Meeting Kids at the School Gate: The Literacy and Numeracy Practices of a Remote Indigenous Community

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Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study which generated detailed case study information about the transition experiences of seven Indigenous students as they moved from Year 7 in their community school to Year 8 in their new urban high school context (Rennie, Wallace, Falk & Wignell 2004). In particular the study aimed to document the literacy and numeracy practices valued in the home community, community school and urban high school and highlight any continuities and discontinuities between the various contexts. Data were collected using observations, document analyses and interviews. Students in the study participated in a number of different activities 'outside of school' in their home communities including hunting, art, ceremony, cooking, sport and play. There was evidence of literate and numerate practices embedded throughout these activities. The data also showed there were distinct differences in the kinds of knowledge valued in each context investigated. Cultural knowledge was valued in the home community whereas curriculum knowledge was valued in the school community. The students also built other bodies of knowledge through their participation in community activities. These were reflected in the school curriculum and included scientific knowledge, art knowledge, sport and recreational knowledge and work and domestic knowledge. This paper discusses the community literate and numerate practices, and highlights the continuities and discontinuities with the literate and numerate practices that are valued and privileged in the school curriculum.

The curriculum in the Northern Territory has undergone sustained review and reform over recent years (Collins 1999, Ramsey 2004). The need to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is echoed strongly in the recommendations from these reviews. According to Ramsey (2004), in 2001, the

Northern Territory had the largest proportion of students attending schools in remote areas in the country. Forty-four percent of all students attended remote schools compared to the national average of less than 5%. However, in the same year only 21% of these remote students attained the Year 5 reading benchmark. Similarly, students enrolled in regional Northern Territory schools fared worse than their urban counterparts.

The Northern Territory is an area characterised by a tropical north, desert south, vast distances and a diverse culture. According to the Department of Employment Education and Training (2002), there were 85 schools that serviced rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory. Sixty-two of these schools were relatively small primary schools with one to five teachers. Three were Area Schools that provided formal education to Year 10 and a small number were trialing the delivery of secondary education to Year 12. Generally these schools in remote locations did not provide any formal secondary education and most students were required to leave their home communities to attend urban boarding schools in order to access secondary education (DEET 2002). The majority of children in these schools were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and the retention rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in high school according to Collins (1999) and Ramsey (2004) were significantly lower than that of non-Indigenous children. Problems associated with providing 'good' education to children living in remote areas of Australia are not unique to the Northern Territory. According to Barcan (1965) this has been an ongoing problem since settlement (Reid, Edwards, Power 2004).

This paper reports on aspects of an extensive study (Rennie, Wallace et al. 2004), which investigated the transition experiences of seven Indigenous children as they moved from their community[1] primary school to their urban high school. In particular the study documented the literacy and numeracy practices valued in the home community, community school and urban high school and highlighted the continuities and discontinuities between them (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Discontinuities were found in the ways in which children engaged in the various activities. Further, the data highlighted a lack of understanding, valuing and acknowledgement of the various community literacy and numeracy practices by schools. The results of the study suggested that student identities embodied different forms of knowledge and skills. These qualitatively different identities played key roles in the students' effectiveness as 'westernised' learners. The study also showed there were a number of myths surrounding this particular group of learners. Myths are often perpetuated by overgeneralising about groups of people. Similarly Reid (Reid, Edwards et al. 2004), found that rural schools and communities are not all the same and suggested they are too often generalised under the same 'umbrella' of 'rural schools'.

This paper provides some examples of the literate and numerate practices found in each of the settings investigated – community, community primary school and urban high school. Continuities and discontinuities found in the data are then discussed. Finally, a number of recommendations are made in relation to improving the learning outcomes for this cohort of children and others like them.

The study reported on here approached literacy from a socio-cultural perspective, see for example, "New Literacy studies" (Barton and Hamilton 1998), "social literacies" (Gee 1996, Street 1993), or "situated literacies" (Barton, Hamilton et al. 2000). This means that literacy is not understood simply as a discrete set of skills but rather as variable forms of social practice. Those who study the social nature of literacy within the framework of the New Literacy Studies distinguish between literacy events and literacy practices. Literacy events are defined as any event involving a written text. Literacy practices are what can be inferred from an observable literacy event as embedded within broader social and cultural norms (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Street 1993). In this study text was viewed in a much broader sense to include written, visual and oral texts.

