

Towards an evidence base: Exploring the impact of community-based literacy programs in remote Indigenous communities

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THERE ARE VARIOUS COMMUNITY-BASED literacy programs in Australian communities that aim to address educational disadvantage by fostering parental engagement with their young children in literacy activities. Despite the effort and goodwill of many community members, there is little evidence of the impact of these programs on children's literacy progress, school attendance or parental engagement. This paper reports on a pilot study of parents' engagement in their child's literacy development in one remote Indigenous community. Preliminary findings from parent reports indicate elevated progress in literacy by the children in the program. Similarly, parents involved in the program report being more engaged in community leadership and in their children's literacy learning than those who are not. The study suggests aspects of the interrelationship between parent engagement and children's literacy progress that require further investigation. Broader use of the instruments developed will help to establish an evidence base and inform such an investigation.

Introduction

Education is recognised as a critical factor in enhancing living standards, life-expectancy, health and employment for Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2009). However, there is a significant gap in the educational performance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children that perpetuates disadvantage. The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results indicate that Indigenous children consistently perform below the national average in literacy and are not achieving the national minimum standard in remote areas of Australia. In fact, as the level of remoteness increases, literacy achievement falls (FaHCSIA, 2009). Limited provision of early childhood services, poor attendance at school, as well as limited participation when children do attend have been identified as factors constraining literacy performance (MCEETYA, 2008; Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

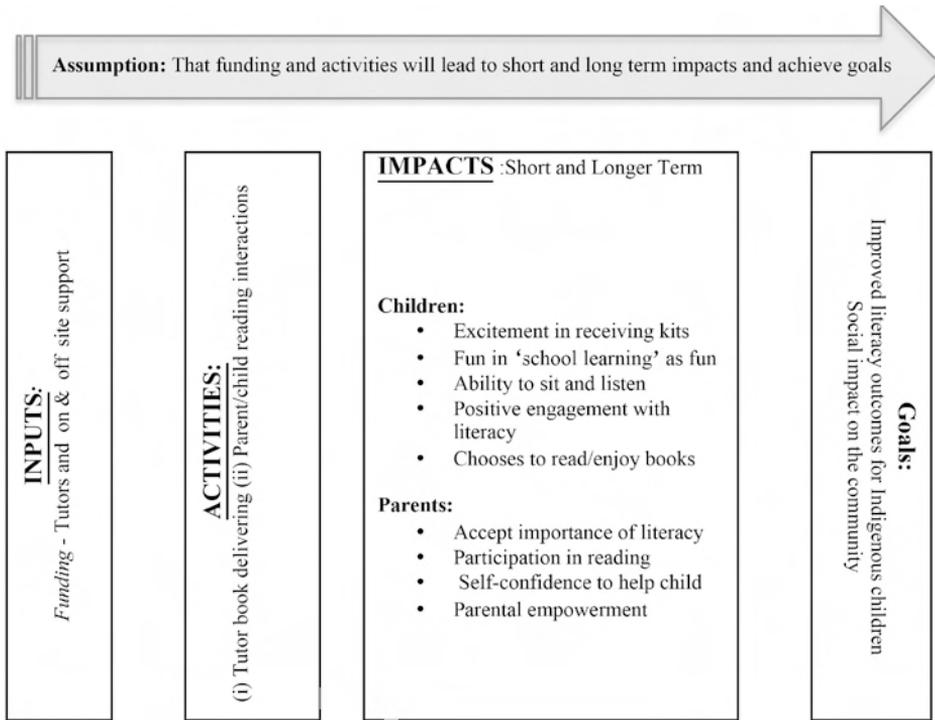
The Australian Government (2009) has argued that early learning opportunities prior to school will assist in closing the gap, and that without these opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to lag behind from their very first year of formal schooling. The provision of early learning opportunities, it is argued, will promote literacy development as well as establish foundations for regular attendance and participation at school. Achievement of universal offering of preschool programs (also referred

to as kindergarten programs) to Australian children has therefore been a national priority (COAG, 2008).

