

Literacy Backpack Project
Information Package

IAN THORPE'S Fountain for youth



Introduction

Since its creation in 2000, Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth has championed new ways of improving health, education and skills training of young Australians.

The Literacy Empowerment Project has been supported by the Australian Government with a grant of \$1 million in October 2005 and a new injection of funding in 2008, greatly assisting us in building a highly effective alliance of Indigenous families, teachers and health workers.

They are linked by a strategy combining early learning, support for literacy and pride in culture, as well as specific life-skills training to develop a path out of the maze of poverty, poor health and welfare dependency.

In 2003 when Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth began work in remote communities east of Katherine, in the Northern Territory, an illuminating study by Schwab and Sutherland of the ANU, "Literacy for Life: a Scoping Study for a Community Literacy Empowerment Project" <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/topical/2004TI11.php> established that Literacy Backpacks and support for early learning were highly desirable priority programs to improve the 93% illiteracy rate in this region.

In Arnhem Land the median age of death of Aboriginal men had plunged to around 46 years. This is far worse than the national average life expectancy gap of seventeen years. Our partnership with the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation and teachers of the Northern Territory Department of Education recognises that the first step to reduce the cluster of preventable chronic illnesses decimating Indigenous communities is to rapidly improve life skills through early learning. In these communities literacy can mean life.

"When Literacy Can Mean Life", by Jeff McMullen:

http://web.archive.org/web/20070829160431/www.ianthorpesfountainforyouth.com.au/pdfs/When_Literacy_Can_Mean_Life.pdf

According to global assessments of Indigenous health by Canadian, Dr Fraser Mustard and others, as well as Professor Ken Wyatt's studies of Australia's Indigenous health disaster, raising the literacy of a community of young girls by even one additional year can add as much as four years to the life expectancy of their first children. A single extra year of learning can also reduce by 7-10% the risk of infant mortality.

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth is providing support for over 2,200 Aboriginal students of school age and up to 300 infants.

THE BACKPACK PROJECT

Inspired by the Navajo Backpacks that we have seen contribute to improvements in literacy among American First Nations, Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth has worked hard to build a new alliance committed to tackling 93% illiteracy in the remote communities of south-eastern Arnhem Land, the South western Kimberley region of Western Australia and the far north of Queensland.

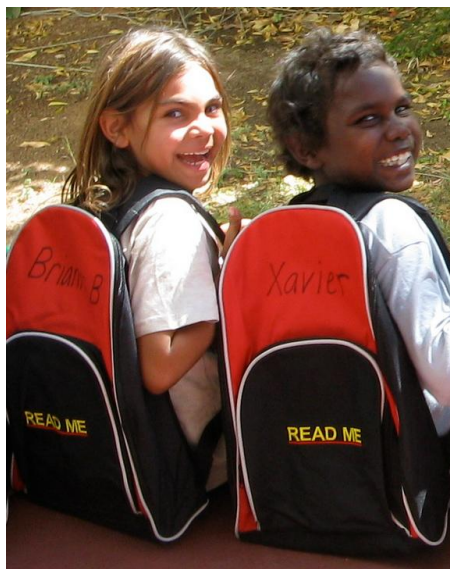
How they went about it in Katherine Group Schools, NT

A survey by Katherine Group Schools established that most of the remote communities of south-eastern Arnhem Land had virtually bookless homes, no public libraries or shops selling reading material. School attendance and parental interest in reading was well below national averages.

The Literacy Backpack Project began by supplying each student attending school with a strong backpack. In the 16 NT remote communities the Literacy Backpacks are stamped with the slogan, "READ ME" focussing the children on the importance of the program.

Children and teachers worked together to come up with the slogan. In Bidyadanga WA, the students of the La Grange Remote Community School have labelled their backpacks "DEADLY READER". By allowing children and teachers to decide on a name for the project you are giving ownership of the program to the school and students. We deliberately didn't add our charity logo to the bags for this very reason. The Backpacks are in the red, black and yellow colours of the Aboriginal flag.

