

# Literacy and the most marginalised children



Researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in the field of inclusive education gathered at a roundtable meeting to discuss synergies across the Australian and international development education policy arenas regarding literacy interventions for the most marginalised children.

**Megan Robinson** reports.



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ACER hosted the literacy roundtable in conjunction with children's development organisation PLAN Australia at the State Library of Victoria in September.

Themes from the roundtable included literacy acquisition and mother tongue instruction, cultural diversity and pedagogy, teacher and teaching quality, and student voice.

Deputy Executive Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Africa, Professor Veronica McKay, delivered the opening address, presenting on the South African Department of Basic Education's workbook development project that currently provides 'lesson-a-day' learning materials in all 11 official languages for approximately six million children from Grade R to Grade 9.

Professor McKay explained that South Africa has achieved a number of the indicators attached to Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, regarding universal education and gender equality in education, and is now addressing the issue of quality. The workbooks are designed to address the low levels of learner performance in a range of national and international student achievement tests. The conceptualisation of the workbook packages are based on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa which seeks to enhance the status and development of the 11 official languages in South Africa, through the use of an additive bilingualism model.

The workbooks are designed to be as colourful and vibrant as possible so that children are excited to open and read the books. Similarly, all of the workbooks include activities in the back on separate pages, such as finger puppets and stickers.

'With really poor children, one of the teachers said to me that when the books arrive it's like Christmas because they know they are going to get fun things to do,' said Professor McKay.

In another presentation, Academic Director of the International Projects Group at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Professor Merv

Hyde, discussed research from Indonesian Papua. Professor Hyde discussed how diversity can be embraced and supported within the education system, using his research in Indonesian Papua as a case study. The study drew a representative sample across the remote and diverse Indonesian province, and identified the social and cultural patterns of young school children and their communities. Classroom observations were conducted within schools to gain a further insight into the pedagogical approaches commonly used within the province.

Professor Hyde then discussed a four-year teacher enrichment program, funded by AusAID for 100 senior teachers and principals in Indonesian Papua. The program saw Indonesian Papua's position on a national ranking of teacher competence rise to ninth out of the 33 Indonesian provinces from its previous position of 31st.

The roundtable was an opportunity to activate shared learnings and insights across the international and domestic domains. In other case studies shared during the roundtable:

- Dr Adrian Beavis from ACER presented the findings of an evaluation of a teacher quality improvement program in Bangladesh that surveyed 100 000 teachers and conducted classroom observations across the country seeking to evaluate the extent to which teachers understand and use interactive teaching.
- Dr Paul Molyneux from the University of Melbourne discussed the benefits and challenges of bilingual education programs operating in Victorian schools, with a focus on an English-Karen language program at a school in Melbourne's outer-western suburbs. His research clearly articulates the centrality of student voice, identity and belonging in culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia.

- Trish Bremner from the Catholic Education Office of Melbourne shared her experiences as a literacy project officer in Australia's Kimberley region. Her research evaluated an accelerated literacy program aimed at increasing Aboriginal students' abilities in Standard Australian English.
- Katherine Fell from PLAN Australia described a PLAN Australia project that created picture story books using local knowledge to introduce text-based literacy to isolated communities in the Philippines.
- Joanne Webber from international development organisation CBM gave a presentation about the need for a human rights approach to inclusive education in order to support those marginalised by disability. She advocated a 'twin-track' approach to disability inclusion whereby learners are empowered in their own capacities at the same time as the school removes barriers to inclusion.

The roundtable continued a conversation that began at the AusAID-sponsored Australian National University and Save the Children Forum in March 2012 on 'Aid Effectiveness, Education and Inclusion.' One of the themes that emerged from that forum was the need to consider the synergies between issues that face education policy workers in Australia and issues that face education policy workers in the aid sector. This theme was articulated by David Howes in his 'Education and development: a modest proposal for a TEPID network' post on the Development Policy Blog.

*The roundtable Literacy and the most marginalised children: A dialogue on Australian and international experience, hosted by ACER with PLAN Australia, was held at the State Library of Victoria on Tuesday 11 September 2012. Podcasts, videos and slides from the roundtable are available at <http://www.acer.edu.au/international/news/literacy-and-the-most-marginalized-children-presentations>*