

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

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Established in 1999, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation ("ALNF") is a charitable foundation dedicated to raising language, literacy and numeracy standards in Australia by the development, implementation and management of literacy projects aimed at individuals, families and communities.

Executive Summary

Improvement in educational outcomes for Indigenous children, whether they live in remote communities or in urban centres, is a self-evident objective. This requires the implementation of effective literacy programs:

- before preschool;
- during preschool;
- into the early years of school;
- during the primary school; and
- during high school years (with an intense focus during the latter part of secondary education)

For those many Indigenous children who grow up in non-monolingual communities and who listen to several languages, including English (often spoken poorly), they need highly focused parallel First Language and English pre-literacy language learning experiences if they are to be given a reasonable opportunity to progress and to take advantage of educational pathways. Focused and specialised "two-way" pre-literacy language learning experiences activate the neurological systems. This in turn facilitates pathways for reading, writing and understanding in the English language to be learnt. The neurological process of learning language/literacy is complex. It requires the accumulation, application and practising of skills. Literacy is improved by the development of language skills. Development of language skills that are based on the language/s used within communities is therefore the pathway to improving literacy in the English language.

Identifying the various barriers to learning language is critical.

ALNF recognises the existence of a wide range of barriers and the complex interconnection between these barriers which militate against the learning of language by Indigenous children. One significant barrier, prevalent amongst indigenous children, is physiologically based i.e. poor hearing. There are many other barriers.

ALNF's expertise is in understanding, developing, delivering and managing First Language and English literacy programs. This expertise has been applied to programs designed for Indigenous communities. There has been a particular focus on programs which are relevant to children in their early years, including prior to entering school and up to Years 9-12. The programs are designed to be comprehensive, effective

and professional. Likewise, the programs are delivered in a comprehensive, effective and professional manner.

ALNF's programs are founded on the disciplines of speech pathology, education, linguistics, physiology and psychology. It takes a multidisciplinary approach by using all of these disciplines. Particular application of speech pathology principles and methodologies make the ALNF approach different and highly successful.

The Early Years Program's starting point is the development of oral language and pre-literacy skills. This is the precursor to learning the skills of reading and writing. ALNF's pre-literacy programs prepare Indigenous children to learn to read by working with the language/s they speak. In many communities this may be their own language ("First Language"). By placing First Language at the centre of the pre-school child's learning, the building blocks for acquiring literacy proficiency is established. Parallel First Language and English pre-literacy learning experiences are a pathway to English literacy proficiency.

Put another way, for many indigenous children, particularly those in remote communities, systematic exposure to First Language pre-literacy programs stimulates the brain and enlivens the neurological connectors which then promote the transference of language skills to English literacy proficiency.

ALNF's pre-literacy programs are characterised by multisensory teaching practices. The objective is to stimulate (or switch on) all neurological learning pathways. These "switched on" pathways enable the development of proficiency in First Language (the language that they are exposed to on a daily basis) which simultaneously acts as a springboard for developing proficiency in English. These children receive "two-way" developmental language-literacy stimulation that is applicable to prior to school aged children, or if they are already at school, the strategies and resources can be used remedially for those school aged children experiencing literacy learning difficulties.

In this process there is a crucial role for families, elders and the wider community. By providing them with appropriate skills and resources they can then confidently and effectively participate in tangibly improving the literacy skills of the children. Furthermore, this results in the development of a literacy rich environment. The incentive to develop a literacy rich environment is greatly expanded/enhanced when there is an emphasis placed on developing First language skills. In areas where First Language is extinct or has too few recorded words, a neighbouring First Language can be shared as a Community Language. Whilst not a spoken family language, more robust First Languages that are able to be converted into literacy learning programs can shared, with consultation and discussion, with other community members.

There is a genuine community demand for developing such roles.

The Indigenous communities in which ALNF programs have been delivered are overwhelmingly positive about the experience and the outcomes.

This submission is concerned with the first four terms of reference for this Inquiry.

Introduction

The ALNF develops and manages 'two way' literacy programs that use First Language, in tandem with English, for young children living in Indigenous communities. These programs include the development, participation and support of families and the wider community.

The ALNF's experience of working in First Language with Indigenous communities has been intensive as well as extensive. When told about this inquiry, elder women in a number of remote and bush communities, who had participated in ALNF's programs, asked ALNF founder, Mary-Ruth Mendel, to speak on their behalf.

They want to acquire the skills necessary to teach reading and writing in their own language to their children. They want their children to be proficient in speaking, reading and writing in both First Language and English. They understand the concept of using proficiency in First Language as a building block to gaining proficiency in speaking, reading and writing in English. The ALNF embraces this objective.