Work taking a sociocultural approach has largely centred on literacy practices although Barton and Hamilton (1998, pp.176-182) in their study of the uses of reading and writing in Lancaster, England, described examples of numeracy as 'situated practices' and provided examples where the participants used both literacy and numeracy skills to engage with an activity or task.

Recent studies that have documented the literacy practices in the home, school and community have illustrated the diversity of community literacy practices within cultural groups. They suggest that the home environments of children from socially disadvantaged and language minority children were generally characterised by rich literate environments with the families of these children not only valuing and supporting literacy but also seeing it as a path for their children's success (Barton 1994, Cairney and Ruge 1997, Fleer and Williams-Kennedy 2001, Heath 1986, Hill, Comber et al. 1998, Hill, Comber et al. 2002, Reid, Edwards et al. 2004). These studies, also, have uncovered a number of mismatches between the literacy practices in the different contexts. Researchers found a marked difference in the literacy practices and values of schools and their families in the ways they used and defined literacy. It is also suggested that school literacy practices served to empower some whilst they disempowered others and the students who were most likely to succeed in school came from home backgrounds where 'family literacy practices' most closely resembled those of school (Barton 1994, Cairney and Ruge 1997, Fleer and Williams-Kennedy 2001, Heath 1986, Hill, Comber et al. 1998, Hill, Comber et al. 2002, Reid, Edwards et al. 2004). The study reported on in this paper found evidence of literate

and numerate practices embedded throughout the daily activities children engaged in 'outside of school' including hunting, art, ceremony, cooking, sport and play. Similarities were found between the literate practices of the community and those valued and acknowledged by school however schools often did not explore ways of connecting home and community literate practices to school literacy practices.

Finally this study recognised the importance of the interplay between being identified as a member of a particular society, community or family group and being and becoming literate (Bell 1997, Ferdman 1991, Godley 1998). The process of becoming literate and the kinds of literacy practices engaged in demonstrates aspects of the individual, place and cultural, social and community identities (Falk and Balatti 2004, Ferdman 1991, Guofang 2000). It was an assumption of the research that the literacy practices of the study's participating schools and communities provided a lens to view the continuities and discontinuities in knowledge and identity that students experienced as they moved from their community-based primary school to their urban high school. That is, the literate practices represented the nature of the knowledge required for the different literate events in the different contexts investigated.

The research sites: Communities, community school and urban high school

The two communities in this study are situated on an island that is approximately one hundred kilometres north of Darwin. Each community has a population of approximately 400 people and is serviced by a local store, bank, primary school, recreation hall, sporting facilities, social club, police, women's and men's centre, library, post-office, art and health centre. Both communities are traditional with the children and their families regularly participating in hunting and ceremonial activities.

Each of the two community primary schools investigated had a student population of approximately eighty students. The seven children who participated in this study were chosen because they were relocating to the same urban high school in Darwin. There were other Year 7 students in the school but their parents chose to send their children to different high schools located in other states in Australia.

The urban high school in this study had a population of about 800 students, the majority of which were day students. The school provided boarding places for Indigenous children from over forty different remote locations in the Northern Territory. At the time of this study Year 8 was streamed into three different programmes, which included mainstream, supported secondary and intensive English

classes. Students placed in mainstream worked with the mainstream curriculum, those placed in supported secondary were being assisted so they could later be moved into mainstream classes and those in intensive English classes had a strong focus on the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. Initially, one of the seven students involved in this study was placed in a mainstream class; three were placed in supported secondary and the remainder in intensive English classes.