Students make regular selections of books from an enriched school library. They also take home in their Backpacks early readers and picture books for younger brothers and sisters and a variety of newspapers and magazines for older members of the family.



Although reading levels are very low in these remote communities one of the biggest surprises for teachers, was seeing the enthusiasm of parents for women's magazines, Aboriginal newspapers including the Koori Mail and National Indigenous Times and sporting magazines. Reading material has rarely been available in community stores and it has greatly benefited students to see their parents reading. With positive modelling of reading in the home, strong links can be forged between home and school.

The Northern Territory Education Department, Katherine Group Schools Principal, Stuart Dwyer and 16 school principals and their teachers have cooperated on this program in great spirit. Katherine Group Schools supported Fountain for youth by appointing with the help of Commonwealth funding, a Project Officer for the Literacy Backpack Project, Cath Meng.

Ms Gail Dous of the NT Library Association assisted schools to establish a simple computer program designed for either PC or Macintosh environment to assist small libraries to manage their resources. A barcode scanner and a printer are required for full operation. The Groups Schools use the AGGAMA system.

Teachers and assistant teachers initially work together to show children how to care for books and help them to understand the concept of “borrowing” in order to prepare them to begin a regular book borrowing process. This has helped establish the habit of taking good care of books in communities that have never had public libraries.

The Katherine Group Schools Principal reports that the Literacy Backpack Project has transformed meagre school libraries into a far more valuable community resource.



Reading Resources

Library Books are ordered for individual schools via the Katherine Group Schools central office to obtain bulk discounts and efficient storage and delivery.

It is estimated that providing a Literacy Backpack over the course of a year with reading materials for school library, Awards, books to go home and reading material for the family costs between \$150 - \$200.

The book selection includes Early Readers, Picture Books, Large Format Books, High Interest Titles, Biographies, Aboriginal Culture and History, Health, Science, Space, Human Body, Seasons, Environment and Earth Science, Hunting, Sport, Nutrition, Food & Bush Tucker, Music, Dance, Arts & Crafts, the Indij Reader Series, Maths Support, Dictionaries and Atlases and the helpful student and teacher resource books.

We must point out that many Australian projects aimed at promoting reading in Indigenous homes collect second-hand books that are not always matched to the reading levels of remote communities.



Feedback from Aboriginal students, parents and teachers reinforces research indicating that children who have never had access to good reading material take far greater delight and make more rapid progress when they have the opportunity to read and ultimately own new books.

To enrich the school library resource for the Literacy Backpacks we have expanded the range of books by accessing many companies including Magabala Books, Black Ink Press, Julius, Big

Blue Marble, Australian Standing, Great Expectations, Angus & Robertson, Dymocks, Scholastic Australia, Indij readers, ACER, Books Direct, Oxford Uni Press, OTR Net, Education Alive, Wooldridges, Burrows Education, IT Beyond, Modern teaching Aids, S & M Publishing, Education Experience, Peg Williams Books, Of Primary Importance, Edumax, Elizabeth Richards, Clark Francis, Edu-21, Kangaroo Trading and Blake Education.

Local newspapers, Aboriginal newspapers and magazines including VIBE, National Geographic, Australian Geographic, Diabetes Australia, Table and various teenage magazines are shared around a large number of Aboriginal homes via the Literacy Backpacks.

Deadly Vibe magazine is delivered each month to schools. Many schools already receive Deadly Vibe through the Department of Education. If this is not the case and you would like to arrange the

delivery of the monthly magazine contact the Vibe Office in Sydney, details are: Ph 02 93610140, Fax 02 93615850.

Rewards & Progress

The students enrolled in the Katherine Group School participating in the Literacy Backpack Project choose books to the value of \$30 per order from the Carnival Club www.carnivalclub.com.au, these books are to take home and keep, these orders are placed twice per year. The frequency of the order and amount allocated for each student will vary in your school depending on the funds available to you.



Students who make good progress and keep up attendance can be rewarded with book vouchers that can be redeemed at your local bookshop (if available). Or the school can order in a collection of books to be given as prizes/awards at specially organised School/Community Assemblies and celebrations.