The engagement of parents as partners in their children's learning is seen as critical in promoting literacy development and ensuring Indigenous children attend and participate in school (MCEECDYA, 2010). Creating and sustaining parent engagement in early education, however, is acknowledged as challenging and problematic (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Some researchers suggest that parent engagement is difficult because current models of home-school partnerships are based on middle-class conceptions that perpetuate inequalities for minority, marginalised and disadvantaged groups (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Daniel, 2005; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Therefore, the reconceptualisation of home-school partnerships by Indigenous and school community leaders, in order to create workable and sustainable models that engage parents in remote areas, is paramount.

Within Indigenous communities, there are a range of programs that aim to foster parents' engagement in literacy with their children. These programs are often costly to establish and maintain and rely on government or philanthropic funding. Despite the effort and goodwill of many community members, there is little evidence of the impact of these programs on children's literacy progress, school attendance and participation or parental

Figure 1. Program logic framework showing assumed link between inputs and activities and long-term goals



engagement. This issue has been the subject of media attention, with comments in a recent report from a Ministerial briefing (NSW Education Department) indicating that, while significant funding had been directed to programs to improve the achievement of Indigenous students, there was insufficient evidence to determine their effectiveness (Ferrari, 2012), reinforcing the need for an evidence base that shows the impact of these programs.

The PaL program

Our study set out to develop instruments to assess the effectiveness and impact of one community's literacy program to establish an evidence base. The Parents and Learning (PaL) program, developed in 2001 by the Napranum Preschool PaL Group (Napranum Preschool PaL Group, 2014), is a structured and widely used program implemented in several remote Indigenous centres across Australia, including the Indigenous community of Napranum on western Cape York where this study was undertaken.

PaL aims to build capacity in Indigenous families by supporting parents who have decided to enrol their children in the program (a choice for parents at the preschool) to engage their young children in shared book reading. Each week a high-quality storybook and a related educational activity are delivered to the home by tutors (parents in the community) who explain to parents/caregivers how to use the book and activity and its connections to school learning. Children commence with level one of PaL in

kindergarten (three to four years) and move on to level two in prep (four to five years) which is their first year of school. Within PaL, parents are recognised as their child's first and most influential teacher and valued as an important source of assessment information due to their knowledge of their children's behaviour through their interactions around books.

Methodology

A program logic framework (see Figure 1) describes the relationship between the program activities—enhancing literacy learning and home–school partnerships—and the long-term goal of positive outcomes in the community. It demonstrates the chain of reasoning that links investments by PaL in community partnership building, tutor training, program development and implementation with short- and long-term impacts of the program that may result in the ultimate goal of improving literacy and social outcomes within the community. The short-term impacts relate to children's interest in books and reading along with increased parent engagement with children. Longer-term impacts include children's improved literacy performance at school and increased parent confidence, self-esteem and empowerment. The synthesis of inputs, activities and impacts presented in the program logic framework provides a valuable tool for the monitoring and evaluation of the PaL program and guides this pilot study.

A first step in the project was the development of two scales (sets of questions in a survey format of statements with assessment through pre-set options), each linked to the relevant literature and discussed in more detail below. The purpose of these scales was to gather information from parents regarding their child's literacy learning, their participation in their child's education, and their leadership in the broader community. The elements of each scale framed an interview with parents to provide the required information. The scales were designed to identify a child's literacy level and parental engagement in the program, as well as changes over time. It is envisaged that these tools have the potential to be used in the assessment of children's literacy progress and parent engagement in other community-based early literacy programs.

This study reports on the first step in a broader research project focused on a rigorous assessment of home-school literacy partnerships in Indigenous communities. It examines parents' engagement in children's literacy, their role in community leadership, along with children's literacy progress and attendance at preschool, providing a comparison between those involved in PaL and those not (i.e. non-PaL).