Research design

The study referred to in this paper generated detailed case study information about the transition experiences of seven Indigenous students from their home community and school to their new urban high school in relation to the literacy and numeracy practices of these different contexts (Dyson 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The study used ethnographic techniques of observation, document analysis and interviews during the data collection phases. Qualitative techniques were used to analyse the data. In the initial phase of the analysis, data collected from the home, community school and urban high school were analysed separately. After the various interviews and observations were transcribed, coding of the data sets occurred (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The second phase of the analysis involved an ethnographically grounded approach to discourse analysis. Gee and Green (1997, p.139) identified four dimensions of social activity – World building, Activity building, Identity building and Connection building. World building referred to how participants assembled "situated meanings about 'reality', present and absent, concrete and abstract". Activity building described the construction of situated meanings connected to the activity itself. Identity building concerned the identities that were relevant to the situation and included ways of knowing, believing, acting and interacting. Finally, Connection building related to how interactions connected to past and future interactions (Gee and Green 1997, p.139). Gee and Green (1997) suggested a number of questions relating to each of these dimensions. The research team selected a number of questions that could be answered through the data. The questions provided a framework to analyse the various data and provided a rich description of the activities investigated (See Appendix 1).

The third phase of the analysis involved constant comparative analysis between the data sets to assist in identifying discontinuities between the data (Guba and Lincoln 1981, Lincoln and Guba 1985). This assisted in identifying the extent to which school literacy and numeracy practices reflected those valued by the community.

The following provides a discussion of some of these data. First, some of the community literate and numerate practices identified throughout the analysis are described. These are then discussed in relation to how they connect or disconnect from school literacy and numeracy practices. Throughout this discussion a number of myths concerning these learners are discussed and dispelled.

Community literate and numerate practices

Participants engaged in a number of common social and cultural activities in each of the communities. These included hunting, ceremony, art, sport and recreation, domestic and work activities. Many of the literacy and numeracy practices identified by the research team were embedded within these social and cultural activities. Through participation in these activities the children built different bodies of knowledge, learned in particular ways and they used various literate and numerate practices in the enactment of the activities. The following analysis uses the frequent 'cultural' activity of 'hunting' to exemplify some of these literate and numerate practices. The study conducted a similar analysis of all the activities the participants engaged in 'outside of school'. The discussion divides into three main sections. The first examines the kinds of knowledge built through participation in the activity of hunting, the second examines how children learned through participating in the activity and the third describes the literate and numerate practices embedded in the activity.

Knowledge

Children and parents interviewed had extensive knowledge about hunting. They placed a great deal of emphasis on sharing this knowledge. In fact, parents suggested it was their responsibility to pass this knowledge on to their children and there was a strong expectation that their children would do the same. This knowledge was part of who the children were, that is, it helped to construct their identity. The data also suggest that there were different kinds of knowledge acquired by the children. For the purpose of the discussion they are called – scientific knowledge, 'how to' knowledge and cultural knowledge.

Scientific knowledge

Children and parents displayed knowledge about various flora and fauna. This included detailed information about habitat, breeding, feeding habits, behaviour and plant uses. The following examples from the data illustrate this:

P: There is a bit of history to it. And you know there is significant bushes, plants, the foliage, the changing foliage. You know they must be aware and that's what they are taught. You know they got to be well aware of the land, you know the different markings, whether it's a tree and the different thickness and foliage and then the grass and the different types of trees.

P: He has a very deep, more so than most adults in fact knowledge of habitat, habits species, their interaction with the environment. He's learnt very well in that area

In the first example a community member on the local council explains the significance and importance of the children understanding their environment. In both these examples, the language used suggests that the knowledge learned by children in this area is scientific in nature, for example, foliage, thickness, markings, species and habitat.

How to knowledge

In addition to knowledge about the habits of particular animals, there was also extensive knowledge about how and where to hunt. This included knowledge about making hunting implements, finding directions, safety in the bush and the preparation of food. In the following data, two children explained how to find mangrove worms.

C1: Just find a log.

C2: We just look for a log. Chop it and we just like one hit and a little piece come out and if we see too new. Must have found last week. Leave it and then go for them old one.

I: Tell me that again.

C2: We um look for them. We look for log and then we see if we see a log we just chop chop a little piece and if we see a new like its a week ago we just leave it.

I: What do you mean new?

C2: It like it fell down a week ago.

C1: Late. From lightning.

In the first part of this explanation, the child assumed pre-knowledge on the part of the listener. The interviewer asked the child to repeat the explanation and clarify some of the language he used such as what 'late' meant, which he did. Nevertheless, it is an adequate explanation relating to the hunting of mangrove worms.

