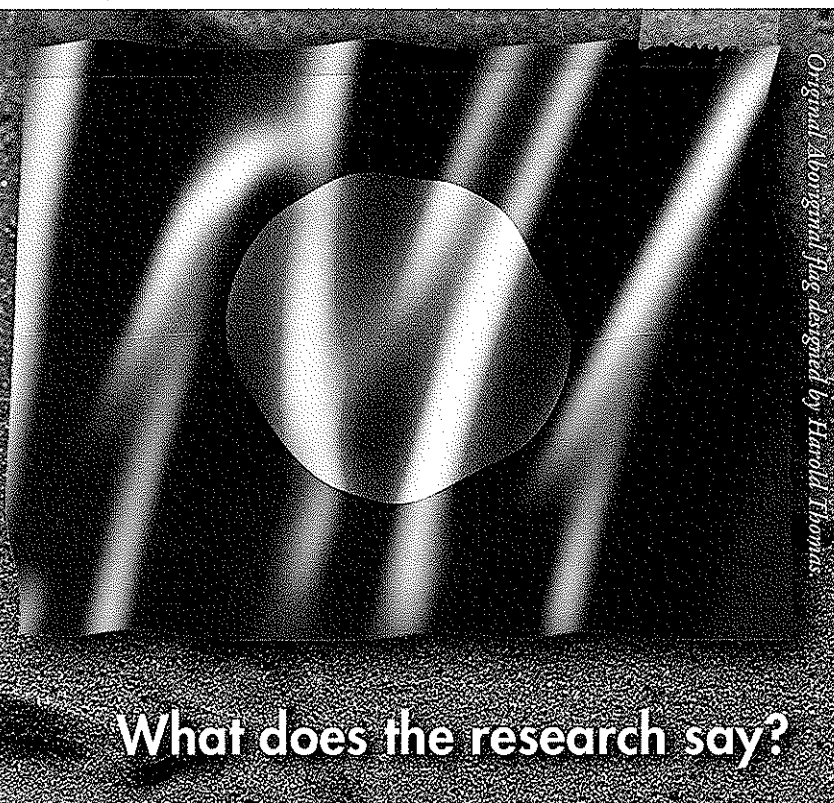


Indigenous students and literacy and numeracy



Original Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Thomas

What does the research say?

Indigenous students typically achieve at significantly lower levels than non-Indigenous students by the time they reach Year Three. What's the reason for that? One way to find out is by way of a longitudinal study, as Nola Purdie and Alison Stone explain.

RESEARCH into effective English literacy teaching and learning practices for Indigenous students in schools suggests a variety of teaching practices are significant, but according to an Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) study undertaken in 1997 under the auspices of ACER's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Committee, now called the Standing Committee on Indigenous Education, several key factors are particularly important:

- modelling Standard Australian English and explicitly teaching children to code-switch between languages and dialects
- understanding students' cultural and social backgrounds and employing appropriate teaching strategies
- providing training and support for Aboriginal and Indigenous Education Workers (AIEWs); and
- ensuring schools and parents work in partnership to provide environments where students can consistently attend and productively engage in educational opportunities.

The continuing concern, however, is that, on average, Indigenous students achieve at significantly lower levels than non-Indigenous students by the time they reach Year Three, a gap that increases substantially for many students by Year Five and underlies continuing inequity at all major educational milestones. One way to investigate that gap is by way of a longitudinal study, following one group of students from school entry through the early years of schooling and beyond to establish a data-rich picture of the educational opportunities offered to Indigenous students. Called the *Longitudinal English Literacy and Numeracy Survey for Indigenous Students*, ACER commenced such a study in 2000.