Ethics approval was obtained through Griffith University. An invitation for parents to participate, together with an information sheet on the project addressing issues of confidentiality and the value of the research, were provided. The voluntary nature of parents' consent to participate was also discussed with parents as a part of the conversation.

The Child Literacy Progress Scale (CLPS)

The Child Literacy Progress Scale (CLPS) was designed to provide a measure of each child's emergent literacy knowledge and skills as assessed by the parents. Emergent literacy is defined as the skills and knowledge that precede formal reading and support the development of decoding skills and reading comprehension (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Emergent literacy skills include outside-in skills, such as vocabulary and oral language development, and inside-out skills, such as book and print knowledge, alphabet letter names and phonological awareness (Girard, Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2013). The ability to use these skills accurately and rapidly when reading enables children to engage deeply with text meaning (Dempster et al., 2012). The CLPS incorporated eight aspects of emergent literacy: vocabulary, book knowledge, print awareness, use of symbols, narrative, phonological awareness, comprehension and children's interest in reading. The descriptors within the scale were initially drawn from an existing 40-item Child Behaviour Checklist used in the PaL program and further refined with assistance from parents and tutors. Each child's progress was identified along a continuum of literacy milestones with '1' indicating achievement of the first milestone and '5' the third (see Appendix A).

Scale of Parental Engagement and Leadership (SPEL)

The intent of the Scale of Parental Engagement and Leadership (SPEL) was to identify parents' engagement with the learning of children and their leadership in their community. The engagement of parents in children's literacy experiences is seen as the most important element in their emergent literacy as well as in their general development and overall educational outcomes (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). In fact, a study by Strickland (1989) showed that children who come from homes where storybooks are read to them have an advantage over children who are not read to at home.

An earlier case study of parental engagement in children's literacy at Napranum (Flückiger, Diamond & Jones, 2012) found that parents involved in the PaL program were also taking up informal leadership roles in the community. The study revealed that voice, agency and self-efficacy were also characteristics displayed by these parents. While consideration of aspects such as voice, agency, community leadership and self-efficacy have been considered in a range of studies, their integration in a single scale is not generally undertaken. Thus, in the development of the SPEL scale for piloting in this study, consideration of research that focused on the individual aspects were considered in developing items for inclusion (e.g. Freiberg, Homel & Lamb, 2007; Koren, DeChillo & Friesen, 1992; Winkworth, McArthur, Layton & Thompson, 2010; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991).

The piloting process

Following the development of initial draft versions of the two scales (CLPS and SPEL), a detailed piloting process was undertaken to prepare these for use with the Indigenous parents that involved:

- consulting with PaL tutors, coordinators and the preschool director to refine the draft scales
- implementing the scales
- identifying and addressing issues arising from critical feedback on the piloting and assessment process
- other refinements emerging from an assessment of the results of the pilot.

As it was recognised that many of the parents in the community might not feel comfortable discussing their child's learning, or their own parenting, with an outsider, discussions with PaL staff occurred to find a more culturally appropriate approach. A community member (a mother who worked as a PaL tutor) agreed to gather the data through conversations with the 20 parents involved in the study (both PaL and non-PaL parents)—thus supporting the completion of the required survey information. In preparation for this role, the researchers explained the elements of both scales to ensure she understood and could explain any queries from the parents about them.

Additionally, the researchers modelled the interview process with her, assessing her views of her own child's literacy progress, her engagement in the child's education, and her leadership within her community. One addition to the SPEL scale identified through this process was the inclusion of a final open question: 'What are your aspirations for your child/what would you hope that your child does when they finish school?' In trialling the interview this was a very logical end to the conversation and something that many parents were interested in discussing.

Conversations to collect individual assessments from parents occurred either one-to-one or in small groups according to parent availability and preference. Parents of kindergarten and prep children (three- to five-year-olds), some of whom were participating in the PaL program, were included. Information from the PaL parents included the PaL level (one or two) at which their child was enrolled, their role in PaL and the length of their involvement (thus indicating if older siblings had also participated in PaL).