Assessment

The Katherine Group Schools central office, combining reports from all of the remote communities participating in this region, provided the following assessment of the first phase of the Literacy Backpack Project, 2005-2007:



reading that is spreading in community homes.

"Students show great excitement at the opportunity to regularly choose library books to take home, exposing them to the joy of sharing their stories with family members. Also strikingly evident in our students is the joy expressed when presented with their book orders. It's refreshing to see the expressions of anticipation and excitement on their faces, emotions once only reserved for toys and sports equipment. The issue of these book orders together with a selection of newspapers and magazines of choice circulated throughout communities by schools each week, has nurtured a culture of

Parents and Community members are slowly showing an increase in appreciation of literature through their support at school Book Fairs throughout the year. Schools participating in the project now give books as prizes for attendance/high achievement.

In addition to these prizes a selection of books covering a range of age groups and reading levels were brought out to schools from Katherine Books for students to choose in exchange for Book vouchers also awarded for improvement or extra effort in reading and writing. Parents are invited to attend award ceremonies and to purchase books for their children and themselves from the selection provided. Where possible, these occasions are scheduled to coincide with major school/community celebrations where students showcase their class activities and achievements in literacy and numeracy to their parents and community

members. These are joyous celebrations that play a major role in helping to bridge the gap between home and school.

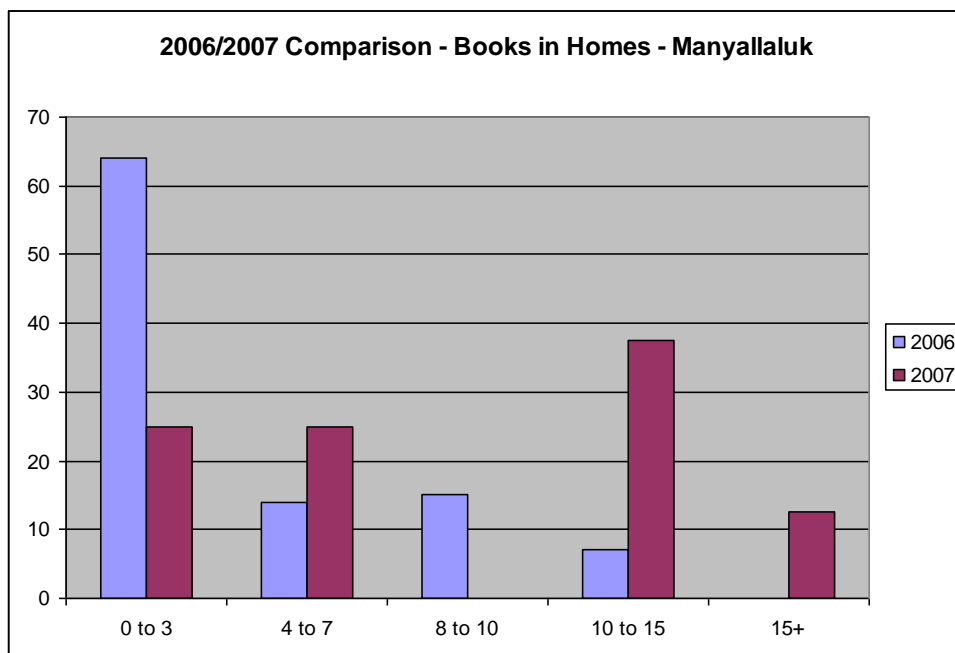
2006/2007 comparisons below show the following outcomes:

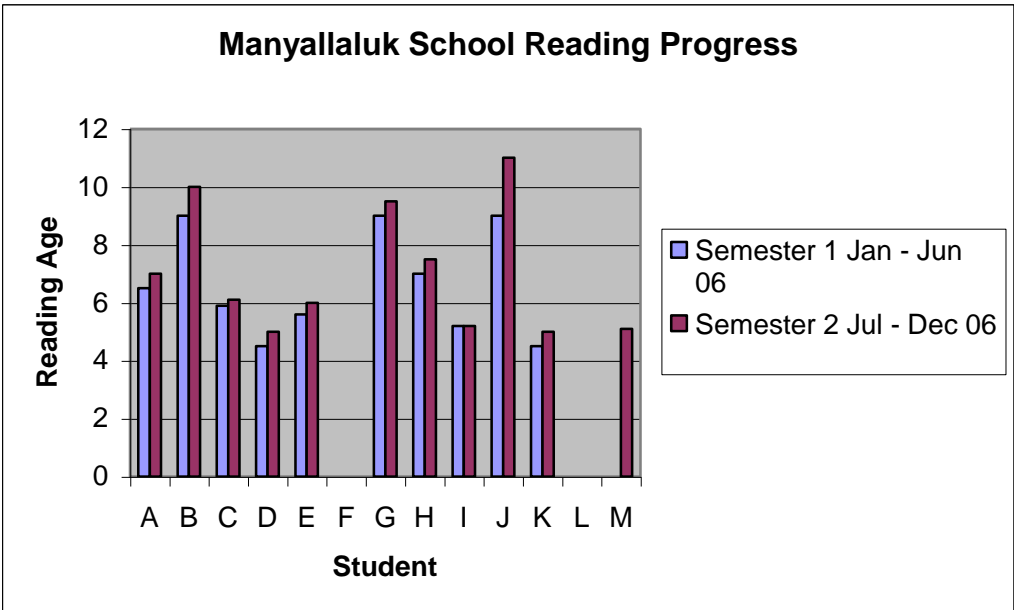
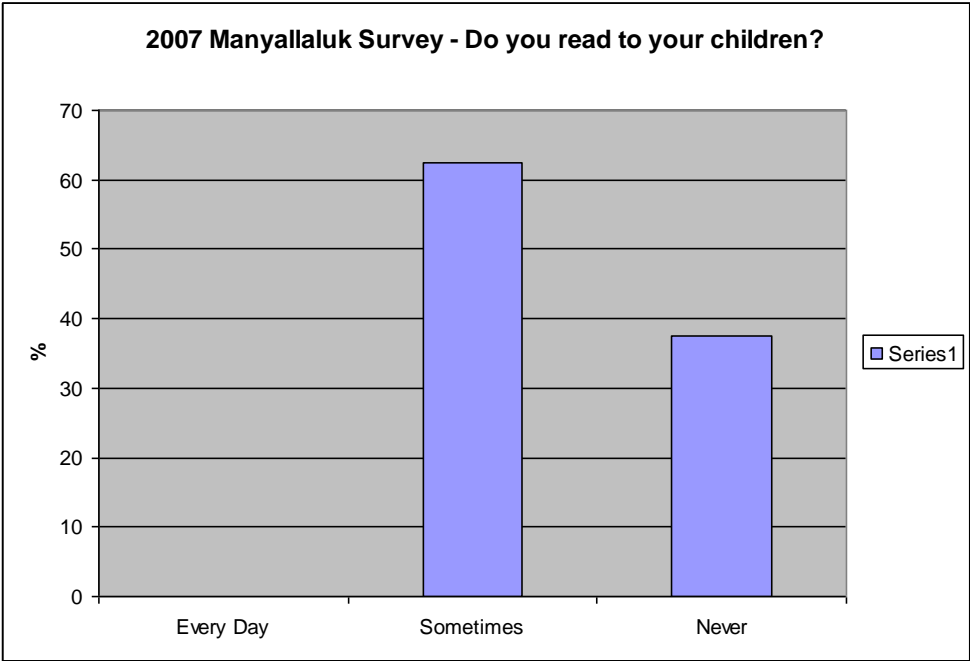
- Attendance figures have increased in 7 out of the 10 participating schools in Katherine Group School
- In the communities surveyed, the number of Books in Homes have also shown increases between 2006 and 2007
- Of the schools surveyed, responses indicated that parents do occasionally read to their children

Schools that have joined the project will be surveyed in six monthly intervals to provide comparisons on literature in homes. “