State and territory Education Departments were invited to nominate schools that had populations of more than five Indigenous students and were acknowledged for programs to support Indigenous students in the early years of schooling. Metropolitan, regional and remote schools across Australia are involved in the project – beginning with thirteen schools. That's since grown to twenty-three. The schools varied from large to small, with Indigenous students in the minority in some and in the majority in others. Students in the study came to school as speakers of Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English, Kriol and Standard Australian English. Quantitative literacy and numeracy achievement data have been collected annually, while qualitative data gathered through interviews, questionnaires and observations have provided an opportunity to explore the learning contexts experienced by students, as well as other factors associated with student growth and achievement. Results of the first three years of the study, reported elsewhere (Frigo et al., 2003), are summarised here.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY ACHIEVEMENT

Findings from analysis of background information obtained in questionnaires completed by principals, teachers and AIEWs, and from the literacy and numeracy assessments showed that, as a group, students demonstrated a consistent pattern of growth in English literacy skills across time. Whilst there was consistent growth, however, this was not at the same rate compared to a larger group of mainly non-Indigenous students who had completed the same assessments in a parallel longitudinal study.

There are several factors that are statistically associated with achievement.

- **School** Schools accounted for much of the variation in achievement; the sample was too small to determine the extent to which classroom or teacher factors accounted for variation in student achievement.
- **Region** Students who attended schools from metropolitan and regional areas generally achieved at higher levels than students in schools from remote and very remote areas; however, between-school differences were greater than regional difference.
- **Initial achievement** Student performance on the first assessment was the strongest predictor of subsequent achievement.
- **Language background** Students who spoke Standard Australian English at home consistently achieved at higher levels than students who did not; students who spoke an Indigenous language or Torres Strait Islander Kriol at home achieved at a comparable level on the numeracy assessments at the end of Year One and in Year Two.
- **Attendance** Students who had higher attendance rates achieved at higher levels than students with low attendance rates; students from more remote schools and students who did not speak Standard Australian English at home reported lower average attendance rates; attendance patterns tended to be consistent across time.
- **Attentiveness** Students who were rated as more attentive in the Kindergarten year achieved at higher levels on both English literacy and numeracy in Year Two than students rated as less attentive, and ratings of attentiveness were consistent across time.

Indigenous consultants undertook case study visits to schools in 2000, 2001, and 2002. A summary of their observations and discussions with principals, teachers, AIEWs and parents suggests that there are several key underlying factors present in schools that support growth in achievement for Indigenous students: leadership; good teaching; student attendance and engagement; and Indigenous presence at the school.

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WHAT EDUCATORS SAY

Recognition of the child's first language is very important.... At our school we have... a teacher that comes in. She makes an oral language chart with the children and they're asked to talk about their language, what they would say at home, how they would say certain sentences at home, how we'd say it in the classroom. So what we do is show them that... (the) language that they use at home is valued and it's correct, but when they come to school, because (there's) the language of the school environment, we show them the difference. (Teacher)

I taught here in 1970 and 1971 as well and we in our wisdom... believed (then) that our Aboriginal kids couldn't get there.... I left and came back in 1987 and by then we'd changed our teaching style and that has had a huge impact on Aboriginal kids.... They're much more purposeful and I think that's really important. (Teacher)

(Frigo, et al., 2003: 43 and 48)

LEADERSHIP

Leadership was seen to be central to how well schools supported the learning of Indigenous students. Identified characteristics of strong leaders were their commitment to improving learning for all students and helping students achieve their potential, and their ability to be pro-active in reaching out to the school community. For Indigenous students, this meant reaching out to Indigenous families, and identifying and connecting with Indigenous leaders, including ASSPA (Aboriginal Services Supporting Parents Association) committee members, AIEWs, and other Indigenous people. Indigenous consultants noted they had an immediate sense of the quality of leadership through the way they were treated at the school. The degree of respect and hospitality they were offered appeared to be greater in schools in which there were positive and respectful relationships with local communities and active, warm, affirming interactions with parents. The longitudinal timeframe meant that consultants could determine the extent to which the leadership was reflected in and maintained by the school's culture. In schools where leadership was dispersed – through a team of educators and parents, for example – initiatives endured even when principals moved on.