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using SPSS version 19. Initial descriptive analyses of the responses allowed the comparison of response patterns by PaL and non-PaL respondents. While acknowledging the limitations of analysis of a small sample size, such analysis was undertaken to support some exploration of patterns in the data. A reliability analysis of each response set was undertaken providing an assessment of the consistency of responses. The Cronbach's α , a value between 0 and 1, gave an indicator of the consistency of responses, with an α above 0.7 generally indicating a reasonable level of consistency. Where such a level was achieved, an average score was calculated providing a single measure. Differences between groups were then assessed using t-tests (comparing PaL and non-PaL responses) or Analysis of Variance (comparing PaL and non-PaL at levels one and two). This approach was used to determine the likelihood that any observed difference between the PaL and non-PaL children, by group, occurred by chance.

Results

Surveys were completed by 20 parents—12 with children in the PaL program. Two parents had a leadership role in PaL (i.e. as a tutor). Six kindergarten-aged children were participating at PaL level one and six prep children at level two. One of the parents was experiencing her first year of involvement with PaL. The experience of others ranged from two to six years.

The CLPS

Responses to the eight aspects of literacy progress are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Response patterns to the aspects of the CLPS showing number of responses at each level, from lowest (1) to highest (5)

| Aspects of literacy | | Level on scale | | | | | Mean |
|------------------------|---------|----------------|---|---|---|---|------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Book knowledge | PaL | 0 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 3.92 |
| | non-PaL | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2.63 |
| Vocabulary | PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 3 | 4.17 |
| | non-PaL | 3 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2.63 |
| Print awareness | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 7 | 4.58 |
| | non-PaL | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2.88 |
| Use of symbols | PaL | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4.00 |
| | non-PaL | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2.38 |
| Narrative | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 4.75 |
| | non-PaL | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2.75 |
| Phonological awareness | PaL | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4.25 |
| | non-PaL | 2 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2.25 |
| Comprehension | PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 4.42 |
| | non-PaL | 0 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2.75 |
| Interest | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 7 | 4.58 |
| | non-PaL | 1 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 3.00 |

The mean scores are summarised in Figure 2, showing the results for PaL and non-PaL children at both levels one and two. These show consistently higher average scores for those in PaL and also a relatively high consistency between aspects. The highest literacy progress was reported for the aspects *Interest*, *Narrative* and *Print awareness*. The weakest aspects were *Use of symbols* and *Phonological awareness*. The average scores for PaL children were around four on all eight measures for both levels one and two. This means that children were, on average, between the second and third literacy milestones. In contrast, non-PaL children achieved an average level of around 2.5 for kindergarten and 3.0 for prep children, thus between the first and second milestones.

Figure 2. Mean scores on the eight aspects of child literacy progress for PaL and non-PaL children (line indicates the average aggregated score for PaL and non-PaL children in level one and two)