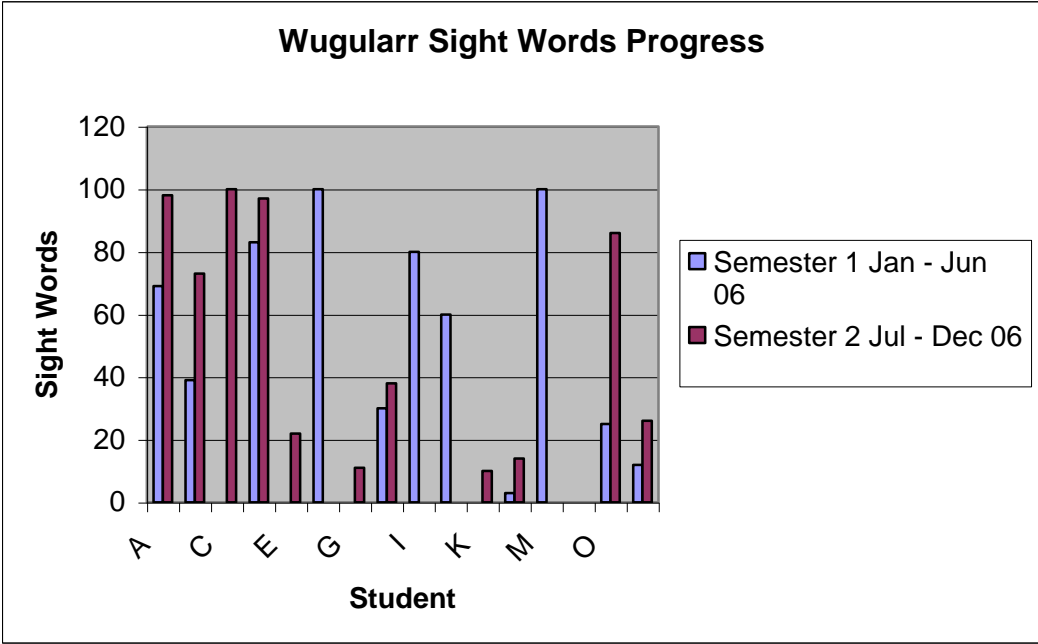
The following graphs are examples of data collected

Eva Valley/Manyallaluk Community commenced the program in 2006, the graphs indicate the increase in reading materials available in the home between 2006 – 07 and how often children are read to.