Cultural knowledge

The activity of hunting is a cultural and social activity. Much of the knowledge acquired and used during the activity of hunting was connected to cultural issues. Participants talked about special places, connections to the land where they hunted, totems, dance, and to stories from previous generations.

I: Does he have country here?

P: Yeah Terracumbi waterfall yeah he like going for a swim in it. That's his country.

As this segment of a conversation shows the place was not special simply because the child enjoyed going there but it was also of special significance because as the father said it was 'his' country.

Learning and teaching: teaching and learning

The activity of hunting was as much about learning and teaching as it was about hunting. Learning and teaching was highly valued in the communities. The children in this study learned about hunting by going out with a skilled, knowledgeable other. Parents, grandparents and older siblings used the activity of hunting as a means to teach younger siblings. In the following example two parents illustrate the importance of this:

P1: Like if the old fella with me he show me around. You have to follow the old person.

I: So that's really important old people teaching younger people?

P1: It's like when you go out hunting looking for buffalo.

P2: Like you're new person you have to go with the older person.

In addition to learning from a knowledgeable other children in this study learned by participating, watching, talking to others and asking questions. There were numerous examples of learning in these ways throughout the data.

The Library in our heads

Participants largely learned about hunting from others. They did not talk about reading texts on hunting or watching videos. When they discussed how they knew these things, they frequently referred to storing the information in their heads.

I: It's a bit like you read the bush

P: Yeah

I: Where do you keep your information about the land?

P: I've got it in my mind

I: So you remember it?

P: Never forget

This knowledge was not written down. Neither was it learned by reading books. The knowledge was part of who they were. It constructed identity and assisted in making connection to places, things and others.

Expectations

Learning was highly valued both in the school and community context. Parent and community members expected their children would learn during the various activities. Children had to learn these things and they needed to be in a position later in life to pass their knowledge on to others.

I: What would you want for A when he's finished school?

P: I want him to learn more

I: Learning seems very important

P: Yeah learning's very important. In our own culture we teach our kids to learn things at home. Even at work we show them how to do the carving so when they grow older they know what to do. Same when you go to school you learn different parts. I want to learn about Greek

I: About Greece

P: Cause a friend of mine he was Greek. We grew up you know we went to school together and he wants to learn about my language. So it's like a borrowing

There was a degree of reciprocity attached to the notion of learning as this transcript illustrates. The parent interviewed explained how he learned from his friend and his friend learned from him. This high expectation in relation to learning transferred to the school context when parents and children discussed their expectations of school. Parents wanted their children to be happy learning in the school context and to see them achieving. They hoped for the best possible education so their children could find work and have the opportunities to look after themselves financially post-school.

Literacy and numeracy practices

There were elements of literate and numerate practices embedded within the activity of hunting. Following is a discussion of some of the examples that were found.

Recounting experiences: telling stories

Many of the participants discussed the hunting experience as a means to share stories with each other. Children talked about listening to stories from older members of their family and parents discussed the sharing of stories with their children. The stories were to entertain, share, maintain cultural knowledge and teach. They were often about previous hunting trips, places of significance and stories of survival.

I: *Do you tell him stories?*

P: *Yeah*

I: *What sorts of stories?*

P: *I tell him about just when I was a kid. I used to be in the swamp and that*

As many other examples throughout the transcripts show, family members enjoyed sharing stories of their own hunting experiences with their children, passing on knowledge through narrative.

Asking questions, explanations and procedures

The activity of hunting was also filled with examples of different family members explaining things to each other. Children asked lots of questions and the older people found great pleasure in answering questions through explanations. The children interviewed were also very good at explaining how to find, cook, make and eat things. Embedded in their explanations was the ability to articulate oral procedures. In the following data, three of the children explained how to hunt crabs.

I: *How do you catch them?*

C1: *You get a stick and poke a hole*

I: *How can you put a stick through the shells?*

C2: *You just make it sharp. Sharpen it up*

C1: *You can make a hook. Just pull it down*

I: *How do you sharpen your stick?*

C2: With a knife

C3: Or you can make spear

Again, in this transcript, the three children assumed a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the interviewer but were receptive to their requests for further information.

