cook.**

Daniel copied this sentence from the blackboard. The sentence was negotiated with the class following a cooking activity. The next day he could identify none of the words even when a teacher read with him and prompted. His attempts indicated he sometimes used initial letters but mostly he could not even attempt a word.

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This page copied from Daniel’s workbook contains a spelling list that the teacher had worked on for a whole period the previous day with the class.

Daniel could identify none except Alex (his friend) and ‘cat’ using first letters only.
The classroom behaviour of the boys was less task-focused than that of the two girls. Of the two boys, Daniel was the most compliant. If he was engaged in a simple undemanding activity such as colouring in or copying he would generally stay within the bounds of the teacher directed activity. However, outside such simple ‘busy work’ he would disengage physically and would readily join others in activity that teachers generally consider disruptive and even defiant. Isaac was a big, strong boy for his age and very quickly disengaged from teacher directed activity if it did not attain his immediate interest. His behaviour was frequently confronting and difficult for the teacher to handle. Often he would walk away from the teacher’s set activity to talk to and join with others such as Daniel in other self-chosen activities. At times his behaviour appeared to directly confront the teacher’s ability to direct an activity, for example, he would sit drumming loudly with a ruler or pencils for long periods and would resist any teacher attempts to get him to stop.

**Summary, the future confronting the children in 1998**

Thus, at the beginning of the intervention in August 1998, all of the 4 children could be said to be severely at risk. For Daniel and Leah the prognosis for the future was especially bleak. Daniel had withdrawn from attempts to engage actively with reading and was content to copy and recite. Leah was also attempting to learn first stage introductory texts such as ‘A Scrumptious Sundae’ by rote. Her recall strategy was to rely on first letters, familiarity with content and illustrations to reconstruct known texts. Both children were extremely unconfident and ready to withdraw from any engagement that challenged the responding patterns they had developed around reading. The strategies of these children were already well fixed in a dysfunctional manner that could not lead to productive development in the future. Into the future post primary grades, it was not hard to picture these two students continuing to work on reading texts at a kindergarten or Grade 1 level. Indeed, most of the post primary students at Amata were at this level or lower at the time of program commencement in 1998.

Donna had a better grasp of decoding but only at a very basic letter by letter ‘sounding out’ level for familiar words. She could not deal well with vowels, letter patterns or words which pushed her beyond straightforward letter sound correspondences. After 5 years of schooling she was reading texts at a level that would normally be expected of mainstream children at the end of their first year. She could not achieve a 90% accuracy level on other texts at this level. Donna was also extremely unconfident and like Daniel, Leah and most of her other classmates, would readily resort to the lowest of whispers when asked to read. Isaac was at a similar level of development to Donna and despite his noisy classroom activity would readily withdraw into silence if the reading task became too challenging. For these two children the prognosis was somewhat more ambivalent. Both were able to employ only low level decoding and meaning prediction competencies. The question was whether they could develop beyond this point. To develop their decoding and meaning prediction they would have to change the responding strategies they were habitualising on the low level basal texts they were reading to strategies based on the automatic decoding of familiar patterns within words and the interpretation of the relationships developed within the language choices of more sophisticated written discourse. It is significant here that none of the post primary students at Amata at the commencement of the program had made any real progress with these higher level competencies. Only 2 out of 16 children could read a familiar Grade 2 text at a 90% accuracy level and there was nothing within the
ongoing program or in the texts to which they were being exposed that indicated Donna or Isaac would fare any better. In fact, at their current rate of progress, there was an immense amount of development required for them to attain even that level.

**Development of the children through 1999**

By the end of 1999, considerable development had been achieved in the reading competence of the 4 children. Over that year, perhaps Daniel of all travelled the most distance. During the two terms available in 1998, while the teacher struggled to master the basic elements of the scaffolding pedagogy and to achieve a consistent program delivery, Daniel made minimal progress. In 1999 however, the classroom program became more focussed and consistent. Daniel started to improve and his motivation and task focus rose dramatically. Daniel’s primary and most visible preoccupation at this stage was upon the development of his decoding skills. At the end of 1998, he showed no evidence of an orientation to attend to even first letters as a means of decoding. In the beginning the application of decoding strategies imposed considerable stress but because Daniel was so strongly supported by the teaching strategies his development continued. And, by the end of 1999 he had progressed to the point where his decoding was beginning to achieve automatic status. Assessment videotapes at the end of 1999 show him reading from texts at a late Grade 4 benchmark level that had been covered in class fluently above a 95% accuracy level. This performance was indicative of strong growth in both decoding and comprehension skills. At this stage his ability to move onto unseen text at a late Grade 4 level was also developing although after a relatively short time the complexities of the task would overwhelm his processing capacity and he would be unable to continue without considerable stress and loss of meaning. Over 1999, Daniel’s ability to sustain engagement with unseen text developed strongly. His attendance during 1999 did not change greatly and fell marginally below his 1998 level of 75% to 66% (closer to 3 days per week). Examples of the kinds of late Grade 4 texts he was able to read are ‘Uncanny!’ by Paul Jennings and ‘Fantastic Mr Fox’ by Roald Dahl.