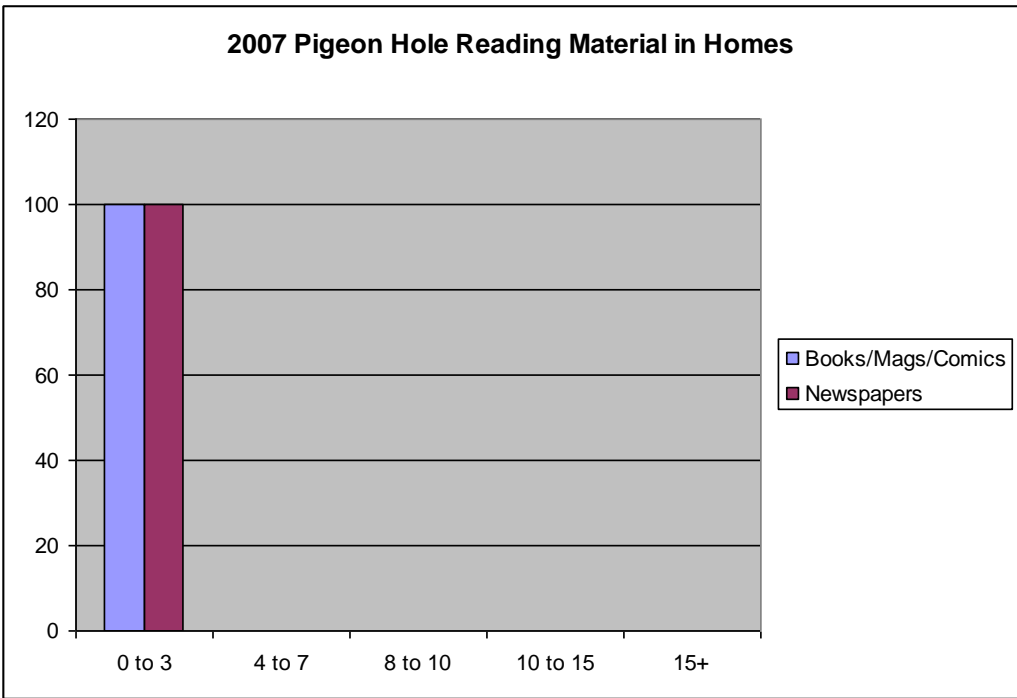


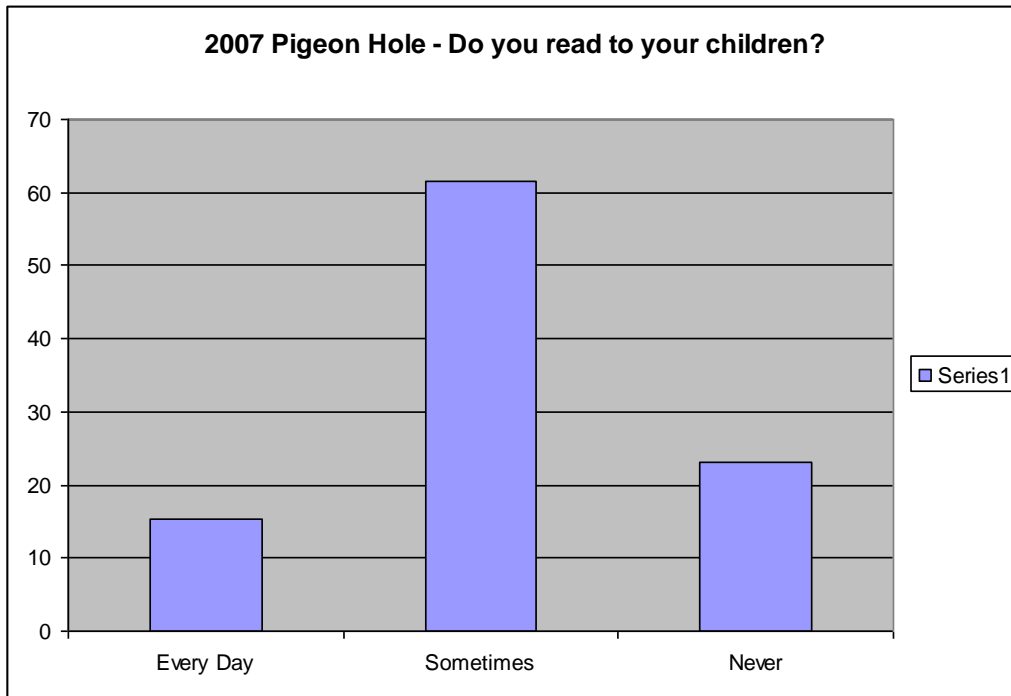


Sample of progress seen in students in the first 12 months



Pigeon Hole commenced the program towards the end of 2007, a follow up survey will be taken in six months time to make the comparisons.





Positive Results in 2009 Naplan Reading Test

		Reading			
		MAP		NAP	
		2006	2007	2008	2009
3	# Students	41	38	47	71
	% Participated	73%	62%	62%	84%
	# Achieved	15	16	13	28
	% Achieved	37%	42%	27%	40%
5	# Students	42	33	52	70
	% Participated	79%	69%	42%	95%
	# Achieved	9	14	8	12
	% Achieved	21%	42%	15%	17%
7	# Students	34	28	30	35
	% Participated	77%	78%	53%	83%
	# Achieved	4	5	7	7
	% Achieved	12%	18%	23%	20%

NT Year 3 increase – 4.2%. KGS increase – **13%**

Significant increase in participation rates as well as an increase in students reaching

Cohort tracking indicates continued improvement. More students reaching benchmark.

Summary

We understand funding is key to being able to roll out a program within your school and suggest you approach corporations, businesses, Mining groups within your region to seek funding assistance for the project.