Reading

In all of the transcripts, there was a sense that the activity of hunting involved reading the land, reading the water, reading the mind and reading the body as is shown in the following example where two parents and their child discussed the activity of hunting

P1: Turtle tracks

I: So do you know when its come out of the water and gone back in?

P1: And crocodile

P2: Crocodile tracks

P1: Crocodile he goes up in the swamp

P2: And you walk past { } danger.

C: And you look for crab

This reading was purposeful. It was a necessary aspect of hunting. The children had to be able to do this in order to hunt.

Knowing where we are and sharing the spoils of the day

There were also a number of examples of numerate practices during the activity of hunting. The participants had a well-developed sense of position, direction and spatial awareness:

I: How do you know the North is?

C: By the sun

I: How does the sun help you?

C: Like east this way where the sun comes up and west where the sun goes down

In this example a child shows how the natural features of the environment were used as markers to assist in finding their way. Sharing or the concept of division was also

evident during hunting adventures. When family members returned from the trip they shared or divided the benefits of the day with all of their family members regardless of whether they went on the trip or not. Giving everyone an equal share was viewed as very important to the extent that large prey such as buffalo, dugong and turtle were cut into pieces.

This brief discussion of transcripts related to the activity of 'hunting' illustrates how the children in this study participated in a wide variety of literate and numerate practices through their frequent hunting experiences. Other activities such as art and ceremony, cooking and sport also comprised a number of similar and different literate and numerate practices. For example, children had very refined skills in the recall of basic number facts through their frequent participation in card games. The following section discusses what the data revealed about the children through the hunting experience in relation to them as learners in the school setting. The following section compares the children as learners during hunting to the children as learners in school. Data from both the primary and high school are discussed.

Meeting the kids at the school gate

The children in this study were exposed to a number of different literate and numerate practices throughout their engagement in various 'out of school' activities. Many of the literate genres in which children participated in the community were also used in school. Discussions with teachers and observations of various lessons indicated that the children were required to know about explanations, procedures and narratives. The community data suggested that all of the children had experiences in these genres and that they used them purposefully. The difference lay in their enactment. In the community, these practices were enacted in the oral mode whereas schools tended to value their written form. Some teachers showed an awareness of the need to map written language onto oral language and one teacher was observed explicitly teaching procedural text by first exploring it in an oral way. Differently, in other classrooms students did not have the opportunity to connect to their knowledge and community experiences of the different genres in the oral mode. In these classrooms, the children appeared to be disengaged from the learning process. As stated earlier, disengagement was assumed when children exhibited disruptive behaviours, when they could not do a task or found it difficult to complete a task, when they frequently sought help from others and when they did not contribute to the lesson. These behaviours were observed and noted during classroom observations (See Appendix 2).

Generally both primary and high school teachers raised concerns about the low levels of literacy across this group of children. Teachers commented that children's

experiences with the various genres were limited and that they needed to go 'back to the basics'. One teacher began her writing program by looking at the 'purpose and audience' of writing. Others suggested that the children had actually 'failed' their primary school years. More specifically, another commented that the children had limited experience with 'procedural' texts. The community data illustrated that the children had many and varied experiences with oral procedures. This was evident when they talked about how to make something, find something, prepare food or fix a bicycle. The issue here lay in what was valued in each setting. In the school setting the written mode was valued over the oral mode. Children were effectively disengaged from the learning process when the connections were not made between the oral and written form. This was not confined to writing. It also applied to reading. There was evidence of different reading practices throughout the community data. Children not only read traditional print and digital text forms but they read the land, the water, the mind and body, paintings and dance. In an observed high school lesson children were asked to write down the various purposes of writing. In this lesson two of the children in the study wrote a list, which included paintings and dance. They explained to the researcher that their mother wrote her stories in her painting. The teacher included all of the suggestions from the various children by writing them on the board. In the second part of the lesson the teacher wanted to examine forms of writing in more detail in relation to purpose and audience. Painting and dance were not included. Instead, the teacher used some of the more traditional school writing practices suggested by students including novels, dictionaries and email. It is understandable that the teacher wanted to concentrate on some of the more traditional written forms as students need to be able to write effectively in order to succeed at school; however it would have been useful to acknowledge some of the other less traditional forms of expression such as painting and dance. It would have allowed the teacher and other students to get to know each other better; provided an opportunity to showcase what these students do well and given a means to explore other semiotic systems that are used extensively as a mode of expression both in western and Indigenous cultures such as painting and dance.