Donna also developed strongly during 1999. She was able to read texts at a late Grade 4 benchmark level fluently if they had been encountered previously in the teaching program. The fluency of her decoding at this stage was marginally better than that of Daniel. Like Daniel, she had strong comprehension of these texts and she was beginning to find the confidence and ability to articulate comprehension issues although she could quickly become confused if the questioning context was not structured in a supportive way. Donna’s attendance dropped from 88% to 75% in 1999 primarily in response to severe family trauma. Isaac’s attendance and general classroom behaviour changed from 40% to 68% along with a strong gain in reading competence. He was able to read accurately and fluently at a late Grade 4 level and his decoding and comprehension of unseen text was the strongest of all 4 children such that he could read unseen texts similar to those given above with little difficulty. His comprehension of text detail was strong. Over the course of 1999, Isaac’s engagement in school work and his general classroom behaviour improved considerably. Leah also could read late Grade 4 texts such as those above that had been taught in the program at greater than 95% accuracy. However, when she moved to unseen text at that level she was now the least confident of the children and her decoding came under considerable stress. Despite this, videotapes of Leah as well as those of the other three children show a marked change in confidence around literacy generally.
**Development of the children through 2000**

Throughout 2000, the class worked on more demanding Grade 6 level texts such as ‘Matilda’ by Roald Dahl to texts closer to lower secondary (identified here as 6/7) such as ‘Blueback’ by Tim Winton and ‘There’s an Indian in my Cupboard’ by Lynne Reid Banks. At the end of 2000, Isaac and Daniel were the strongest readers. Both children had developed automatic decoding at a high level that could cope almost faultlessly with texts they had studied such as those above and almost as well with unfamiliar words they encountered in other unseen texts at junior secondary levels. Their comprehension was also well developed. In final assessment sessions Isaac dealt easily with unseen 6/7 texts such as the Jack Davis biography, ‘A Boy’s Life’ (100% accuracy) and ‘Mrs Frisby and the Rats of Nimh’ by Robert C. O’Brien (98% accuracy). He also demonstrated strong comprehension of the sections he was asked to read. Isaac’s attendance rose to 75% in 2000.

Daniel read texts such as ‘Matilda’ that he had studied with fluency and a strong accuracy rate of 98%. He could also read the unseen 6/7 texts ‘Rowan of Rin’ by Emily Rodda at 99% accuracy and ‘Witches’ (97% accuracy) with demonstrated comprehension.

Donna could read the familiar ‘Matilda’ at 95% accuracy and unfamiliar 6/7 text from, ‘The Witches’ at 96%, ‘George’s Marvelous Medicine’ by Roald Dahl at 94% and ‘The Gizmo’ by Paul Jennings at 99% accuracy. She could also answer comprehension questions on these texts. Donna’s attendance rose to 96% in 2000.

By the end of 2000, all three of the children above had developed strong automatic decoding competence and this competence was beginning to provide a secure base from which they could comfortably address comprehension in unseen texts. Their ability to comprehend was also being supported by the high level deconstruction and discussion of the author’s language choices within the texts they were being taught to read. One child, Leah, remained a level below the other 3. In class, she appeared to cope just as well but in testing situations she could not perform at the same level. A key factor seemed to be the degree of conservatism she applied to decoding. Her reading displayed a more conscious effort in decoding although her choices were insightful, demonstrating considerable ongoing progress. At the end of 2000 she could read ‘George’s Marvellous Medicine’ an unseen Grade 5 level text at 94% accuracy but was most comfortable with unseen text benchmarked at a Grade 4 level. In addition, Leah’s attendance fell to 67% in 2000 primarily because of family travel outside the community.
Reflections on program outcomes
By any measure, the highly supportive pedagogy associated with the “Scaffolding Literacy” program had by the end of 2000 proved that it was capable of achieving quite dramatic development in the literacy competence of remote area Indigenous children. The previous discussion has also detailed the progressive development of the children’s capacity to generalise their growing reading competency from familiar to unseen text at appropriate high benchmark levels. Without the intervention of the program, the children concerned would in the normal course of events have left school either illiterate or at best literate below the level of a Grade 2/3 mainstream child. The prognosis for success in secondary schooling for such children was remote in the extreme.

