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

Professor Jack Beetson, Dr Rose Amazan, Dr Sophia Lin, and Dr Frances Williamson

Image 1: Literacy for Life Foundation Coordinator Mary Waites (left) and graduate Connie Sullivan. Photo: Justine Kerrigan
The most recent available data on Australian literacy in 2011-12 shows that 44% of adults have low English literacy levels (ABS, 2013). However, the data from the 2011-12 national literacy survey is not available by Indigeneity. The most recent available literacy data for Aboriginal populations, comes from the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy which estimated that 41-47% of Aboriginal adults had low English literacy (McLennan, 1997).

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bottom line

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

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

About the Researchers

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

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

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

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

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

Research Brief

Funding Acknowledgments
Lowitja Institute

Internal images provided by: Literacy for Life Foundation