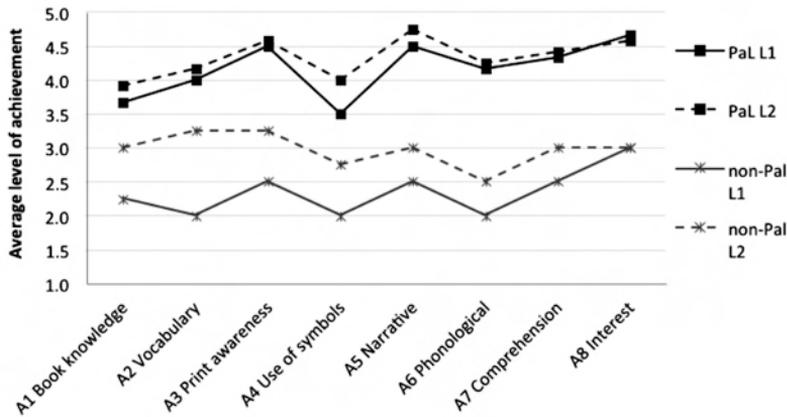


Table 2. Response patterns to the Scale of Parent Engagement and Leadership

| | Item | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly agree | Mean |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|------|
| 1 | I make the time to read books or play games with my child | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4.73 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 4.13 |
| 2 | I have a right to say what is best for my child and expect others to listen | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 4.82 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3.75 |
| 3 | I know how I can help my child learn | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 4.82 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3.75 |
| 4 | I know what to do when I am concerned about my child | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 4.82 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3.88 |
| 5 | I am comfortable/confident in trying new things | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 4.64 |
| | | non-PaL | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3.00 |
| 6 | I am good at getting people to support me to get things done | PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 4.55 |
| | | non-PaL | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2.75 |
| 7 | I try to learn new ways to help my child | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 4.82 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 4.00 |
| 8 | I am interested in issues that affect my community | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4.73 |
| | | non-PaL | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3.25 |
| 9 | I am patient and take time with my child | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 4.64 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 4.25 |
| 10 | I know what to do when my child has a problem at school | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4.73 |
| | | non-PaL | 1 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 3.25 |
| 11 | I get involved in community issues I am concerned about | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 4.36 |
| | | non-PaL | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2.63 |
| 12 | I am confident my child will do well at school | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 8 | 4.73 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3.88 |
| 13 | I need to voice my opinions more | PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 4.73 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 4.13 |
| 14 | I let the teachers know what I want for my child | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 | 4.80 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 3.43 |
| 15 | I will be able to help my child when they go to school | PaL | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 4.64 |
| | | non-PaL | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 3.43 |
| 16 | I like to help parents/community members to help their children | PaL | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 4.45 |
| | | non-PaL | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3.14 |

A reliability analysis of all eight aspects was undertaken to assess the consistency of responses. Interestingly, despite the very small sample size, the reliability (measured by a Cronbach's α) for the PaL group ($n = 12$) was 0.747, while a higher reliability was found for the non-PaL group ($n = 8$) with an α of 0.945—thus with lesser variation with individual responses. A single aggregated measure of literacy progress was calculated by averaging assessments across all eight aspects of the scale.

A comparison of this aggregate score was undertaken using an ANOVA to test if there were differences in the mean scores of the four groups (i.e. PaL and non-PaL children in kindergarten and prep). This showed significant differences between these average scores ($F = 8.863$, $df = 3,16$, $p = 0.001$) with post hoc tests revealing the main difference being between PaL and non-PaL children but with no significant difference noted between kindergarten and prep children for either PaL or non-PaL children.

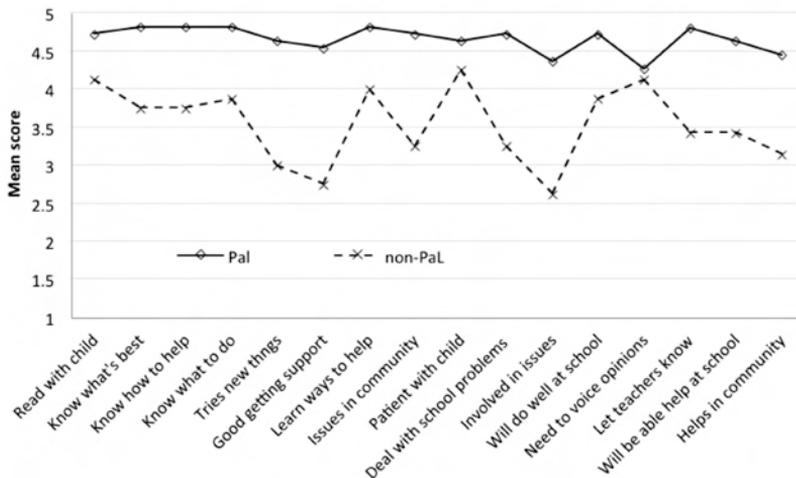
This ANOVA assessed the likelihood that any observed difference between the PaL and non-PaL children, by group, occurred by chance. The data suggests that there is a more positive achievement by those in PaL than not, but this is not necessarily a causal link. It needs to be noted that this is an initial analysis based on a very small sample of data.