How to set up the Literacy Backpack Project in your school

1. Consultation

It is crucial for Principals and teachers to consult with significant elders and leaders of the community. Establish relationships with key people and discuss the needs of the community and how best you can work *together* to implement the Project.

Elect a representative/s to be the liaison - to organise the program and liaise with community members in the initial set up.

In the east and west regions of Katherine, key women and men in each community expressed enthusiasm for a program that would involve parents, students and teachers working together.

2. Partnerships on the Ground

Our partners on the ground are the Katherine Region Group Schools, NT Department of Education, headed by the Regional Group Schools Principal Stuart Dwyer and Project Officer for the Backpack Project, Cath Meng and the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation.

3. Presentation and Surveys

Prepare a presentation organised by the representative/s (teacher/principal) from the School inviting staff and community members to meet and learn about the Backpack Project. This is an important opportunity for interested parties to understand what the program is about;

- Features, benefits and aims of the project
- Types of reading materials provided in the pack for students and families.
- What the backpacks are for – to provide safe storage of books and reading material and safe transportation of books back and forth between school and home. (*not for fishing tackle*)
- Understanding shared responsibilities

It is important to have teachers and parents involved at the earliest stages.

To assess how things are going, begin with a simple survey from the start. The surveys in the Katherine region showed that most of the homes had from zero to three books in the beginning. Teachers have the school class assessments of reading levels that are also a valuable measuring tool of the project success.

A sample survey is available. [\[click to download\]](#)

BACKPACK PROJECT OFFICER

Because there are 16 schools/communities between the east and west regions of Katherine, it was necessary to employ a Project Officer, funded through DEEWR.

Individual schools may need to elect a Project Officer from existing school staff to organise the project and liaise with teachers and family members.

The role of your Project Officer would look something like this:

- **Project Sponsorship**
Liaise with project sponsors regarding budgets, feedback and reporting requirements.
- **Education**
Coordinate Information Sessions for teachers and community members to ensure everyone is aware of project features, benefits aims and shared responsibilities.
- **Backpacks**
Fountain for Youth arranges the delivery of backpacks with orders placed to V Gilmore and Sons based in Melbourne. You may have a distributor in your state, a little closer to home. The packs are ordered and delivered directly to the school.
- **Newspapers & Magazines**
Talk with community members to establish which newspapers and magazines they would be interested in reading and receiving on a weekly/regular basis.
- **Relationships**
Establish relationships with local store to provide newspapers & mags (if possible). Alternatively the newsagent in the nearest town might be able to put together an order each week and have it distributed via your school PMB.
- **Finances**
Manage Sponsor's finances ensuring funds are spent appropriately and in keeping with project aims and objectives.
- **Accounts**
Liaise with school registrar to coordinate payment of accounts and reimbursement from your Project Sponsor/s.
- **Book Clubs**
Set up an account with a Book Club (e.g. Carnival or Scholastic), and have them provide an information pack and a set of brochures for all reading abilities (eg. Busy Bee, Wombat, Lucky, Arrow, Star). Depending on your school enrolment it may not be possible to have a brochure for each student. Providing there are sufficient brochures to cover one whole class, the reverse of the brochures can be photocopied so these can be used as order forms. That way the brochures themselves can be used by more than one class. Teachers work with children in class to order from catalogues and pass order forms to the Project Officer for online ordering.
- **Distribution**
Upon delivery of books, individual orders need to be collated and distributed to relative classes and students.
- **Awards**
If possible, liaise with local/regional distributor for supply of book vouchers to be given to students for good attendance/outstanding achievement. If this is not possible due to remote location, it might be possible to use Carnival/Scholastic "Free Picks" to provide books to be kept specifically for this purpose.

The Way Ahead

The Australian public and many leading corporations have given considerable support for the Literacy Backpack Project after seeing the direct benefits to Aboriginal children.

The strongest evidence of progress supported by the Literacy Backpack Project is the steady improvement in reading skills demonstrated to us by Aboriginal students on our visits and the reading culture that is developing within the whole community.