There were also examples of this in relation to numeracy. Generally teachers reported that the children again needed to go 'back to the basics'. One high school teacher was asked what they needed to learn most in mathematics. He replied that it was important for them to be a 'hundred percent' on their basic facts. Similarly, a primary school teacher reported that they needed to do a great deal of work on the four basic algorithms. The children were observed frequently in mathematics classes working on the four basic operations. Differently, the community data showed this to be one of these students' strengths, yet this was rarely acknowledged in the classroom. So here myth number one is discussed and dispelled. It was the general opinion of teachers in both primary and high school that these children had low levels of literacy and

numeracy. It was also assumed that they had limited experiences with literacy and numeracy in their communities. The data from the study show that they had rich literate and numerate experiences in their home communities although the ways in which they were enacted were often very different to the ways they were enacted in school. In the school there were preferred ways of doing literacy. Writing was highly valued and reading in school was generally confined to the novel, textbook and in some cases, digital texts.

Children and parents interviewed had extensive knowledge about the various activities in which they participated. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the sharing of this knowledge. This knowledge was also an integral part of who they were. Within the activity of hunting examples of scientific, 'how to' and cultural knowledge were given. Similarly in the other activities children demonstrated extensive knowledge about other things such as art and sport. Knowledge was also highly valued in the schools. During the analysis, primary and high school knowledge were categorised into curriculum knowledge and 'doing school' knowledge.

In the communities children learned about hunting, art and other things with ease. Most of what the children were required to do in school was connected to the curriculum, although the children in this study had great difficulty engaging with some of this knowledge. Teachers frequently reported the tension between having to meet curriculum requirements and these individual students' needs. The children were required to acquire curriculum knowledge through textbooks, research, by listening and by copying notes off the board. In one high school lesson the children were observed copying notes on the digestive system. Discussions with the children revealed they had limited knowledge of the various terminology used. In another lesson a child was reading mathematics problems, which required application of one of the four basic algorithms. The child came across a number of unfamiliar words such as 'bushel' and 'green pepper'. The child was unable to engage with the task until someone explained what these words meant. There were numerous examples throughout the data where the children had to tread unfamiliar ground during their learning in school.

In a social education lesson the children were learning about mapping. The children were required to give compass directions, use grids and coordinates, draw to scale and understand a legend. The children in this study had great difficulty with the task and yet through the data collected in this study we learned they had refined skills in position, direction and spatial awareness. This teacher was seemingly unaware of the knowledge these children already had in relation to mapping, as there were no apparent attempts to make connections to this knowledge. This was a potential continuity in the learning for the children. If connections had been made between

what the children already knew about mapping to what they were required to know in the school curriculum then they may have been more engaged in the learning process. In all of the examples previously described engagement in the learning process may have been enhanced if connections were made between what the children already knew and what they needed to learn. The importance of making connections between what students know and need to learn is grounded in schema theory (Anderson and Pearson 1984) where 'prior' knowledge and experiences are the foundations for building new knowledge. It is also driven by a constructivist approach, which acknowledges the importance and impact of past experiences in learning (Fosnot 1996, Steffe and Gale 1995). The school learning experiences observed occurred in a context separate from where the new skills or knowledge were to be applied. Differently, when the children learned about hunting in their community they were applying the knowledge as they learned it.

The community data indicated that these children learned in a variety of different ways. First, learning occurred in the context in which it was to be applied. They learned through participating, asking questions, listening and watching and they learned in collaboration with others. There was also evidence of this kind of learning in school, although the schools tended to favour some learning styles over others. In school, students mostly learned by listening, reading and writing and independent learning was valued over collaborative learning. This is where we found another discontinuity in the data, which served to effectively disengage these children from the learning process. Many of the teachers tended to overgeneralise about this group of learners. Some said that they were all 'visual' learners whilst others said they had difficulty listening. The children were exposed to a number of different kinds of learning styles in their community. Sometimes the children would sit and listen to stories, other times they would sit and watch whilst elders danced or fixed cars and in some situations they would learn by doing. This is where myth number two is discussed and dispelled. These children learned in many different ways in their communities therefore it is dangerous to place them all under the umbrella of 'visual learners'. Further it is unfair to say that the children found it difficult to work independently when learning in a collaborative way is so much a part of everyday life.