What is the reasoning behind this objective? In summary:

- they do not want to be placed in a position where a choice has to be made between teaching language and literacy in their own language or in English ("the Sophie's Choice" concept); in other words, an emphasis on speaking, reading and writing in English should not act as a justification for relegating or ignoring the value of gaining proficiency in First Language;
- for their children to be emotionally strong, they need First Language literacy – i.e. their identity is shaped by their intimate knowledge of First Language and the stories and concepts embedded in the Language and stories;
- their children learn about "good" vrs "bad" social and learning behaviours by being able to coherently and confidently speak/articulate in First Language ;
- they want their children to be able to express concepts using words which are part of their language and which have no direct equivalent in English;
- they recognise that a proficiency in First Language is a way for their children to share their culture, history, emotions and knowledge with non-indigenous children;
- they recognise that a proficiency in First language enhances the process of reconciliation and diminishes any sense of alienation, inadequacy or lack of inclusiveness;
- they recognise that by converting First Language, ordinarily spoken orally, into a written form makes it come alive and most importantly rescues the language from possible extinction;
- they recognise that it is by making the language secure that enhances the confidence of communities because they know that their language can form an effective part of contemporary life such that the barriers, to communicating between generations and across language groups, whether other indigenous languages or English, are reduced or even eliminated.

This submission:

- provides some background to ALNF programs and the principles that underpin them;
- describes the ALNF's First Language literacy programs and reports on the experience of delivering these programs to Indigenous communities.
- provides specific responses to the terms of reference, Reference Points 1,2,3, and 4.
- includes case studies and testimonials about ALNF's work

1. Background to Programs

Preparation for reading should begin before school. Good readers master a number of essential skills built on a robust oral language systems.ⁱ The system requires the development of specific skills including the ability to:

- listen to the patterns of spoken language;
- understand the relationship between these sounds and letters;
- recognise whole words;
- create a rich print vocabulary;
- understand what they read; and
- do i. – iv. almost automatically

It is by accumulating these specific skills that children learn to confidently and competently decode the written word.

Becoming a reader (let alone a good reader) is not a natural process. It is not like speaking. Reading needs to be taught, learnt and practised. Jascha Heifetz, the famous international violinist, said in one of his master classes while discussing the routine of practicing:

"If I don't practice one day, I know it; two days, the critics know it; three days, the public knows it."

Often the teaching requires intensive techniques.

By means of a complex neurobiological process that builds on oral language skills, literacy skills are developed through stages of increasing complexity well into the high school years.

Yet it is in the early childhood years, before formal schooling, that a child's environment provides the initial experiences that stimulate these vital neural connections.

Indigenous children, very often, fall behind because the opportunity to develop these early learning patterns is ignored. By the time they reach school they do not have the level of reading readiness necessary to successfully participate in reading lessons.

By the age of five, four out of five Indigenous children, living in remote Australia, are not "reading ready" and do not "read" to the minimum level. Such disadvantage becomes entrenched as a child passes through

the school system, with poor skills in reading, writing, spelling, comprehension and expression making it difficult, if not impossible, to engage with curriculum content in infant, primary and high schools. Indeed, Australian government studies have identified a profoundly significant gap between educational outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children.

For a variety of reasons, Indigenous children face significant barriers in developing the pre-literacy skills so critical to all the learning that follows.

These barriers, well documented, include:

- Poor middle ear health resulting in compromised sustained hearing capacity
- Poor eyesight/visual perception, visual tracking muscular dexterity issues
- Neurological compromise arising from various circumstances (such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome)
- Limited literacy input from parents due to their own impoverished literacy ability

An additional problem for Indigenous children growing up in communities is that partial or fragmented multiple languages are spoken and language models may not be proficient in spoken language, including English.

The solution to overcoming such problems is prior to school and early years school literacy preparation through programs like those developed by the ALNF.

This does not mean teaching children to read and write sooner. Rather, ALNF programs combine principles of speech pathology with best teaching practice to stimulate children's neural pathways and ensure they acquire the foundational skills they need to engage with school-based literacy learning. The programs use multisensory methods that stimulate and develop all avenues to the brain, to teach the seven aspects of phonemic awareness (listening; rhyme; words and sentences; syllables; initial and final sounds; phonemes; letters and spellings) and three pre-alphabetic skills – pre-phonics, pre-writing and pre-reading. They equip children to learn.

The child, who starts school without these skills, and without these neural connections in place, is already disadvantaged.

At the very beginning of this learning journey is the need for children to identify and understand their own speech sounds. For children in Indigenous communities, this often means learning in First Language. First Languages provide learners with relevant and essential brain stimulation. English is one of the languages Indigenous children hear too so it is one of the languages that needs stimulation. This then transfers to more complex English and encourages language and literacy learning, retention and fluency.

First Languages are a pathway to English literacy skills, and for this significant reason along with many others they should be preserved, encouraged and generally revitalised, in both the oral form and written form. The ALNF has run multiple projects that demonstrate the impact of using First Language in teaching children to read and write, with words and sentences converted into reading courses and mentoring workshops so that elders, parents, aunties and uncles can all participate in teaching their children and all involved in the process are empowered by it.

"I am alive again. Listen! Language is life. You have given me language. You have given me life. I am alive again."