The SPEL

Nineteen parents completed the parent scale—11 of these with children in the PaL program. Their responses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 shows there are also quite marked differences in the pattern of responses between PaL and non-PaL parents. Figure 3 provides an overview of the mean response per item, with higher values on the scale indicative of a parent demonstrating the characteristics of voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership addressed in the SPEL. The most positive responses were observed from the PaL parents. Thus, for item 13 ('I need to voice my opinion more') the average response levels are very similar (4.73 to 4.13 for PaL and non-PaL parents), representing average responses between agree and strongly agree. The greatest difference is seen on Item 11 ('I get involved in community issues') with non-PaL parents reporting an average score of 2.63 compared to PaL parents of 4.36. This reflects an average level between disagreement and uncertainty for non-PaL against strong agreement for PaL parents.

Figure 3. Mean scores on the 16 items of the Scale of Parent Engagement and Leadership for PaL and non-PaL parents



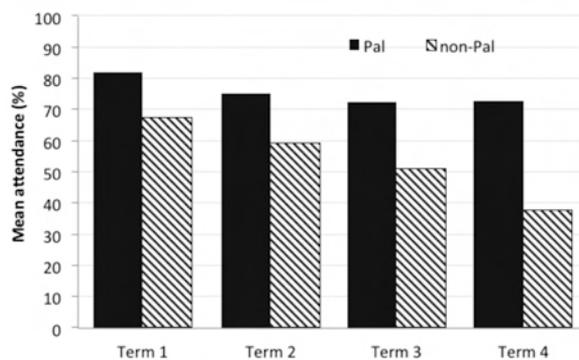
As with the CLPS, the overall aim is to look at the applicability of these responses as a single measure. A reliability assessment of the 16 items showed a very high level of consistency—with an α of 0.955 for all responses. There was also high consistency in the smaller sub-samples of PaL and non-PaL parents (with an α of 0.871 for PaL and 0.894 for the non-PaL parents respectively). Interestingly, as with the CLPS, the slightly higher reliability from non-PaL parents suggests a slightly higher consistency in the lower levels of reported engagement and child literacy than in responses from PaL parents.

PaL parents had significantly higher scores on the total scale (an aggregation of all 16 responses), as measured by a t-test ($t = 5.218$, $p < 0.000$), indicating responses aligned with greater levels of voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership. As with the CLPS, these results are from a very small sample of self-report responses and thus more general conclusions cannot be made from this data.

Attendance at the preschool

Limited data on attendance patterns was accessed for children in the prep class during the year of study. Figure 4 summarises the average attendance rate across the four terms, showing not only lower levels by non-PaL children but also a greater fall-off in attendance across the year. While the differences occur in all terms, the attendance by PaL children is significantly higher in terms three and four ($t = 2.358$, $df = 24$, $p = 0.027$; $t = 3.407$, $df = 25$, $p = 0.002$) and also in the difference between terms four and one ($t = 2.372$, $df = 24$, $p = 0.026$).

Figure 4. The attendance rate of PaL and non-PaL children



Discussion

The findings from this paper contributed to the refinement of instruments (the CLPS and the SPEL) for use in the next phase of this research—the establishment of baseline data on literacy achievement in a number of remote early settings. Although the results represent a small sample, common in research in remote Indigenous communities, further consideration of the findings is warranted as they offer some learnings about the program and the parents involved. These findings are outlined below.

Refinements to the scales and their administration

With regard to both scales it was clear that the wording, at least at a general level, was understandable by respondents. This is seen as a very positive outcome of the consultation process undertaken with the community as a part of the development and piloting of the instruments.