Children we have gotten to know well over the past eight years have gained in confidence and in 2007 some made a long journey to Darwin or Cairns to start High School, these numbers have increased over the past two years.

There is no doubt in the minds of educators, students and parents that the Literacy Backpacks are stunningly successful.

Even in an area with a 93% illiteracy rate eight years ago, children are improving and so have many of the adults. Some Katherine Group Schools have upgraded their library



resources to include adult fiction paperbacks and culture rich reference books to encourage parents and community members to become regular library borrowers.

Teachers have noticed an increase in school attendance rates and a greater interest and genuine love of reading from students. Group School principal in Katherine, Stuart Dwyer, expresses huge enthusiasm for the project. He describes it as a *'once in a lifetime opportunity'*. The local principals and small reading circles of

parents and teachers have all jumped into it whole-heartedly. **This is the biggest help to the project, having committed staff and family members to keep the program rolling.**

The children have been enthused by seeing that Aboriginal people can write contemporary stories and that they can find out anything they want to from the right book.

Several communities have worked on their own 'community stories' through work shops with renowned children's author Alison Lester (Ernie Plays the Didgeridoo) and with students from the University of Victoria. This is a fantastic way to extend the project. Many of the stories that are developed and illustrated by the children can then be published and included in the Library resources, these writing workshops will continue throughout 2009 and 2010.

Your school and community will have its own ideas and needs and the Backpack Project can be adapted to meet these needs.

For example originally we thought children would just keep all of the books that we sent home in the backpacks. But in the early stages of the program it was pointed out to us by the teachers that in a community full of bookless homes and no library it was important to start the idea of lending and sharing stories, so that there would be more books to go around. It was the first stage of establishing a good library for the students.



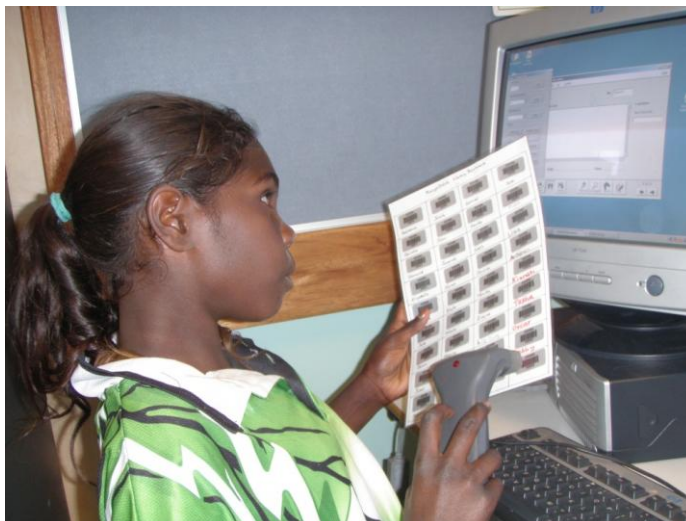
In 2010 the Katherine Groups Schools will place more focus on building up the School Libraries and introducing the position of 'Library Monitors' to the older students within the schools.

These students using the AGGAMA program will register books and keep record of the borrowings with the assistance of the teachers and Literacy Backpack Officer.

One order per year will be placed with the Book Club with a spend of \$50 per student instead of the previous bi-annual ordering. The extra funds available will be directed towards the

continued building up of resources for the school libraries and adult reading materials.

"Serita recording student's names against book borrowed"



You will find what works best for your school and community.

The key is to be good listeners. We know the kids ultimately are the best barometer of whether we have it right, but it is heartening to see mothers and fathers and their children all enjoying reading. When Ian and the rest of us read the letters these students are now writing and see the great progress they have made it makes us believe that all children, no matter where they are, can discover and achieve so much more with the right opportunities.

I am sure your students will enjoy the flow of books to their school and show as much excitement as the children in the schools to the east and west of Katherine, and in the schools we are supporting outside the Katherine area.

I hope this information package offers some useful ideas for you to get the Backpack Project started in your school.

Happy reading!

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