Previously in this paper, the high expectations these parents had for their children as learners were discussed. Data collected in schools suggested that teachers' expectations were generally lower. One teacher reported that it was rare for a student placed in the Intensive English class in high school to achieve their Northern Territory Certificate of Education. Another made assumptions about prospective employment opportunities suggesting that what they learned in school was not going to be useful for them. Others suggested that parents were not engaged enough in their children's

education. It is here that we dispel the third and final myth. Parents interviewed in this study had high aspirations for their children. This provides support for other recent studies, which suggest that parents viewed literacy as a pathway for their child's success. The study found that parents did not fully understand how the school system operates and that their understanding came from their own school years. For example, some parents in this study had little understanding of the nature of the classes in which their children were placed in the high school. Parents also reported having little contact from the school unless a form needed to be signed or their child had been misbehaving. Many assumed that no contact from the school meant their child was doing well. One parent in particular had difficulty reading and understanding their child's school report.

Two central issues appear to underpin many of the findings discussed in this paper. First there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about these learners. Teachers repeatedly confessed that they knew little about these children. A better understanding of what these children know, how they learn and of their community would assist teachers in making meaningful connections to the curriculum so that the children would be in a far better position to engage in the learning process. Similarly the parents of these children knew little about their children's education apart from what they had learned during their own schooling. Parents should actively seek out information about their children and the education process and schools and policy-makers should ensure that parents are fully informed in these matters. Second there is a lack of valuing, acknowledgement and understanding in schools of different kinds of literate and numerate practices, different bodies of knowledge and different modes of learning. Curriculum should address this to ensure it is more inclusive and reflective of different community practices.

Endnote

[1] A community school is generally a small school that does not provide any formal secondary education in a geographically isolated area comprising mainly Indigenous students.

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Appendix 1 – Questions guiding the analysis

World Building	When, where with whom and under what conditions are members interacting? What meanings and values seem to be attached to places, times, bodies, objects, artefacts and institutions relevant to the situation? What name is given to the event or situation? What language practices and processes are used as resources by members of this event?
Activity Building	On what is time being spent in this situation/event? What sub-activities and sequences compose the activity? What actions/requests etc compose these sub-activities?
Identity Building	What norms and expectations, roles and relationships and rights and obligations are constructed by and signalled by relevant members to guide participation and activity among participants in the event? What personal, social and cultural knowledge and beliefs, feelings and identities seem to be relevant to the situation? How are these identities signalled by members and/or constructed in the interactions among members?
Connection Building	What sorts of connections are made to previous or future interactions, to other people, ideas, things, institutions and discourses outside the current situation?

Appendix 2 – Observation Science 21/4/06

Time	Activity	What do teachers and students talk about?	What is used
1.45pm	Children enter room	Children come in late	Photocopied sheet
		Teacher says if you're going to do an activity on Friday they need to be here on time	
	Word Find	Word find - testing their knowledge of basic science equipment	
2.00pm	Revision circulatory system	Reads through notes on the board	Human body life model
	Introduces nervous and digestive system	Shows where various organs are using Sammy (the human body)	Notes on board
		Teacher asks some revision questions along the way	
		Students instructed to copy notes off board	
2.20pm	Crossword	Students instructed to use their notes to complete the crossword	Teacher explains that when crossword is finished they may play game of choice but that everyone must hand in two worksheets by the end of the lesson

Notes

- Lot of discussion about rules and consequences. Students are very restless.
- B, D sit together. A chooses to sit near researcher.
- Again this is the first time A has been in this class all year.
- B remembered some of the parts of the bunsen burner. D did not know answers and relied on B to assist.
- A had no idea as he had been moved from the Intensive English class
- Students do not contribute to questions teacher asks
- A copes with copying notes off board well.
- B and particularly D are very distracted. Talk a lot to each other.
- None of the three children (A B and D) complete the notes off the board. They leave the lesson with incomplete worksheets and notes unfinished.
- There are no consequences given for not completing the sheets.