Some idea of the difference achieved by the program over two and a half years can be seen if we compare the overall results achieved by the Grade 5/6/7 composite class containing the 4 children discussed above at the end of 2000 and the reading results obtained by the pre-program Grade 6-10 composite class that was in existence at the beginning of the intervention in 1998.

The graph above shows the number of children (y axis) achieving at benchmark grade levels (x axis) from < Kindergarten to lower secondary which is marked Grade 6/7. The blue bars give the number of children achieving various benchmark reading levels in the original Grade 6-10 composite class at the beginning of the program and the red bars show the outcomes achieved by the children in the 5/6/7 composite grade at the end of 2000. The graph indicates that the class was working at an extremely low level with only 2 children reading at a Grade 2 level. The benchmark grade levels have been determined for both groups using books that were being taught in the classroom programs at the time. To achieve a benchmark grade level a child had to read a book at that level at above 90% accuracy. A child achieving an accuracy level greater than 95% was tested on a higher benchmark text until he/she could no longer achieve 95% accuracy or higher. It should be
noted that all children in the Grade 5/6/7 class for 2000 who achieved a benchmark of Grade 5 of above were also tested on unseen text. All children who achieved a benchmark level of 5 or 7 on the texts they had been taught could also achieve a benchmark at that level for unseen text. The one child from the 2000 class who scored in the lowest level had an average attendance rate of 30% (approximately 1.5 days per week) over 1998/99 and 2000.

What the graph shows is the extent to which the children could work independently on books being studied within the class. The magnitude of the difference between the 1998 and 2000 classes was reflected in the books that were available in the classroom at the time and is shown in the classroom ‘reading library’ of the time which is included title such as Spot Goes to a Party, Rosie Sips Spiders, Wake up Charlie Dragon, Bamboozled. Contrast this ‘library’ of infant level texts with the 2001 video of the senior class covering grades 7-10, containing most of the children from the 5/6/7 class of 2000 discussed above.

What is evident from the video is that all of the children remained focussed throughout the lesson. They could read the text being discussed and were very familiar with the large number of major and minor characters in the book. There is also one further point worth noting with the 5/6/7 Grades being discussed. During 2000 the 10 children in Grade 5 at Amata sat for the system wide Basic Skills Test that is administered in South Australia and scored within the average range for all children across all schools in the state. This test is usually not taken by whole classes in schools such as Amata which are able to exempt children who may do poorly. In addition, the Amata children achieved at an average level for mathematics without any special program in that area. It can be claimed then that the Scaffolding Literacy initiative has been able to achieve a major transformation in the outcomes for Amata School. Specifically for the 4 children discussed at length in this article, the program has opened up the possibility of entry into a secondary education that otherwise would not have existed. And, while their success in secondary schooling is by no means assured for they will still need considerable support, at least they have reached a level where they do have a real chance of success.

Reflections on program implementation issues

As the previous discussion has illustrated, the Scaffolding Literacy project has shown that it is possible to develop and apply a pedagogy that is capable of engaging remote area Indigenous children with literacy at a level commensurate with success in mainstream schooling. Achieving a pedagogy that can do this is the very first step in the process of providing meaningful access to mainstream English Literacy Education for there is very little that can be done without such an enabling pedagogy.

This realisation is a critical one. For, very often, initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children are implemented without serious consideration of the quality of pedagogy to be provided in conjunction with those initiatives. Thus, for example, school attendance is pursued as a goal with the seeming assumption that the prevailing pedagogy will work once the children can be persuaded to attend. Attendance clearly is an important issue. However, with respect to the 4 children discussed in this paper, it is important to note that 3 of these children were at the beginning of the intervention amongst those with the highest attendance rates in their class (Donna 93%, Leah 84%, Daniel 75%). Yet all children at that time had made minimal progress after 5 years of schooling. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that Isaac’s attendance would have improved had he not found he could be successful in class.
For children such as those discussed in this paper, access to a high level of English literacy holds a major key to their future lives. This point is reflected in the aspirations of the Pitjantjatjarra/ Yankuntjatjara Education Committee. However, experience to date on this project has demonstrated just how ‘fragile’ is the thread that holds the educational development of these children together. Evidence is beginning to emerge from this project that children do retain the gains they make over time even when program delivery is subsequently disrupted. However, given that Indigenous children are so far behind their mainstream non-Indigenous peers, ensuring that effective pedagogy is delivered in a consistent and sufficiently intensive manner provides a critical and substantial challenge for education systems.