Following the assessment of results presented above, further refinement of the instruments and associated implementation processes was undertaken. First, it was felt the initial version of the CLPS might not have the capacity to test the full range of literacy progress, as a high proportion of responses positioned children at a four or five—thus indicating they had achieved the third milestone. To address this concern, two additional milestones were added, resulting in a scale that gave a 1–9 measure, with a 9 indicating preparedness for Year 1 (see Appendix A).

Additionally, it was felt that the process for collecting data could be strengthened. In order to assist parents to identify their child's literacy progress and the extent of their own community involvement, it was felt that an interactive conversation in the form of a 'yarn' may be more appropriate. It is expected that this will provide a richness of information and a depth of understanding about parents' roles and involvement that cannot be elicited through the current administration of the instrument by a parent. The relationship between the parent and the

interviewer will be particularly important in this revised process. It is clear that someone with established contact, who has the respect of the community, will be best placed to undertake the data collection.

Reflections on findings

The study showed clear differences in the literacy progress of children who participated in the PaL program compared to those who did not—with the former group having significantly higher reported levels of achievement. It supports findings from other studies (e.g. Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sukhrum & Hsu, 2012) that indicate parent engagement supports children's emergent literacy development. Prep-aged children who were involved in PaL also had significantly higher attendance at the preschool. The interesting difference in attendance patterns was most marked in terms three and four when the community bus that usually picked children up and brought them to the preschool was discontinued. It shows that when more effort was required to bring children to preschool, higher attendance rates were still maintained by the children in the PaL program. The parents who had chosen to involve their children in the PaL program also reported a higher level of engagement in their child's learning and leadership within the community than those who had not chosen to participate. While the reason/s behind such differences need further consideration, it is suggested that the investment in emergent literacy programs that focus on engaging and supporting parents is worthwhile and should be promoted. Such an investment appears to produce benefits that include strengthened literacy development and attendance at school.

While it is reasonable to suggest that the additional exposure to books and other literacy activities experienced by children involved in PaL is likely to contribute to the difference in their literacy progress observed by parents; and that parents' reading of PaL books and participation in associated learning activities accounts for parents' higher level of engagement with their children, other contributing factors need to also be considered. For example, how representative of the general community are the parents and children who participate in PaL? Children's general interest in books may precipitate parent involvement in PaL, thus the children in PaL may not be representative of children in the general community.

A second consideration may be that parents who are already inclined to support their children's learning may be the ones choosing to participate in PaL. Thus, if the PaL program was not being offered, these parents might still find ways to engage their children in literacy learning activities. Furthermore, parents who are tutors in PaL visit families in the community to deliver resources. This broader exposure to the community, along with training in the tutor role, may alert them to community issues and concerns and position them well to become more active and take lead roles in the community.

The increased voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership characteristics reported by parents involved in PaL (when compared with non-PaL parents) provide a strong impetus to investigate further. These specific characteristics were also identified in the earlier case study of parents and community members involved in PaL (Flückiger et al., 2012). Further investigation is warranted to ascertain whether these characteristics are aspirational; inherent in parents who choose to be involved in PaL; or developed through involvement with PaL (i.e. PaL has an empowering effect on parents). If these characteristics are found to be the 'knock-on' effect of engaging parents in their young children's emergent literacy development, then we suggest the PaL leadership model be considered for the review and development of other Indigenous community literacy programs.

Further investigation is also needed into the leadership of the PaL program. The earlier study (Flückiger et al., 2012) described PaL as situated in an inter-cultural space where everyone listens carefully and respectfully to each other, in order to help build and lead a literacy learning community. PaL parents, along with various preschool directors and community members, have initiated, co-constructed and sustained this space in which everyone works together, over time. Such an approach suggests that genuine collaboration and leadership in family-school partnership building can occur when opportunities are created for leadership, power and responsibility to be shared. However, it should be noted that such relationships rely on constant nurturing and cannot be taken for granted.