May, Warumungu Elder at the completion of Learning to Read and Write in Warumungu course

"People make a tradeoff between Own Language and an education for their children in English. White culture and Aboriginal culture are different, how we live, what we do and how we think are different to each other. Language is important because it tells us who we are and where we belong".

A participant in the inaugural ALNF Coding Aboriginal Languages for Indigenous Literacy course

2. ALNF Programs

ALNF:

- is at the forefront of the revival, maintenance and modern applicability of Indigenous First Languages through our work converting a number of oral languages into teaching/learning workshop strategies and literacy resources.
- provides seven interrelated First Language programs that aim to simultaneously address instruction in First Language literacy and assist in developing connections and comparisons to English language and literacy.

Program 1: **Early Language and Literacy (EL&L) - English and First Language in parallel**

ALNF has developed a program called EL&L which:

- is based on developmental speech pathology;
- combines specific understandings of speech and language pathology with Early Years education best practice;
- results in powerful practical methods that are flexible in their use for individual children, teachers, groups and each family unit;
- augments and supports existing education structures, taking into account the neurological window of developmental opportunity.
- includes strategies and resources in both English and First Language.ⁱⁱ

The core program provides the essential building blocks of language and pre-literacy development, as well as a means to monitor the child's development profile.

EL&L offers preschools and early years school the ability to include families and communities in the children's learning experience. An intensive case-management platform sits alongside the core program

and addresses the needs of both gifted and challenged learners. Challenged learners include the large number of Indigenous children suffering from hearing loss and those with identified learning challenges.

EL&L offers a pathway to work collaboratively with other service providers such as speech and language pathologists, special needs teachers, Indigenous assistant teachers and classroom teachers.

The program presents developmentally appropriate resources, skills and strategies in a way that stimulates essential neurological foundational skills in language and pre-literacy development and includes:

- workshops (training & up skilling), including follow-up site visits
- mentoring training and support
- various family and community engagement programs/activities
- outreach through ALNF's Share-a-Book program /ALNF's Literacy Packs

Multi-sensory instruction techniques are taught to support auditory, visual and tactile-kinaesthetic perceptual development. Games, activities and teaching strategies are taught to support all aspects of reading readiness.

The EL&L program seeks to up skill all key people involved in the learning dynamics of young children. These 'expert enablers'—often children's teachers—are joined by Indigenous teachers' assistants, parents, grandparents, librarians and health professionals, participating in up skilling aspects of the EL&L program.

Program 2: **Share-a-Book and Reading Circles**

Where ALNF delivers programs, it also distributes quality new and second hand books to communities. These books can be kept by families, passed on to others, returned and/or swapped for other books. There are no negative consequences if the books are damaged (an important point because young children can be rough with books and, community living can mean that books get wet or damaged in some way.)

Reading Circles are set up around Share-a-Books. These are occasions where parents, Assistant Teachers and teachers sit around together and read First Language and English books for or with children. These are informal occasions and are often held in Women's Resource Centres, in front yards, play groups etc.

Program 3: **Coding Aboriginal Languages for Indigenous Literacy (CALIL)ⁱⁱⁱ**

CALIL is in the final stage of accreditation with the Australian Skills Quality Authority. CALIL is a course that collects, categorises and converts oral First Language elements so that they can be transformed into reading and writing resources. An essential component of ALNF's work is with Indigenous elders who can indicate the correct pronunciation of letters strings and words. To facilitate quick and accurate pronunciation representation whilst reading, a pronunciation reading code has been devised. By converting oral First Languages into reading and writing courses, the ALNF and local communities can provide community members with the teaching and learning skills and strategies that empower them to teach their own children to read and write in their First Languages. Literacy in First Language/s helps children by giving them the skills to make comparisons and contrasts with English language and literacy.

Program 4: **Reading and Writing in First Language (First Language WRAP)^{iv}**

The Learning to Read and Write in First Language Course is perhaps best described as a method of decoding and encoding that teaches phonics, whole-word recognition and vocabulary through multisensory instruction. The Learning to Read and Write in First Language Course uses First Language resources collected through the CALIL program. The course is a five day workshop that teaches adults how to teach others (both children and other adults) to read in First Language. The course has a very practical, hands-on focus. Participants spend much of the course practicing the strategies, so that they can confidently work with others after the course has finished. Resources and strategies available in First Language match English resources and strategies. Therefore there is a pathway for transference of language and pre-literacy and literacy concepts and developmental skills.

Program 5: **First Language Workshops**

First Language Workshops are mini workshops designed to mentor and support First Language instructors by providing participants with strategies and resources that facilitate effective learning engagement and literacy acquisition. These workshops assist participants in reviewing and expanding their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies and in developing additional resources for language stimulation and literacy skill development.

Please note that these programs are reading programs. Existing linguist and language worker documents that have previously recorded these languages are relied on in the development of reading resources.

Program 6: **Community Action Support (CAS)**

CAS is a new program, currently in the last phase of the pilot stage (three years) but already generating extremely positive feedback from participants.

Through CAS, Indigenous high school students are supported to provide valuable reading and writing support for children at their local primary school. The CAS program provides these high school students with the resources and encouragement they need to be effective in their literacy teaching in both English and First Language. The young people participating in the CAS program are viewed as positive role models and become agents of change in their community.

Additionally, student teachers from universities inject enthusiastic and dynamic teaching during a four-week placement in the local community. They lend their experience to support the activities between the high school students and the primary school children. During this time these skilled individuals also teach literacy through a range of activities, including art, and drama, and exploring key issues that are at the heart of the community.

Currently, CAS is conducted in Tennant Creek (NT) in conjunction with Papulu Apparr-Kari Indigenous Language Centre (PAK). Indigenous elders from PAK are valuable mentors in the program, attending weekly lessons at the high school to share their First Language knowledge and providing leadership support for the high school students at the primary school sessions.

An interactive online resource library and discussion forum has been developed so that teachers, students and student teachers can access resources, post comments, and make suggestions.

CAS is a trans generational program with the cascading generations of elders helping the high schoolers with literacy teaching strategies in First Language, both then visiting the primary school children on a weekly basis for literacy activities in English and First Language.

The Centre for Indigenous Literacy

The CAS project and the original First Language WRAP (Warumungu) course have grown from the relationship between PAK (Papulu Apparr- Kari Language Centre) in Tennant Creek and ALNF. In the process The Centre for Indigenous Literacy Project became to overarching name for our relationship. Our vision is for ALNF to continue its role with PAK through its media unit which can produce literacy learning resources in First Languages Australia wide. We are yet to achieve that vision Australia wide but PAK provides valuable support for the Tennant Creek based projects.

Program 7: First Language On-line Site

This is a dedicated site to display the First Language literacy resources from the communities. The goal is to make these resources readily available and, through community multi media presentations on the site, provide a context for the language and culture of these communities. This site will shortly go “live”.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

First Language literacy teaching and learning resources and practices provide the neurological and conceptual bridge that supports the brain to develop English literacy skills. To acquire fluency in reading and writing, the pathways of the brain need to be engaged in particular ways. For this to occur, the sensory/perceptual system requires a certain form of stimulation. The form of the stimulation needs to be such that it is capable of promoting the various developmental stages, from early skills associated with pre-literacy to, ultimately, the sophisticated understandings needed to fully decode and encode language.

The starting point is a child’s own speech. All children need both stimulation and development in their own speech. For children in Indigenous communities, ‘own speech’ is likely (and most certainly in remote communities) to include First Language, creol/kreol and English. Words that are commonly heard become essential building blocks for words that are spoken and in turn, words that can be recognised in written form. First Language is thus a vital building block. The strength or weakness of this building block will have a material effect on the overall level of literacy that is achieved, let alone the speed with which can be achieved.

The pivotal role of First Language in literacy programs ensures the engagement and support of the wider community. It is well recognised and documented that this role, when supported by communities, is

critical to the creation of a successful learning environment for the child. The experience of the ALNF is that the wider benefits of working with First Language include:

- A more intense interest in literacy (both First Language and English) in the school and wider community
- Development of neurological and learning pathways towards English literacy - First Language literacy skills are a conduit for this
- The facilitation of pre-literacy and literacy learning, irrespective of poor middle ear health and concomitant hearing loss
- Community and parental involvement in pre-literacy games and activities that are essential for school readiness
- The enthusiastic participation of elders and other carers in school classrooms for both English and First Language lessons
- Increased self-esteem and confidence in relation to facilitating language and literacy for everyday use, home practice and schoolwork
- Improved learning behaviours which include (but are not restricted to) 1. a high level of engagement in language and literacy based practices, 2. improved attention control (concentration), 3. appropriate positive learning behaviours, 4. enjoyment and practice in literacy and language based interactions.
- Children can develop reading, writing, comprehension and thinking ability in First Language and English.
- Requests for other resources in First Language and English literacy material – for example, books, conversational workshops, study workshops
- Interest from younger community members in becoming teacher/teacher assistants
- General interest from community members in the role of literacy and the benefits that flow from it
- Pride in individuals who begin to view themselves as effective language and literacy users and teachers to their children within their community
- Psycho/social literacy dynamics within the community improve. Increased familial competence delivers pride and loss of the shame factor (so often prevalent where there is sustained experience of literacy failure or mediocrity).
- First Language Speakers are repositioned as “experts” of oral language and pre-literacy/literacy activities in their family groups and learning environments (play group, preschool etc).
- Indigenous class room teacher assistants can contribute First Language literacy learning lesson sequences with authority and authenticity alongside non indigenous class room teachers.
- Teaching/learning collaboration is inclusive and highly engaging with the children.
- Cascading generations can become involved in pre-literacy/literacy objectives which provide support for young people to engage in literacy activities with confidence, persistence and resilience.
- Language and Culture is not only acknowledged, honoured and maintained but by creating First Language literacy resources, it is possible to revitalization oral languages into modern reading and writing learning tools which have learning relevance in modern classrooms and communities.
- Acknowledgement of and methodology to comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights

of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September 2007 - Article 14 which says; “1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. 2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination. 3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.”

2. The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

The ALNF recognises that Indigenous children need to receive a higher level of stimulation and development than has been achieved in the past. The stimulation and development should have as a building block First Language/s. To that should be added a further building block in the form of English. The means by which these building blocks can be established should include families, the immediate community and extended community. All participants should clearly recognise the role they are playing in establishing the literacy building blocks for the children of their families/communities.

Strategies and pedagogy to accommodate the physiological barriers to the acquisition of literacy skills, such as poor middle ear health and concomitant hearing loss, should be included in the matrix of programs aimed at elevating literacy levels.

Being acutely aware of such barriers, ALNF contributes speech pathology understandings and multi-sensory teaching/learning methods plus testing of the children’s learning levels to adjust teaching levels with educational teaching/learning programs and curriculums.

Whilst many teachers are generally aware of the complex range of barriers affecting indigenous children, their skill set often does not incorporate the required specialised teaching and learning understandings and competencies. Consequently, classroom teachers have limited exposure to the forms of speech pathology techniques and strategies aimed at addressing these barriers.

Parents and the community (including school teachers) need appropriate tools to assist in establishing the building blocks. ALNF has developed programs for this purpose. They are called the Early Language and Literacy Program, the Share-a-Book scheme, Reading Circles, the First Language Learning to Read and Write Program.

First Language/s Literacy:

- hold concepts unable to be conveyed in English
- connects people to their country and through that connection their identity and mental health is

improved

- connects people to their ancestral heritage and aspects of social and personal conduct and thinking
- provides a sophisticated linguistic architecture upon which English language and literacy can be layered. Professor Dr Tasaku Tsunoda provides the explanation, “Indigenous Australian languages are not primitive or simple. The language structure is systematic and sophisticated. The languages reflect a grammatical structure similar to Latin. Learning an Indigenous Australian language will be of intellectual and educational benefit to children learning English.”
Professor Dr Tsunoda, National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, Tokyo, 2011
- The development of First Language literacy resources provides a means for revitalisation of First Languages into modern literate contexts i.e. modern living languages able to be used in the current day and age.

The following comments from Dr Tom Calma^v and Mr Aiden Ridgway^{vi}, two well known Indigenous Australian men, give an insight into the identity and cultural relevance of First Language to Indigenous Australians.

3. The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

The ultimate benefits are reflected in people reaching their true potential. Individual integers such as neurological, educational, cultural and psychological-social benefits can also be maximised. The desirability of including indigenous languages in early education cannot longer be ignored or even diluted. In the past, explicit teaching of literacy in First Language was most likely relegated because it was not been clear how to expressly developmentally teach First Language pre-literacy and early literacy skills in tandem with developmental English pre-literacy and early literacy skills. ALNF has made that practical process clear and manageable.

There are many significant benefits that flow from the inclusion of Indigenous languages in early education:

- Parents and the wider community are included in constructive language and literacy learning strategies, methods and resources to prepare children for literacy learning prior to school and during the early years at school
- Parents and community are included in constructive language and literacy learning strategies, methods and resources to support children’s literacy learning once they have started school and either need practice or remedial support to acquire literacy and language ability
- Assistant Teachers (often Indigenous) and non indigenous classroom teachers can develop learning partnerships as the Assistant Teacher becomes a genuine language expert with First Language literacy skills which will dovetail with the classroom teachers’ English version
- Children are strongly engaged in literacy-based activities prior to school and during the early schooling years
- Developmental bridges essential for robust development in language and literacy are built with appropriate best practice stimulation of the developing neural pathways towards English literacy

acquisition and fluency^{vii}

- Phonemic Awareness is established, together with neurological developmental pathways towards English literacy, vocabulary building, sentence knowledge and oral narrative discourse structures
- Resources and methods compensate for hearing loss
- Informed parents and family members who feel empowered to help their children become fluent readers and who can create dynamic literacy learning communities and positive literacy role models in the families
- Collaboration between family and community members with educators about their children's schooling needs and progress
- Personal and community pride in language and culture
- Practical skills to accompany literacy resources that go beyond verbalizing the acknowledgement of the vital role indigenous teachers have in the learning environment/classroom
- First Language and English pre-literacy resources that underpin existing school literacy programs
- Resources and methods consistent with the National Early Years Framework and Australian Curriculum

4. Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language

There are practical measures that can be implemented so as to improve education outcomes in those indigenous communities where English is a second language. The pathway towards successful engagement with English literacy has a number of steps:

1. Develop the ability of parents and others in the community (including schools) to teach their own children in their own language by using appropriate literacy resources, courses and organisational centres.
2. Establish organisational centres in the form of Hubs which are capable of:
 - Delivering ALNF's suite of First Language and English Early Language and Literacy courses to support parents and community members (including teachers and other in early learning settings).
 - Developing and producing supporting resources N.B. All ALNF programs have templates into which First Language features can be inserted and therefore, easily produced in different languages.
 - Collecting known information about the language/s from all possible sources and providing First Language and English resources and courses/workshops, train the trainer capacity and mentoring.
 - Mentoring parents and community members, early years' assistant teachers and teachers involved in the pre-literacy and early years literacy in both First Language and English.
 - Training and provision of mentors, trained in ALNF strategies, who can provide not only practical knowledge but also providing encouragement, problem solving and resilience.

- Facilitating the ALNF First Language Online Site and the Wiiki Interactive Site so that long distance communication and sharing of knowledge is efficient and available to all.

N.B. ALNF programs are in course work format. Training Hub trainers for delivery of courses and mentoring can be on site at the local hubs/communities. Therefore, ongoing courses and mentoring are efficiently delivered and managed.

Conclusion:

First Language oral and print language proficiency is a pathway to English literacy proficiency. The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation methods and resources provide an educationally sound solution to this outcome.

Effective and efficient First Language Literacy resources and courses are now available. They are in a form that dovetail with English Literacy learning strategies. Consequently, First Language speakers can now participate effectively in teaching their own children to read, write and think in their own language. They can do so in formal or informal educational settings.

“Best practice” in both speech pathology and education, when combined, provide a means to teach children. This can be done irrespective of their physiological or environmental special learning needs.

Community members and school based teachers (both non-indigenous/Indigenous) can collaboratively work together on ALNF’s Programs.

Adequate funding is now required to roll out the ALNF First Language Programs to all Indigenous communities.

Mary-Ruth Mendel

Founder and Chair

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation

ⁱ How the brain works – in brief (very brief)

- the sensory systems (eyes, ear, large and small muscle groups) feeds information to the brain
- a chain of neurons start to “chat and crackle”
- a pathway is created.....with practice the pathway grows from a “track” to a “super highway”
- strong memory formation takes many iterations.....it eventually becomes a highway with two way traffic – information coming into the brain is instantly recognised and, outgoing information is quickly retrieved and put to use.
- Reading and writing are based on this system working efficiently. Teaching/Learning strategies must explicitly address these literacy learning development needs.

How a Reading Brain works: (again very brief)

- squiggles on the page become letters attached to sound/speech strings.
- When the letters and sound strings are processed rapidly and the words and sentences are understood, it is called reading. The reverse: When the letters and sound/speech strings are retrieved from the memory banks and encoded on the page it is called writing.

NB: This is an explanation of the sensory role in reading acquisition. Other essential components also need to be included for a robust reading program to work well. This model is presented for the benefit of those trying to understand the learning needs of children with hearing complications and environmental and social elements that need this type of consideration.

Why Does The Brain Require Specialised Language and Literacy Support?

Explanations and comments:

- The sensory perceptual system (visual, auditory, tactile/kinaesthetic) feed information to the developing brain to learn to speak and listen – both of which are language based pre-literacy skills. This is not a haphazard development. It is a developmental set of steps that grow from babyhood into adult language systems. This predominantly occurs in the prior to school years. Children with underdeveloped systems are recognized as being at risk for reading failure.
- Research identifies a number of reasons for this underdevelopment. They include:
 1. middle ear infection with concomitant hearing loss (often hearing loss is long term in indigenous children)
 2. poor literacy level of the mother/family group
 3. poor health, nutrition, sleep patterns
 4. limited exposure to literacy practices in the family/poor access to literacy materials and role

models

- Research has also shown that hearing loss sets off a chain of difficulties: poor hearing reception → compromised auditory sensory perception → distorted auditory processing → poor phonemic (sound) development → poor memory for sounds/patterns of sounds → compromised vocabulary development, sentence construction development, low expressive and comprehension development, reduced literacy competence → related low self esteem, compromised social interaction and poor mental health
- The brain needs to work through a series of learning performances before reading and writing can be performed fluently:

This is what needs to happen....

- **uptake** of what the eyes see (the letter squiggles), what the ears hear (sound strings), and what tactile messages are sent from the mouth when pronouncing the words. **This is the problem:** Indigenous Australian children struggle with clear auditory signal input due to hearing loss. This places them at a profound disadvantage.
- **sorting and sequencing** this perceptual information into patterns. **This is the problem:** Indigenous Australian children do not receive clear auditory signals which interfere with this stage.
- **filing** information into short term and then working memory storage. **This is the problem:** In order for anyone to convert information from the short term memory into the long term working memory, plenty of repetition and practice is required. This requires engagement, concentration, persistence and clarity. Indigenous Australian children often display difficulties with these four skills – in large measure due to the fact that they don't hear sound patterns well and therefore struggle to listen and understand information such as explanations, instructions, lesson content.
- **storing** information over time. **This is the problem:** Research is developing an increasing understanding that the first stimulus learnt by the brain is the one that is coded into memory. Therefore, for Indigenous children with poor sensory input (particularly auditory), the first layers of memory are not precise/accurate. Therefore, precise "remedial" corrective stimulation, which compensates for inadequate language processing, is paramount in the early years.
- **retrieval** of information-quickly. **This is the problem:** This skill requires practice and is particularly important for the development of fluent reading (as well as spelling, writing and comprehension). Children who do not acquire rapid retrieval of language based information are restricted to slow and laborious reading (sometimes referred to as "spit and grunt" reading.)