GOOD TEACHING

Much has been said about the importance of quality teaching, a current hot topic in the media. Many research studies have attempted to define what it is to be a good teacher; a smaller body of literature has described what it is to be a good teacher of Indigenous students. While the design of this study did not allow for a statistical analysis to contribute to this discussion, the observations of Indigenous consultants were enlightening. Although the focus was primarily on the development of English literacy and numeracy skills, the consultants also noted the extent to which classrooms provided environments that supported the personal and social development of students. The most impressive classrooms were those with teachers who valued the experiences and qualities that students brought with them to school, and who demonstrated a commitment to a belief that all children can learn and succeed. While the value of having Indigenous educators in the classroom was highlighted, there were also examples of Indigenous educators who were not effectively engaging students in learning. Finding a balance between supporting cognitive and academic development and supporting the social and emotional development of students is sometimes difficult. In truth, these things often go hand-in-hand.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE

The data collected regarding student attendance show a wide range in levels of attendance. Some students missed a considerable amount of schooling during their first three years of schooling, reflected in a lower growth in achievement. One consultant, referring to an enthusiastic, committed and skilled teacher, noted that whatever was offered at school by this teacher was not being experienced by absent students. For students to become engaged at school, they first have to be there. For students who do not speak Standard Australian English at home, school is a primary source of exposure to Standard Australian English and mathematical language. Even so, assessment results for some regular attendees also showed a slower growth in achievement when compared with their non-Indigenous peers. You need attendance at school if you want exposure to school learning opportunities; however, once at school, students need to be engaged in interesting and challenging lessons to stimulate learning.

INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN THE SCHOOL

While the design of this research did not quantify levels of parental involvement, positive comments were made regarding the support children who were working well at school received at home. The extent to which parents were engaged in an active role at the school varied; according to consultants, involvement by some Indigenous parents was a matter of choice and sometimes a reflection of the institutionalised racism they themselves had experienced when in school. Schools with targeted strategies to increase an Indigenous presence on site, whether through an active ASSPA, the employment of Indigenous staff, or training of Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme tutors, received substantial support from the community. The consultants believed that an Indigenous presence on site had a positive impact both on students and parents, and parents had a greater confidence in knowing who would be watching over their children, rather than simply trusting that the 'system' would do this. The increased knowledge about, and involvement in, school education of a few key Indigenous people had a ripple effect and strengthened the capacity of other members of the community to be actively involved in their children's education.

CURRENT PROGRESS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Analysis of the 2003 and 2004 data indicates that some schools are clearly better than others in assisting Indigenous students to achieve Goal 14 of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 'To enable Aboriginal attainment of skills to the same standard as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years.' Why are some schools better than others at providing for the educational needs of their Indigenous students? The most common answer relates to the cultural relevance of the education program. While it's commonly believed that culturally-based education (CBE) that applies culturally relevant pedagogy, materials and curriculum is an important factor in the achievement of Indigenous students at school, there has been no research in Australia that has rigorously tested this. In North America, where there has been more research in this area, the jury is still out on the effects of CBE. How the cultural curriculum fits into the puzzle is a topic that sparks debate among many Native people of Alaska, as it does amongst both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. To untangle the influence of CBE on students' academic achievement, we need to identify whether it refers to a traditional Indigenous culture or a contemporary one, or to some combination of both, and more importantly to which among the many Indigenous Australian cultures it refers.

These and other important questions relating to the equalisation of English literacy and numeracy outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will continue to direct the course of progress of the *Longitudinal English Literacy and Numeracy Survey for Indigenous Students* as it tracks students through their primary years of schooling.

REFERENCES

Tracey Frigo, Matthew Corrigan, Isabelle Adams, Paul Hughes, Maria Stephens and Davina Woods. (2003) *Supporting English Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Indigenous Students in the Early Years*. ACER Research Monograph 57. ACER: Melbourne. Visit www.acer.edu.au/publications/newsletters/eNews/2004/Apr/ILLANS_April04.html

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LINKS:

ASSPA (Aboriginal Services Supporting Parents Association) is at www.schools.ash.org.au/asspa
ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme) is at www.flinders.edu.au/yunggoarendi/services/atas.php
For more on Indigenous educational research see The Case for Change at www.acer.edu.au/news/documents/TheCaseforChange.pdf

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