Limitations

This paper reports on an initial study of young children's literacy progress and aspects of parental engagement and leadership in a remote Indigenous community. The focus of the research is the development of scales to assess aspects of community-based literacy programs in order to determine their impact. We see this as a first step towards building an evidence-base and identifying the characteristics of programs that make a difference in Indigenous communities.

In assessing the findings from the study, some analysis of the relatively small sample has been undertaken using analytical techniques that would require markedly larger samples for strong conclusions to be made. For example, a reliability analysis was undertaken on responses to determine consistent response patterns, thus providing the justification for calculating an average score on both scales. Such assessments focused the discussion on the broad aspects of literacy and engagement. The results for individual items are also presented and discussed to allow consideration of these individual items.

While the study has been able to report on some differences in both the levels of achievement of children on the CLPS and also in reported levels of parental involvement on

the SPEL, it must be recognised that this data is self-report data from very small numbers of parents involved in the study, a common constraint in studies undertaken in remote Indigenous communities. As can be seen from the conclusions in this study, while differences between PaL and non-PaL groups are evident, the reasons behind these differences are discussed with caution, and we identify the need for further investigation.

Conclusions

Findings suggested there are identifiable differences between the PaL and non-PaL groups, with regard to reported levels of children's literacy progress, attendance at school, parents' engagement in literacy with their children, and parents reported involvement in aspects of community leadership. While generalisability or causal relationships from these findings were not possible due to the small sample (19 parents), further studies will examine the dynamics of these relationships.

This paper reported on the development and refinement of instruments and processes to evaluate the success of the PaL program. Two instruments were developed—the CLPS and the SPEL. While refinements to both the content and application of these tools have been identified, the findings suggest the overall instruments are valuable and, in their adapted form, will contribute to the next stage of our research.

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Appendix A. The Child Literacy Progress Scale (items for initial and final version)

| | Items Initial 5-point scale | | | Additional items 9-point scale | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1. Book knowledge | Turns the pages when looking at books | Knows that the writing on the page tells a story | Talks about books using words like page, story, picture, author | Talks about different reading materials E.g. newspaper, phone book, magazine, fact books, recipe | Identifies and selects books for a purpose E.g. finding a recipe in a cookbook |
| 2. Vocabulary | Uses words to ask for things and to answer questions, instead of pointing | Uses language in lots of different ways: e.g. asking questions, giving directions, expressing feelings | Uses the words he/she has heard in books | Asks 'what does that mean?' about words he/she doesn't know | Discusses and uses new words and language found in books to make meaning |
| 3. Print awareness | Can recognise some signs, letters or numbers they see in the community | Asks about print e.g. 'what does that say?' | Knows where we start reading on a page | Once shown a word in a story can recognise it again on the page | Reads simple books matching one spoken word with one written word |
| 4. Use of symbols, letters and words | Makes letter-like marks | Can write some letters of their name | Can write some familiar words | Can write a simple sentence | Creates and writes short texts using words and pictures e.g. story, recipe, directions |
| 5. Narrative / storytelling | Retells the story by looking at the pictures | Talks about the story and/or what they enjoyed in TV programs, videos and books | Can make up stories of their own | Tells/retells stories in detail, with details about characters, place and events | Creates new stories from favourite characters, books, films |
| 6. Phonological awareness | Makes up words and sounds for fun e.g. rhyming words | Knows the sounds of some letters | Can sound out some words | Knows the sounds of some groups of letters, e.g. 'sh', 'bl', 'ing' | Uses sounds and letters to write |
| 7. Comprehension | Uses pictures to help understand the stories I read | Can retell the stories I read | Asks questions to help with their understanding of the story | Can explain what happens in a story | Can predict what might happen in a story using pictures, words and ideas |
| 8. Attitude | Enjoys books | Asks to be read to | Chooses to read a book by themselves in their own time | Seeks out books that relate to his or her interest | Uses books for a specific purpose e.g. for pleasure, to find out facts or to follow a recipe |