



“Learning English literacy is just the most recent adaptation we have had to make, to enable our survival.”

Yo! Si Puedo (Yes, I Can!) comes to Brewarrina



Located on the Barwon River in far-western NSW, Baiames Ngunnhu, known in English as the Brewarrina Fish Traps, has been an Aboriginal gathering place for millennia. It was fitting, therefore, that over 100 local First Nations people of Brewarrina and the surrounding region met there earlier this year, to launch the next stage of the Literacy for Life Aboriginal adult literacy campaign.

Acknowledging the continuous occupation in this region by the Ngemba and other First Nations, Ms Pat Anderson, an Alyawarra woman from Central Australia who chairs the Lowitja Health Research Institute, and is a Director of the Literacy for Life Foundation (lflf.org.au), told the crowd: "Learning English literacy is just the most recent adaptation we have had to make, to enable our survival."

She joined campaign leader and Ngemba man, Mr Jack Beetson, in welcoming the local Ngemba and Murruwarri men and women who have come forward to lead the campaign in their town - Grace Gordon, Chair of the Ngemba Community Working Part; Mary Waites, Campaign coordinator; and Janelle Frail and Norman Coffey, campaign facilitators.

The Literacy for Life adult literacy campaign began even further west along the river, among the Bakindji people of Wilcannia, in February 2012. From there it spread east, to Bourke and Enngonia, before reaching Brewarrina a few months ago. To date, 89 low literate community people have graduated from the campaign classes, and another 20 have now joined in Brewarrina. The campaign utilises a Cuban model called Yes I Can, (*Yo! Si Puedo* in Spanish) which has been deployed in 28 countries around the world and taught more than 8 million people the basics of reading and writing.

Project management during the pilot stage of the campaign was carried out by UNE's Associate Professor Bob Boughton and he continues his involvement in the program as academic adviser. PhD student Ruth Ratcliffe, who won an APA scholarship and is also supported by the CRC for Remote Economic Participation, is researching the longer term impact of the campaign in the communities where it has run.

In western NSW Aboriginal communities, over 40% of the adult population has low or very low English language literacy. This creates a major barrier in almost every aspect of daily life, and in particular makes it very hard for parents and grandparents to get actively involved with their children's schooling. In a recent interview with Adult Learning Australia, Mr Beetson talked about his role and the effect of the campaign:

'I think it's one of the most extraordinary and rewarding things I've been involved in in my life. I play a very hands-on role in community engagement. I bring together the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in town. It's a peace building role in some ways. No one can disagree that learning to read and write is a good thing so it's a matter of finding ways of working together. You just have to attend one of the graduation ceremonies to get a sense of how important literacy is to people...When graduates read their story out at this very public event there isn't a dry eye in the house.' (ALA Quest, Sep 2015, p.6)