When the brain system is working to plan, all is well but in the case of Indigenous Australian children factors are interfering with language and literacy acquisition proficiency i.e. hearing loss, limited social literacy practices/proficiency in their homes and communities, various impacts related to poverty and social/family challenges. It can happen to people other than Indigenous Australians too. The following is an illustrative story.

Lopsided Language Development

The story begins with a young refugee to Australia. Up to the age of 18 months he listened to Hungarian spoken by his parents. Once in Australia though, he spoke English to his parents who in turn learnt how to speak English from their little son. During this process though the parents spoke Hungarian to each other, including to their son but the son was encouraged to only respond in English. That son is now a grown man who uses excellent English skills, both oral and written, in a demanding professional career. The interesting part of this story for us is this. When first visiting Hungarian relatives (about 10 years ago), this man could rapidly and accurately listen and comprehend what his Hungarian relatives were saying, even though he had not heard a conversation in Hungarian for about 20 years. But, he had no skill in speaking Hungarian.

Why? The neural pathways for speaking Hungarian were still at the “track” stage of development in comparison to the listening pathways which were at the “highway” stage of development.

In this case, a competent First Language pre-literacy listening system provided solid foundational skills to facilitate transferral to English language learning. That transferral was successful and excellent English language developed. Indigenous Australian children also need a competent First Language pre-literacy listening system so that transferral will be facilitated. However, ongoing stimulation in both languages is needed or the fragile First Language component will be compromised. In this illustrative case, because there was not continued practise in oral Hungarian this skill did not progress. Indigenous Australian children need ongoing practice in oral and print language “two ways”.

The message for us is this: Explicit and targeted oral and literacy instruction and practice is essential for balanced language and literacy pathways to develop in First Language and English.

ⁱⁱ List of ALNF First Language Teaching/Learning Resources:

- Discovery Sound Cards
- Sound Code for marking words (for correct pronunciation of the words)
- Children’s Reading and Writing Dictionary
- Marked words in the Children’s Dictionary
- DVD of Contemporary books read in First Language
- Language Spelling Dictionary
- 7 Steps to Phonemic Awareness Games and Activities
- Learning to Read and Write in First Language Course
- First Language Mentoring Workshops

iii Comments about Learning to Read and Write in First Language work –

There are two objectives to this work:

Firstly, to develop First Language literacy resources to stimulate neurological brain development as a pathway to English literacy and,

Secondly, as a revitalisation process for Indigenous Languages to have a practical relevance in modern literate society.

In the communities in which ALNF works, participants have been empowered to work more confidently with the literacy resources and to expand their skills. Additional benefits were also observed, such as increased confidence about working with language literacy concepts, strong participation in the process of capturing language features to represent them in written form, genuine commitment and perseverance to learn how to teach children to read in First Language, surprise at their own level of language and teaching competence (!) and motivation to join with school class teachers to present First Language literacy skill development, begin after school reading/literacy groups, use of mother's groups to work with elders on games and activities etc.

Collection of language elements has also taken place for Warumungu and Warlmanpa (Tennant Creek) and Allywara (Barkley Region, Central Desert) Warramiri (Elcho Island), Anindilyakwa (Groote Eylandt) and Warrongo (Palm Island, Townsville). This work confirms that the template developed through the CALIL program is effective for multiple First Languages, and also that the collection process is a profoundly positive experience for those who take part.

Comments on CALIL course evaluation forms include the following:

“One very important part of this process is the development of resources that support these Own Language Education activities. Some language groups have an already well established resource for word lists in a dictionary. Others have none. A well developed Own Language Vocabulary is the key for all ... Today I have been excited by the process for categorizing words, recording sounds and their pattern of usage in words. Knowledge of a phonic system in a language allows the learner to understand correct articulation and intonation for speaking. It is the key to accurate spelling, writing and reading of those recorded words.

Reading and Writing resources in a person's First Language recognises and acknowledges the language is alive. With language teacher aides and teachers, it's a wonderful opportunity to teach reading, writing and spelling concepts. Once the dictionary/word list is also part of the educational tools. There is an opportunity for students to analyse literature, write creative stories and practise writing a variety of documents. It becomes a relevant and important literacy tool. More importantly though it keeps a language alive, builds self worth, pride and keeps a body of knowledge available. Help Indigenous Languages come to the true meaning of life ... What I meant by saying that is

because Indigenous people need to learn more things – how to do things – speaking in their own languages so that Indigenous people will be able to improve their skills as well – so they know what they are talking about”.

Kathy Gothajakka, Elder, Elcho Island

The Beginning- How Learning to Read and Write in First Language Courses started.....

Case Study: Warumungu

When ALNF first visited Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, it was to deliver a course in English literacy skill development. Initial course participants included high school, primary school (including bush school) teachers and teachers’ aides alongside a wide selection of community members.

During the course, the headmistress of the high school introduced ALNF Founder Mary-Ruth Mendel to staff at the Papulu Appar-Kari Aboriginal Language Centre. ALNF discussed the possibility of working collaboratively on First Language literacy in the future - creating resources from the language elements that would provide the basis for reading and writing workshops and courses in indigenous First Languages.

As a result of these initial discussions ALNF began working with Mrs Judy Nakkamarra Nixon, community Elder and Warumungu speaker, who was keen to support First Language literacy development in the community by participating in a number of workshops.

The project stages:

- Identifying First Language sound patterns and letter knowledge associations
- Identifying First Language pronunciation of vocabulary lists
- Establishing reading and writing resources to represent the sound/letter patterns and the vocabulary pronunciation
- Creating literacy concepts and teaching/learning practices around the First Language sounds and words
- Identifying and explicitly demonstrating the connections between First Language literacy elements and English literacy elements
- Creating opportunities to transfer and share literary concepts in both languages
- Transitioning into teaching/learning practices in English literacy.

The end result was the Warumungu Reading and Writing Course (WRAP), delivered in 2006 to a room crammed full of 35 participants.

The feedback forms were full of profoundly positive comments, such as the following:

“The work of the ALNF in developing a reading program for Warumungu has been an empowering process for the traditional speakers of the Warumungu people. It has helped give them control and ownership of their language in its oral and written forms, and has produced considerable pride in themselves as learners and teachers of their language. Most importantly it has given them a process and a set of tools to take their language into schools and to the general public to enable effective and meaningful teaching of their language to occur. Language does not survive in books, it survives by being taught, spoken and passed on from one generation to the next, as it is the core and basis of culture.”

Media and Training Officer Papulu Apparr-kari Aboriginal Corporation

“Many of our students ... are in no way capable of functioning in school without massive literacy support. Finally now we have an approach that gives our disadvantaged students a chance to break the barriers. Including so many from the community [in the learning process] helps the students recognize that we are all intent on giving them what they need, and it gives value to our education process.”

Teacher, Tennant Creek High School

^{iv}ALNF’s latest Learning to Read and Write in First Language Course/workshop

Case Study: Anindilyakwa

In 2011, ALNF worked with the Anindilyakwa speakers of Groote Eylandt to develop the literacy resources necessary to present the workshop to the community. The culmination was a 4 day workshop attended by 39 participants.

The following quotes give an indication of the outstanding contribution the Learning the Read and Write in Anindilyakwa workshop, resources and skill development provided to the community.

“This is what we are going to start teach our children – how to read and write. We want them to grow up with English as the second language. Our language is going to be first and English second so both languages when they speak they will make it strong for our three communities.”

Gayangwa, Elder, Anindilyakwa Speaker.

“The language (Anindilyakwa) has shown me how confusing it must be for the children learning English.....I’ve got a very good insight now (following completion of the Learning the Read and Write in Anindilyakwa course) into how my children will be feeling and how I’m going to use it (resources and strategies in Anindilyakwa and English) in my class.”

Sharron, class teacher on Groote Eylandt

^v Why preserve Indigenous languages?

Language is the verbal expression of culture – the most important medium through which culture is maintained and enhanced.

Stories, songs and ordinary communications, coherently expressed, generally empower communities.

Absent a strong cultural identity, individuals as well as communities are likely to be disconnected from society generally, disillusioned, de-motivated and often depressed.

In such circumstances there is often recourse to alcohol, drugs and other potentially harmful activities.

There is nothing surprising about this, but it is all too frequently overlooked as one of the root causes that lay behind the abject condition of our indigenous population. There is a significant body of evidence which demonstrates a range of benefits for Indigenous peoples and minority groups when they maintain strong connections with their languages and culture. Having one’s mother tongue bestows social, emotional, employment, cognitive and health advantages. Bilingualism provides yet another layer of advantage for minority language speakers.

Keeping, (and by that I mean being able to speak fluently) the mother tongue and "then mastering English, for example, provides minority language speakers with the distinct advantages. At the very least it enables people to interconnect and operate in different contexts. Logically this creates a special form of resource, - an enhanced social resource, an enhanced employment source and an enhanced cultural resource.

A message from Dr. Tom Calma - Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

^{vi} Once while travelling through many remote communities on the Tanami Track, an old man said to me, “Come speak my language and I’ll speak yours.”

It was only then that I completely understood what my own grandmother, who spoke the Gumbaynggirr language of the NSW North Coast, had taught me about the importance of language in our lives – it goes to the heart and soul of one’s identity and gives connection to family, country

and community. It instils an enormous sense of pride and provides the strength from which to see the world beyond the fences of your own community – then everything seems possible.

From 'Language is Power' by Aden Ridgeway, Sydney Morning Herald 26.11.2009. Published as part of the ALNF's Wall of Hands appeal, the article was also printed in Gumbaynggirr-First Language