The field of Indigenous education is one where intervention efforts in the past have consistently failed or have not been sustained. The extent and duration of that failure in the past is such that much current pedagogy and its application can only be viewed as dysfunctional with all the associated problems attendant on achieving change in such systems. Achieving the changes reported in this article has been a struggle for all concerned, both teachers and researchers. The difficulty exists because the kind of teaching necessary for success in this field demands that teachers move away from ‘safe’ work on low level materials with Indigenous children and work at the kinds of level the children ‘should’ be achieving. The successful implementation of the Scaffolding Literacy initiative therefore requires teachers to have confidence in their ability to communicate learning, insight into the goals they are trying to achieve and to prepare conscientiously and in depth. The simple truth is that, in the face of the substantial difficulties that present in Indigenous classrooms, teachers for the most part have not been provided with the training and support base necessary to allow them to achieve successful program implementation without support from the project team.

To achieve the level of quality and intensity of program application that has been obtained to date at Amata has required considerable goodwill, patience and trust on the part of both teachers and researchers. As previous discussion has illustrated, those results have been, on the whole, exceptional. Even so it is proposed that the full potential inherent in the Scaffolding Literacy pedagogy with Indigenous children has not been fully realised at Amata to date. Different teachers have mastered the changes necessary for maximising outcomes with Indigenous students at different rates. In explanation, it should be noted that given the challenging nature of the classroom contexts at Amata this differential development at is to be expected. Overall, aspects of the program implementation to do with the development of automatic (high order) decoding and spelling have only been partially achieved. Moreover, teachers are on the whole still developing their capacity to engage with the children in discussion around reasons for language choices made by authors in their writing – an area that is so critical for the development of deep comprehension and the children’s own writing potential.

On one hand, therefore, it is highly satisfying that even at the current stage of program consolidation significant outcomes have been achieved. However, on the other hand, these observations highlight the inescapable fact that achieving and sustaining the highest levels
of change, particularly from the low outcome base which exists in the field of Indigenous education, will require a correspondingly analytic and sustained effort on the part of all parties at all levels - teachers, researchers and schools as well as from regional and state education systems.

At the school, regional and state organisational level significant issues need to be overcome if effective support systems are to evolve which can initiate and especially implementation of effective pedagogy in this field. For example, a number of organisational issues to do with the provision of services to remote area children need to be further addressed. Especially those to do with high teacher turnover and restricted access to high level secondary education. For example, on average, each year at Amata at least half the teachers leave. Even a change of principal carries with it the possibility that carefully constructed program structures could collapse. With respect to access to secondary education, available correspondence flexible delivery ‘open access’ programs do not come close to providing an equivalent to serious mainstream education. To achieve even the potential of a comparable secondary education to that of their mainstream non-Indigenous peers children from Amata must travel 1500 Kilometres to Adelaide and board in a hostel for the period of their secondary schooling. In this fragile context many difficulties can and do arise which can terminate their progress.

Furthermore, because of the complexity of issues in this field, it is very easy for gains and initiatives to dissolve over time. Consequently, one critical focus for sustaining and implementing of change in Indigenous education must be upon the prioritising of measurable outcomes in literacy development. Moreover, this focus on the measurement of outcomes needs to be tied to a reconsideration of the nature of the current support systems both system wide and within schools that are provided for teachers working with Indigenous children as well as for the types of curriculum frameworks that are applied particularly in remote area Indigenous schools. Despite a major emphasis by the Federal Government on literacy for Indigenous children the reality is that focussed literacy teaching for Indigenous children who are severely at risk of leaving school illiterate struggles for time with other key curriculum areas, with sport days and excursions at a level well above that which would be tolerated in a mainstream school. In addition, remote area Indigenous schools have considerably shorter terms because of travel and remote access issues. If, for example, a remote school loses three weeks out of a ten week term (this is not an unusual occurrence), a child with a 70% attendance level actually attends school below 50% of that achieved by a full-time attending mainstream peer. In these circumstances it is critical that literacy teaching should achieve greater priority in classroom practice than it actually does. Without an adequate level of literacy, work in other curriculum areas is little more than a token effort.
References:


