



**YES, I CAN!**

**ABORIGINAL ADULT  
LITERACY CAMPAIGN**

# **Collarenebri, Intake 1**

**Final Evaluation Report 2019**



## First Nations Graphic Design:

Award-winning designer, Brooke Ottley, has family from across Australia: Gunggari from central Queensland, Wuthathi from far north Queensland, Cape York area, and Torres Strait Islander, from Thursday Island. She lives in Darwin.

Photo supplied.

Readers are advised that this document may contain images of people who are deceased.

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Report designed in 2025.

**Cover image:** Student Joyce Sands shares a love of reading in Collarenebri.

The Literacy for Life Foundation acknowledges and pays our respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which we meet, work and live.

Collarenebri

Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign

Final Evaluation Report

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University of New England

November 2018–September 2019



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The highly successful Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign launched on 31st January 2019, engaging 31 adult learners and four local Aboriginal staff members from the community.

This report evaluates the first intake of the Collarenebri Campaign between November 2018 and September 2019, examining outcomes and processes and identifying key impacts, including:

### HIGH RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT

The Collarenebri Campaign achieved high retention and engagement, with a **completion rate of 52%** - over 20 times higher than other adult literacy programs in Australia. Strong **participation rates of 65-80%** reflected the efforts of local staff and strong community support.

### IMPROVED LITERACY SKILLS

91% of students started at Level 1 or Pre-Level 1 on the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). This means significant difficulty with daily tasks such as banking and shopping. Following the Campaign, **92% improved** on at least one indicator and three students progressed two levels in reading and learning indicators.

### IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Students in the Campaign reported **greater confidence and feelings of independence** in their daily lives. This translates into impact such as being able to read mail and write text messages. Staff also reported **positive changes in their sense of self**, with the Campaign developing their confidence and work skills.

## EMPOWERED, CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

The first intake of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Collarenebri functioned as a **rallying point for the whole community**. Whole-community mobilisation is a key aspect of the Campaign.

Two aspects of the success of the Campaign highlighted in this report are the investment in the local Aboriginal workforce and the strengthening of community systems and leadership as the foundation of the Campaign.

Key learnings and recommendations identified in this evaluation will be used to shape further Campaigns. These include additional staff training and literacy support, management of staff workloads for sustainability, and strengthened transitions into Phase three of the Campaign to support consolidation of literacy skills gains.

The report concludes that the Literacy for Life Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Collarenebri was highly successful.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACSF	Australian Core Skills Framework
CAC	Community Advisory Committee
CPO	Campaign Project Officer
CWP	Community Working Party
ED	Executive Director
EOI	Expression of Interest
LFLF	Literacy for Life Foundation
NCM	National Campaign Manager
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NSW	New South Wales
PAR	Participatory Action Research
YIC	Yes, I Can!

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of 2018, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) was undertaking its third and fourth intakes of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in nearby Walgett. Close family and cultural ties with Walgett meant that those in Collarenebri were aware of the Campaign and the work of LFLF. Impressed with the reported outcomes in Walgett, the Collarenebri Community Working Party (CWP) lobbied Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales (NSW) to contact LFLF about the possibility of a Campaign in their community. The Foundation Executive Director (ED) then began a series of visits, sometimes accompanied by the then National Campaign Manager (NCM) and the Walgett Campaign Project Officer (CPO) to canvas community attitudes to a potential Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.

As with many smaller Aboriginal communities, Collarenebri experiences historic intra- community conflict. This situation, undoubtedly a legacy of colonisation, meant that in early community consultations, some expressed doubts the Campaign would work. The ED and Walgett CPO spent time with representatives of the two key community organisations – the CWP and the Local Aboriginal Land Council, discussing the Campaign model, in particular community ownership and the need for constructive working relationships among all stakeholders. After a time, an agreement was reached and partial funding was provided by the Department of Family and Community Services NSW with a contribution by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Western NSW. However, the need for careful and ongoing diplomacy meant the initial preparatory work for the Campaign took longer to complete. Further delays resulting from workload constraints from the concurrent Campaign in Walgett necessitated an extension on funding. After more than six months of groundwork, the Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign was officially launched on

31st January 2019. At the time of writing, a second intake of students have joined the Campaign and funding is being sought for a third intake for 2020.

This report evaluates the first intake between November 2018 and September 2019. The report examines both outcomes and processes, identifying key impacts such as:

- » student participation and retention
- » literacy gains
- » psychosocial benefits
- » staff capacity development
- » community cohesion

It also analyses strengths of this particular Campaign and areas for future improvement. Ethical approval for the work was granted by the University of New England and additional resourcing and support for the evaluation was made possible by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant.

## 2. EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Evaluation has been embedded in the development and implementation of LFLF's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign from the outset. The report presented here is a continuation of a process of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology that the Foundation began with the first pilot intake of students into *Yes, I Can!* (YIC) in Wilcannia in 2012. Key qualitative and quantitative data which the evaluation is based on is the result of field trips to Collarenebri during 2019. These trips were used to meet with and interview staff, students and local organisations, and to take part in Campaign activities, including observing and participating in some lessons. Field trip data has been supplemented by regular phone/email contact with staff, and reviews of the LFLF documentary evidence, including funding agreements, attendance records, assessment



reports, minutes of Campaign meetings, examples of student work and the written reports of local and national staff and consultants.

The depth and breadth of data informing this evaluation and the high level of community participation in its collection and analysis goes some way to addressing recent concern from the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that ‘too often, evaluations of key Indigenous reforms have been of limited usefulness for Indigenous people and policymakers. The evidence about what works, including for whom, under what circumstances, at what cost, and why, remains scant’ (Empowered Communities, 2015, p.90).

The approach taken to balance depth (that is, the implementation context and local issues) and breadth (the transferrable experience of the Campaign under evaluation expressed in terms of what worked well and why and what didn’t work so well and why) also provides valuable insights for LFLF that can be used to inform the Foundation’s ongoing and future operations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> **A note on objective evaluation:** In my role as evaluator I bring both insider and outsider perspectives. I have previously been engaged by LFLF as a CPO, Trainer and Technical Adviser and have been part of the Australian Research Council- funded longitudinal impact study of the Campaign. I have also been involved in staff training and monitoring of internal student assessment in Collarenebri over the course of 2019. These ‘insider’ roles have allowed me to develop the relationships necessary to effectively undertake PAR. However, I maintain an objective perspective as I have not been directly involved in the day to day running of the Collarenebri Campaign.

**Photo:** Coordinator Katy Jasper (left) and student Sheila Adams (right) practicing writing skills in the classroom. This report indicates that 71% of students improved in writing by the end of the Campaign intake. Credit: Adam Sharman.





### 3. BACKGROUND TO COLLARENEBRI AND THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Collarenebri is a small town located on the bank of the Barwon River in north-western NSW. It is approximately 75 km north-east of Walgett and 140 km west of Moree. Collarenebri is one of 16 communities in the Murdi Paaki Region, an area LFLF has been working in since 2012. The modern-day township occupies traditional lands of the Kamilaroi Nation and the name of the town is taken from the Gamilaraay word 'galariinbaraay', which means 'place of flowers'.<sup>2</sup> Carved trees and other cultural sites around Collarenebri, such as Collymongle<sup>3</sup>, attest to the traditional and ongoing significance of the place for the Kamilaroi Nation.

Today, Collarenebri has a population of 650, of which 42.1% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). Among the Aboriginal population, the average age is 26 years. Unemployment is high at more than double the state average due in part to the significant decline in economic activity from drought and the collapse of some rural industries. Similarly, educational outcomes are relatively poor with over 40% of people not completing Year 12 schooling. Health outcomes for people living in Collarenebri are also poorer than the state average (NSW Government, 2018) and people frequently need to travel to larger regional towns such as Walgett or Moree to access essential medical and allied health services such as obstetrics and podiatry. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of transport into and out of the town. Such patterns of relative disadvantage are



well-recognised and have been recently strongly correlated to geography, with studies consistently finding that for Aboriginal Australians, there is a clear gradient of disadvantage by remoteness (Biddle, 2009).

In early 2019, when the Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign began in earnest, much of NSW and in particular, far western NSW was in the grip of a severe and protracted drought. On my first visit, Greens MLA David Shoebridge, local Elders and Campaign staff attended a meeting at the Barwon River weir, a place long associated with local livelihoods and the transmission of knowledge and culture. That day, the temperature in the middle of the dry riverbed exceeded 53 degrees. Locals reported their taps running dry, lamented the fact that their children under the age of five had never known the river running and expressed concern and anger at the presence of diseased fish floating belly-up. The connection of the river's health to the spiritual health and functioning of the community was all too apparent. This was the reality that the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign and staff were working within.

<sup>2</sup> The spellings used in this report for First Nations Peoples and languages are those used by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (<https://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/search>). It is acknowledged that alternative spellings exist for many First Nations Peoples and languages.

<sup>3</sup> Collymongle Station is a property near Collarenebri where in 1949, 52 carved trees were cut down and taken to Australian museums for 'preservation'. This was done without consulting with the local Aboriginal community. It remains 'the site of the greatest number of surviving carved trees – some 60 – from anywhere in NSW' (State Library of NSW, 2011, p. 4).

At the same time as work was beginning in Collarenebri, LFLF was planning new Campaigns in very different regions. Having implemented Campaigns in north-western NSW since 2012, the Foundation began groundwork for Campaigns in the urban fringes of Sydney (Campbelltown) and in the remote Central Australian community of Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa). This was the first time the Foundation was to run simultaneous Campaigns in three geographically, culturally and linguistically distinct communities. In addition to this, LFLF had more staffing changes at the national level with a new NCM taking up the position in September 2018 and the relatively experienced Walgett CPO who was slated to implement the Collarenebri Campaign resigning.

As a result, a new CPO was appointed towards the end of 2018 and was on the ground in Collarenebri from early 2019.

### **3.1 THE EXTENT OF LOW ENGLISH LITERACY IN COLLARENEBRI**

As part of the Campaign model, each community undertakes a household literacy survey. The household literacy survey is the chief means by which the local staff 'socialise' the Campaign and assess need for the literacy classes. Overall, approximately 90 households were visited during the two-week survey period (December 2018). Seven households declined to take part. Of the remaining, a total of 154 adults (15 years and over) completed a survey, as detailed in Table 1, below. Based on the 2016 ABS Census and

*Photo:* Dry river beds to rivers of literacy – Students Louise Sims and Sheila Adams reading to children in the Collarenebri Campaign during the Literacy for Life Foundation 'Reading with Children' day. Strong adult literacy benefits entire communities through intergenerational and lifelong learning. Credit: Adam Sharman



local information, the numbers of households approached during the survey period represents close to 100% coverage.

**Table 1. Collarenebri Intake 1 household literacy survey data**

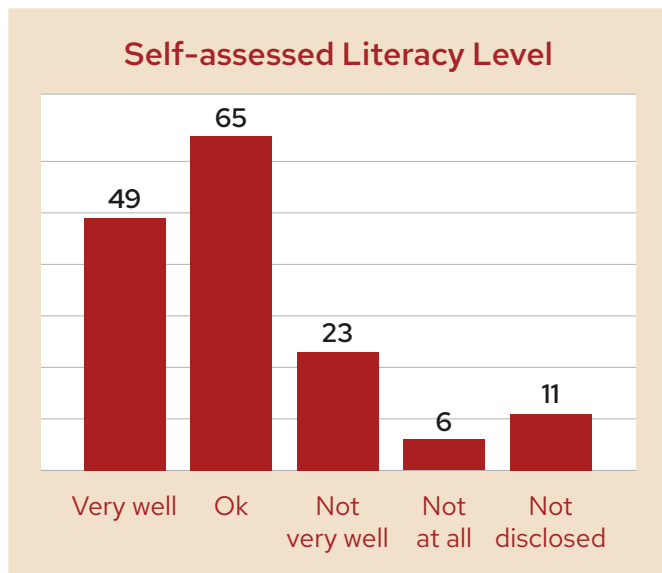
Collarenebri Household Literacy Survey Coverage, 2018			
	M	F	Total
Individuals	67	87	154*
Households	N/A	N/A	90
Declined	N/A	N/A	7

\*The 2016 ABS Census lists 148 Aboriginal people over the age of 15 resident in Collarenebri (ABS, 2016). This is most certainly an undercount.

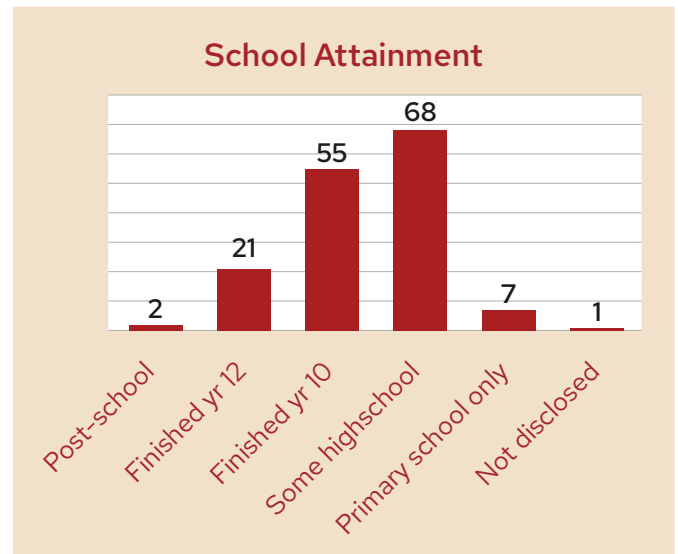
The following charts detail the educational background of the 154 adults surveyed.

## EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF HOUSEHOLD LITERACY SURVEY RESPONDENTS

**Chart 1. Self-assessed literacy from the household literacy survey**



**Chart 2. Highest school attainment from the household literacy survey**



The overwhelming majority (84%) had not completed high school. Despite this, nearly a third of those surveyed said that they could read and write 'very well' ('A' on the LFLF self-assessed literacy scale as shown in Table 2) and only 18% assessed their literacy at either 'not very well' (C) or 'not at all' (D), the usual target levels for the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.

**Table 2. LFLF Self-assessed Literacy Scale**

## HOUSEHOLD LITERACY SURVEY RESPONSE OPTIONS

A. Very Well

B. Ok, but trouble filling out forms

C. Not very well

D. Not at all

E. Not specified

Part of the discrepancy is likely due to the propensity of people to overestimate their literacy level. This is particularly so when people have achieved up to Year 10 schooling. Comparison of self-assessed literacy and ACSF scores of starters in Intake 1 also confirms this (see section 4.3). As a result, it is safe to conclude that low English





*Photo:* Student Sheila Adams (right) receiving support from Coordinator Katy Jasper (right). Classroom staff were clearly committed to the learning experience of each student. Credit: Adam Sharman.

literacy is far more prevalent in Collarenebri than the results of the household literacy survey indicate.

## 4.OUTCOMES

### 4.1 ENROLMENT AND RETENTION

One of the key outcomes of this Campaign has been the high participation rate. In past Campaigns, LFLF have limited enrolments to around 20 participants for each intake as this is considered by the Technical Advisers and local staff to be the maximum number that the local Facilitators can effectively manage. Despite receiving well over 20 Expressions of Interest (EOIs) in past Campaigns, the cap of 20 students has never been challenged since the average conversion rate of EOIs into actual starters (as

of the close of Week 3 – LFLF’s ‘census’ date) has hovered around 50%. As Table 3 shows, 31 students were still enrolled in the Collarenebri class after Week 3, representing an uptake of 67% – well above the Foundation’s average to date. The local Campaign Coordinator described the enthusiasm in the Collarenebri community for the Campaign, saying ‘the people are really ready for it – for class. They’ve grasped the opportunity to learn with both hands’ (Interview, February 2019).

**Table 3. Collarenebri Intake 1 participation and retention rates by gender.**

## PARTICIPATION AND RETENTION BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Total
EOIs (enrolled)	17	29	46
Started	10	21	31
Withdrew	5	9	14
Graduated	4	12	16*
Retention (%)	40	57	52

\*One student while completing both Phase 2 and 3 did not meet the literacy requirements to graduate and is continuing into Intake 2

Part of the high participation can be explained by the determination of the local staff in following up each and every person who had expressed an interest via the initial household literacy survey some months earlier. This formal process usually involves the Coordinator engaging in a 'yarning' style interview with prospective students and targets those people who self-assessed as having low to very low English literacy during the survey. In effect, this process for confirming EOIs is as much a socialisation tool as it is a recruitment tool. After dedicated instruction in this process as part of a three-week onsite training program prior to the commencement of Phase 2: YIC lessons, all the local staff felt confident to take on the responsibility for conducting the EOI interviews. The participation of the Facilitators in addition to the Coordinator proved particularly effective for increasing enrolments. Two of the local Facilitators had high standing in the community and so they were well-placed to communicate key information about the Campaign classes and garner a high level of community buy-in.

Of course, the challenge with high participation is maintaining sufficient support for each student to

maximise retention and progression. Despite this Campaign not being fully funded, LFLF decided to maintain three full-time classroom Facilitators (the usual being two) in recognition of the challenge of the large class. Under the guidance of national staff, these three Facilitators divided up the students, each taking responsibility for the support and monitoring of a smaller group of students with whom they had a particular bond. This strategic support meant that the majority of those students who were able to, completed Phase 2: YIC lessons.

As Table 3 shows, a total of 14 students withdrew from the Campaign resulting in a retention rate of 51%. While this figure is below the Campaign average to date, it is still above completion rates for TAFE NSW qualifications, which for 2016 sat at 48.5% across the state (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2019).<sup>4</sup> Nine students withdrew during Phase 2: YIC lessons and another five in Phase 3: Post-literacy. The majority of the withdrawals were for reasons beyond the control of the Campaign and local staff, such as relocating to another town for personal reasons and pre-existing complex mental or physical health conditions.

## 4.2 ATTENDANCE

Despite the slightly lower retention rate for this Campaign, attendance across Phase 2 classes was strong. The average number of lessons attended for all starters was 47 out of 59, or 79%. This figure rose to 96% for the 22 students who completed Phase 2: YIC lessons. The high attendance rates are in large part due to the efforts of the local staff. It is evident that early on, the CPO recognised the challenge of maintaining

<sup>4</sup> Whilst 48.5% is the completion rate for all VET courses in NSW, the rates are lower for Certificate I and II courses. Completion rates are also substantially lower for Indigenous students (NCVER, 2019). Furthermore, TAFE completions in the state's remote areas have been much lower than this in previous years (Williamson & Boughton, 2019).

momentum and engagement in a large class. Just over a month into the literacy classes, the CPO reported that:

*We've had a really good response from students, especially with regards to coming to catch up. They're very diligent and most Thursdays we have more people turn up than we are able to cater for! And to encourage good attendance, we've started giving out certificates to people who have 100% attendance so far, which has definitely piqued people's interest! That said, we are starting to see a couple of students drop off, so I will make sure we're communicating with them and finding out what we can do to support them to come back to class (email, March 2019).*

The local initiative of formally recognising those with 100% attendance bolstered motivation.

A total of 17 students finished Phase 2: YIC lessons with a perfect attendance record. Similarly, the pattern of attendance was strong with the average number of students on any given day in Phase 2 at 19.5 or 68.5%.<sup>5</sup> Chart 3 illustrates the pattern of attendance across the 12 weeks of Phase 2: YIC lessons.

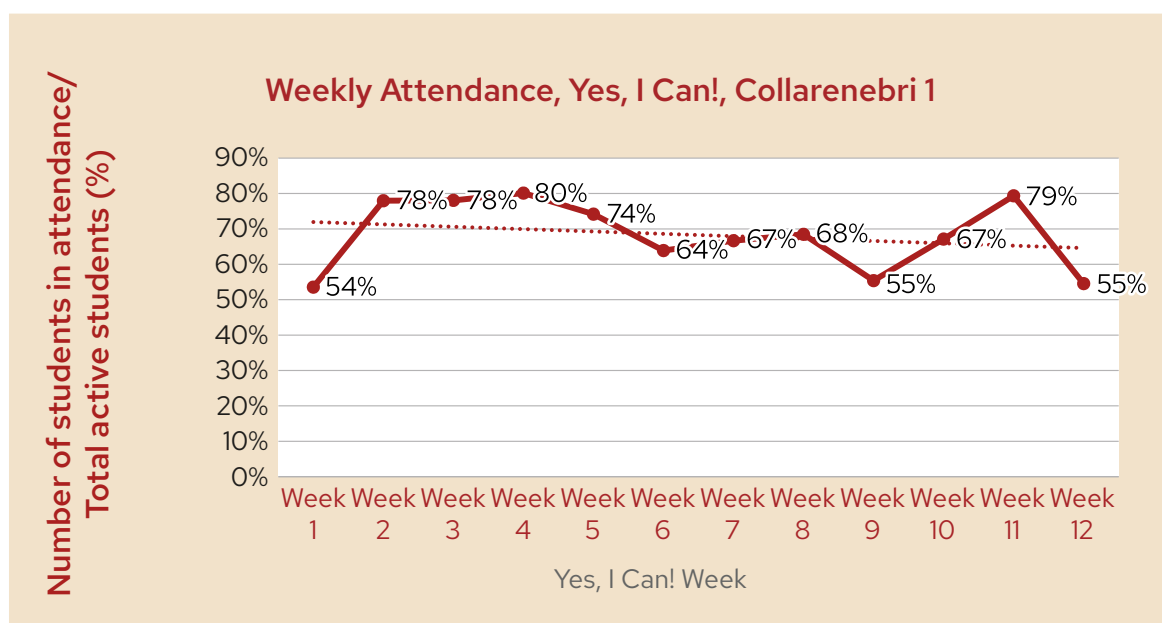
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<sup>5</sup> The number of students in attendance is expressed here as a percentage of 'active' students; that is, starters minus withdrawals.

**Photo:** Student, Nakita Sands, in the Collarenebri classroom. 92% of students recorded improvement on the ACSF. In real terms, this means better skills to take control of daily tasks such as banking and sending text messages. Credit: Adam Sharman.





**Chart 3. Pattern of attendance across the 12-week Phase 2: YIC lessons.**

As can be seen, by Week 2 a pattern of strong attendance was achieved. While there were dips in attendance from time to time, that were due, for instance, to issues finding childcare for a number of the primary carers in class, attendance remained around 65–80% of active students for much of Phase 2.

### 4.3 LITERACY GAINS

Another strong feature of the first intake of the Collarenebri Campaign is the literacy gains achieved by the majority of students. By way of context, Table 4 shows the self-assessed literacy levels of the 31 starters alongside the more objective literacy pre-test results conducted in Week 4 of Phase 2 using the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF).

**Table 4. Comparison of self-assessed literacy levels and ACSF pre-test results for Intake 1, Collarenebri.**

#### LITERACY CONTEXT OF COLLARENEBRI INTAKE 1 STARTERS

Self-assessed literacy level	A. Very well	B. Ok, but trouble filling out forms	C. Not very well	D. Not at all	Total No. of self-assessed literacy assessments
	2	18	9	2	31
ACSF pre-test	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1	Pre-Level 1	Total ACSF pre-tests conducted
	0	2	11	11	24

As was mentioned in relation to the self-assessed literacy levels collected in the household literacy survey, it is clear that many students overestimated their English literacy. Almost half the class commenced at Pre-Level 1 on the ACSF

and 91% were at Level 1 or Pre-Level 1. In real terms, this means that the vast majority of the class required significant support to read or write a simple sentence, comprehend and complete a

form and follow written instructions. They also experienced difficulties in daily tasks involving literacy such as banking and shopping.

While the literacy level of most students indicates that the Campaign did a good job at targeting those most in need and suited to the YIC classes, the high proportion of Pre-Level 1 students presented a particular challenge for the inexperienced classroom Facilitators to manage. There were also two students with physical conditions requiring ongoing one-on-one support from the Facilitators. One student was profoundly deaf, and another student was recovering from a stroke and his fine and gross motor skills meant that a staff member needed to sit with him throughout each lesson.

Adding to the challenge of high numbers of students with high support needs, there was no full-time onsite Technical Adviser as is usually the case in LFLF Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaigns. As mentioned previously, this Campaign was not fully funded and securing a third on-site national staff member (The Technical Advisor) was beyond the resources of LFLF. In previous Campaigns, it has been possible to have a Technical Adviser work across two Campaigns but the distances between the three concurrent Campaigns in 2019 ruled this out as an option. This meant that the CPO took on the tasks of supporting and monitoring student progress and training and overseeing the local Facilitators’ daily lesson preparation and delivery. The CPO was well supported in this additional role by onsite visits and regular phone calls and emails by more experienced LFLF staff and management.

Despite these constraints, the literacy outcomes achieved by the students are outstanding. Table 5 summarises the results of pre-training and post-training literacy assessment using the ACSF undertaken by an external assessor. The

pre-training literacy assessment took place in Week 4 of Phase 2; and the post-training test was conducted in Week 9 of Phase 3; that is, after almost six months of participation in the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.

Table 5. Comparison of pre- and post-training assessment results.

ACSF PRE- AND POST-TRAINING RESULTS

ACSF Level	Pre-training (N=24)	Post-training (N=17)
Level 2	2	8
Level 1	11	9
Pre-Level 1	11	0

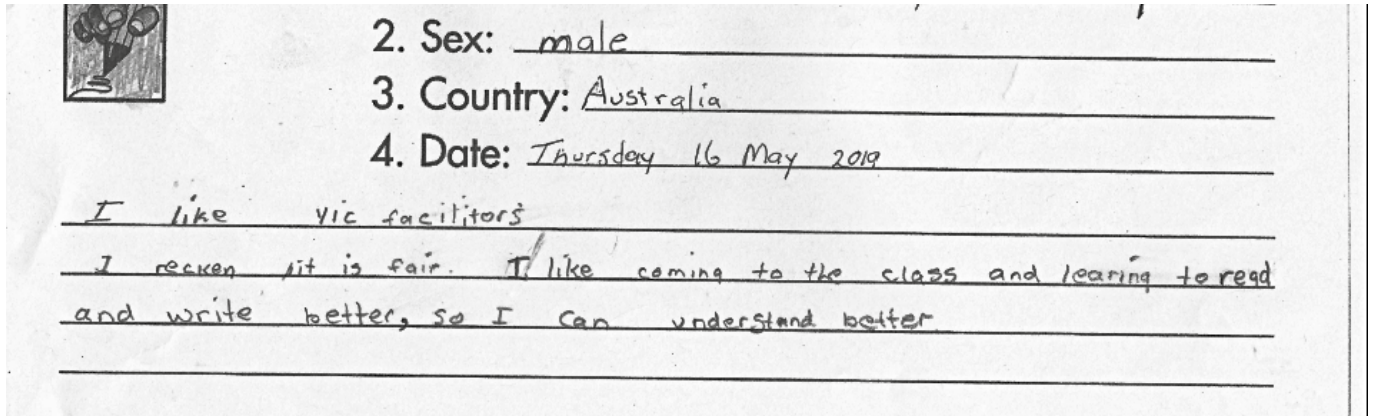
The post-training results show that all students operating at below Level 1 had moved up a whole level on the ACSF; that is, no students remained at Pre-Level 1. Furthermore, 13 out of 14 students, or 92%, recorded improvement on at least one indicator and three students progressed two levels in reading and learning indicators. All but one student with pre- and post-training results improved in the learning domain. This is significant as acquiring the identity of a learner and being able to consciously apply learning strategies are the foundations upon which effective learning in any area is built. In terms of progression in the macro skills of reading and writing, 78% of students improved in reading and 71% in writing. These results are closely related to the high student attendance in this Campaign.<sup>6</sup> Over 85% of those students with ACSF pre- and post-training scores attended 100% of the lessons and the average number of lessons attended by these students was 58 out of a possible 59.

While the numbers are compelling, it is important to bring to life the significant gains the students

6 The number of lessons attended in Phase 2: YIC lessons has recently been shown to correlate strongly with the likelihood of literacy improvements. This is one of the findings of the Australian Research Council funded longitudinal study into the impact of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, jointly conducted with LFLF, the Lowitja Institute, the University of New England and the University of NSW (Lin et al., 2021).

made in their English literacy. Below are two examples of work done by one student. The first sample was written as part of the internal assessment and is the student's evaluation of

the YIC literacy classes. While clear and mostly accurate, the text conveys only the simplest opinion with little sense of the writer's identity.



2. Sex: male

3. Country: Australia

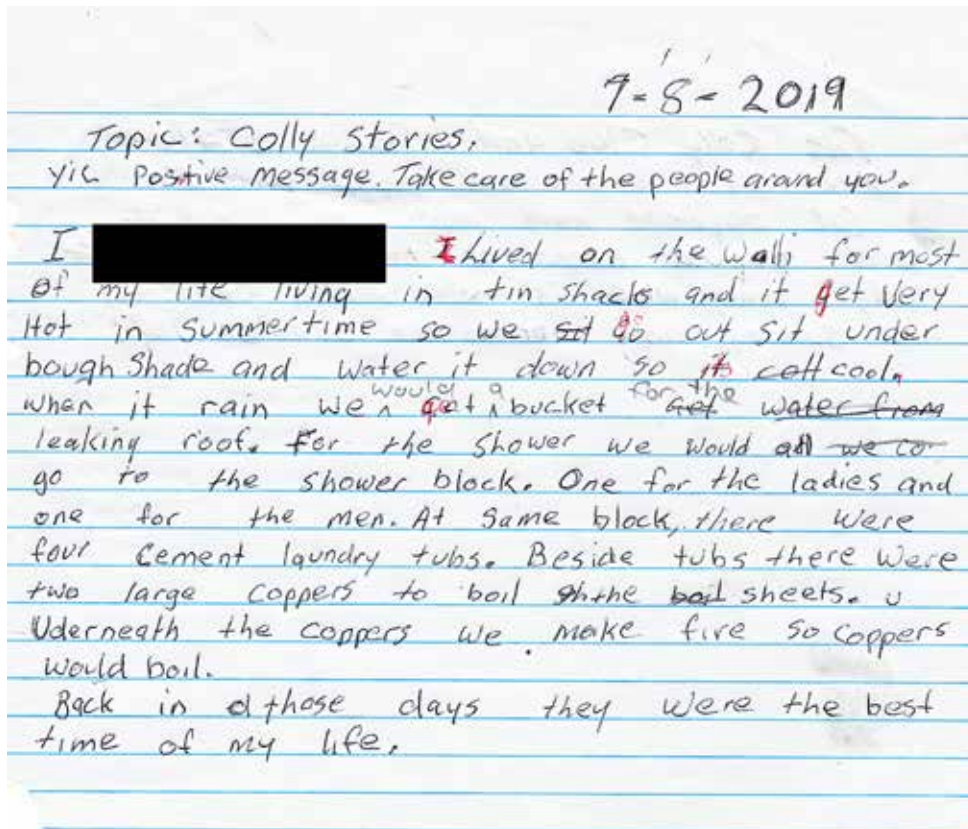
4. Date: Thursday 16 May 2019

I like yic facilitators

I reckon it is fair. I like coming to the class and learning to read and write better, so I can understand better

Weeks later, the same student produced the following piece of work as part of a creative writing workshop. It was written sitting by the weir

and shows the student's developing command of written language to communicate important personal memories and events.



7-8-2019

Topic: Colly Stories.  
yic Positive message. Take care of the people around you.

I [redacted] I lived on the walli for most of my life living in tin shacks and it get very hot in summertime so we sit out sit under bough shade and water it down so it felt cool. when it rain we would get a bucket for the water from leaking roof. For the shower we would all we go to the shower block. One for the ladies and one for the men. At same block, there were four cement laundry tubs. Beside tubs there were two large coppers to boil the bath sheets. Underneath the coppers we make fire so coppers would boil. Back in those days they were the best time of my life.

While this student had not met the required literacy standard by the end of Intake 1, he has since gone on to enrol in Intake 2 and the CPO reports that he is one of the most regular attendees in the class.

Student perceptions of literacy gains were also strongly evident in interviews and corroborate the more objective data presented above. A typical comment by students was 'I've learned to read and write and understand words I couldn't do before. I can pick up a book now and read' (male, 57



years). Other students reported being able to read newspapers, spell better and read the signage in supermarket aisles. Another comment by a student highlights the impact that the Campaign can have on home literacy practices. This father of three young daughters remarked 'I know I've improved 'cause we're fightin' over the home readers now' (male, 50 years).

#### 4.4 PSYCHOSOCIAL GAINS

Closely linked to literacy gains is a tangible improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem. This finding has been consistent in previous evaluations as well as recently published studies (for examples, see Boughton & Williamson, 2019; Williamson & Boughton, 2019). Interviews with staff and students provide countless descriptions of the transformation of withdrawn people into more confident and engaged members of the

community. In one such example, staff reported that a female student came into class early one morning 'with the biggest smile on her face' and told them she had been able to help her son the night before with his homework – 'very proud, she was'. In another example, staff recounted the story of B, a man in his mid- 40s who had been confined to his home for many years following the death of his only brother in a car accident. Before the Campaign, when visitors went to the home he shared with his grandmother, he would retreat to his room. But a few weeks into Campaign classes, B was the first to the classroom each morning, helping staff to prepare breakfast. According to his grandmother, 'the Campaign was the only thing that's gotten him out of his comfort zone'. Most significantly, after several months of silently acknowledging others, B began initiating morning greetings. No one recalls ever having heard him speak before. And while throughout the literacy

*Photo:* Staff, students and children reading in the Collarenebri Literacy for Life classroom. Credit: Adam Sharman





## STUDENT PROFILE

### Student profile

MB began the Aboriginal adult literacy Campaign classes as a shy and reluctant student. With several young children, one of whom is in foster care, she had many demands on her life. Early on her attendance was quite poor and she was quick to blame others, saying that staff hadn't picked her up. After nearly pulling out twice, one of the Facilitators spoke to her and explained that they were going to give her a chance to catch up and that she should come for her kids. After that, she attended class every day and was always positive. She particularly enjoyed the games in Phase 3: Post Literacy. She'd never played trivia before and when the 'Know Your Town' trivia lesson was held; it was the first time staff saw a really genuine smile on her face. According to the Campaign Project Officer, 'she was laughing and talking trash - it was great!'

MB went on to achieve all the goals she set for herself in Lesson 1: she got her license back, bought a car and graduated from the literacy campaign. Her next goal is to get a job. Below is the speech MB gave at the intake 1 graduation:

Hi Everyone,

My name is MB. I would like to thank you all for coming along today to help us celebrate our 'Yes, I Can! graduation'. I'd also like to say thanks to our facilitators for helping us all come this far. The YIC program was happy and fun to do, it helped me to read and write better than I use to, before the YIC

**program I could not read my kids news letters or my own mail. I use to get 1 of my family members to read it to me.**

**I'm also proud of my mother M for doing the YIC program with me she's also graduating today. I'm also happy for all the other students that's made it this far. Congratulations everyone. WE DONE IT!!**

classes, B remained reluctant to read his work aloud or have his writing checked and corrected, this student developed independence and confidence as a result of improved literacy. Staff and family report 'he's able to do his shopping better; he can recognise words on the list and match them to words at the shop'.

Other students also cited growing independence as an impact in their own lives of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. A young woman said 'I feel independent now. Like I can do things on my own; I don't need people to help me. I can send messages without asking my other half 'what's this word and what's that word?'. She also felt that the Campaign had given her the capacity and confidence to take the next step in her life. She went on to explain that 'if it wasn't for Literacy for Life, I wouldn't have my café – gettin' it up and runnin'. Like learning how to do the course, reading's the main part. I'm moving forward to go to TAFE to do my Barista course and OH&S Food Health and Safety course' (female, 28 years).

This is true also of another student who gained the confidence through the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign to go on to a driver training course. The Campaign Coordinator reported that:


*We've got S going for her L's [learner driver licence] at Birrang now, and she wouldn't have been confident enough to do that in the past, so that's a sign that it's working.*

The psychosocial gains of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign are not only experienced by students. The staff of this intake also reported changes in their sense of self. The youngest of the three Facilitators who was painfully shy at the start of the Campaign now perceives herself as 'someone who has something to say and can be listened to' (CPO report). After volunteering to write and deliver a speech at the community BBQ following the end of Phase 2: YIC lessons, she commented 'I wouldn't ever have imagined being like this'. Another Facilitator, for whom the Campaign was her first paid employment, remarked that the Campaign had 'ruined her'. She now knows she cannot return to her previous life and has taken on the position of secretary of the Collarenebri CWP as well as applying for work with the Australian Electoral Commission in upcoming NSW Land Council elections. Both these women claim that learning to deliver lessons in front of their own community has given them the skills and confidence to take on more in the community.

## 4.5 STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY COHESION AND EMPOWERMENT

The final impact this report details is at the community-level. The first intake of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Collarenebri functioned as a rallying point for the whole community. Staff and community leaders



A woman with long, wavy brown hair is wearing a black graduation cap and a vibrant, multi-colored patterned shirt. She is standing and looking directly at the camera. Behind her, a young girl is peeking over her shoulder. In the foreground, two other young girls are looking at the camera. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting with large windows.

**Photo:** Intergenerational impact! Students often sign up to join the Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign so they can help their children at school. Photo credit: Adam Sharman



## OUTCOMES

emphasised the solidarity that resulted from the Campaign. The Campaign Coordinator remarked that the classes 'broke a lot of barriers, with people sitting side by side that don't usually talk outside of class'. One of the Facilitators, herself a community leader and member of the CWP, said that:

*The whole course has helped to bring the community together. The community was becoming quite divided, but this has helped to mend rifts. It's not back to where it once was, but it's getting better.*  
(Facilitator, Phase 3: Post-literacy evaluation report).

This sentiment was echoed by a local leader who said in his speech at the graduation of Intake 1 students:

*I was proud of the program and I am even a lot prouder today, to see all you people that started from scratch, started from way back, to finally be*

*here today. This is the first time that I can remember for a long time, that Colly has come together, united, on one thing. We hope there is more of it.*

These comments are particularly significant given the doubts some in the community had expressed before the Campaign began about the ability of Collarenebri to overcome divisions and work together to implement the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.

Further evidence that the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, and in particular the 'Red Shed', in which classes were held, became a community hub, can be seen in the numbers of services and organisations that interacted with the Campaign over the nine-month period (see Table 6 below).

**Table 6. List of organisations interacting with staff, students and the wider community through the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.**

### COMMUNITY GROUPS AND LOCAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE ABORIGINAL ADULT LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Organisation/service	Involvement
Collarenebri Community Working Group	Co-designed the Phase 3: Post-literacy program
Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service	Regular attendance at Community Advisory Committee meetings; had students visit their centre in Walgett, presented sessions during Phase 3: Post-literacy
Collarenebri Central School	Provided computer rooms for computer classes
NSW Aboriginal Land Council	Deputy Chair (Anne Dennis) ran sessions in Phase 3: Post-literacy on the Aboriginal Education Consultancy Group, the Local Aboriginal Land Council, and on how to effectively communicate with the local school.
The NSW Ambulance Service and Colly Ambos	Ran Phase 3: Post-literacy sessions on diabetes, strokes, heart attacks and asthma.
Western Aboriginal Tenancy Advice and Advocacy Service	Ran a session on tenant rights as well as a one-on-one clinic.
Lifeline	Conducted a session on budgeting
Murray Darling Basin Authority and Commonwealth Environment Water Office	Ran a Phase 3: Post-literacy session on river management and facilitated a class excursion to the Gwydir Wetlands.

Organisation/service	Involvement
National Association for Loss and Grief (NALAG)	Did a session on grief and loss during Phase 3: Post-literacy
St John's Ambulance	Delivered a basic first aid course
Aboriginal Civil Legal Aid Service	Discussed consumer rights, focusing on loans

That the Campaign was able to attract a high level of support and buy-in from local and non-local service providers went a large way to dispelling a common view that 'people don't normally show an interest in Colly' (staff interview, June 2019). By investing in the community, the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign encouraged others to do so. The corollary of this is that the people of Colly seem more willing to invest in their future. According to one of the Facilitators and community leaders, the Campaign, and in

particular Phase 3: Post-literacy, 'has given people the confidence to know that they can speak up if they choose to – it's an option'.

## 5. CAMPAIGN PROCESSES

### 5.1 WHAT WORKED WELL

In this section of the evaluation, I focus attention on characteristics and processes that contributed to the outcomes detailed above.

**Photo:** "Perhaps the key component of LFLF's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign model is community ownership." Through its use of a locally-led model, the Campaign is shaped by community, for community. Left to right: Joyce Sands, Gloria Adams, Louise Sims, Nakita Sands, Kiesha Walford (Facilitator), Sheila Adams, Aunty Jedda Flick, Shane Caldwell, Katy Jasper (Coordinator), with children. Photo credit: Adam Sharman.



### STAFF CAPACITY AND COMMITMENT

The onsite team consisting of CPO, Campaign Coordinator and three Facilitators, while inexperienced in running a literacy Campaign, brought considerable capacity and commitment to their work. The Coordinator and one Facilitator had broad previous work experience and skills which they quickly applied to the new context. The CPO was well-grounded in the mass literacy campaign model and used this knowledge effectively<sup>7</sup>. The other two Facilitators had an aptitude for teaching which served them well in the early weeks of the Campaign.

This solid foundation was significantly strengthened by an exceptional work ethic. In the Phase 2 intensive training in which staff learn how to deliver the YIC literacy lessons, the Facilitators took it upon themselves to practice lesson delivery and reread the lesson plans after hours. It is an expectation that Facilitators are always two lessons ahead of the students, but by early May, one of the Facilitators had watched and prepared all the lessons in the 12-week course. It was evident that the local staff felt the need to establish their authority and legitimacy as the classroom teachers. The Coordinator explained the pressure in these terms: 'The Colly mob are a tough audience and you don't get a second chance with them'.

Classroom staff were also clearly committed to the learning experience of each student. They regularly went overtime on their afternoon lesson preparation sessions, striving to find the 'right way' to present lesson content to each student. This often led to lengthy and robust discussions about the learning styles of different students. To accommodate individual student needs, the Facilitators and CPO also devised supplementary teaching material and homework worksheets. These were gratefully received by students.

The CPO demonstrated exceptional commitment and diligence in her role. She maintained meticulous records and lists to ensure the smooth running of the Campaign. She also created new processes for data management and ongoing analysis and feedback which allowed her to quickly identify and act on issues as they arose. Most significantly, when it became clear there was to be no full-time onsite Technical Adviser deployed to Collarenebri, the CPO set about acquiring the knowledge and advice which allowed her to be more effective in the classroom. Most of this work was undertaken after hours.

### STAFF RELATIONS

The commitment of the local team was arguably only sustainable because of the collaborative, respectful and supportive workplace environment that the CPO created. Open and frank communication between staff members was facilitated by weekly staff meetings as well as daily 'mini meetings'. These regular formal meetings were a forum for the transparent and timely addressing of issues. Following the three-week training prior to the commencement of Phase 2: YIC lessons, the CPO employed the tool of critical reflection, which is an integral part of the mass campaign's popular education approach, to great effect. This allowed all to have their say, be respectfully heard and solutions to be suggested and tested. This strategy was particularly helpful in managing an ongoing 'personality clash' between two of the staff members, which in less collegial workplaces could have threatened to derail the Campaign, as this extract acknowledges:

*We have had quite a few old rivalries and issues flare up in the last few days between the staff. I think I need to get everyone in for another extra team meeting and action reflection session. I might lead a frank conversation about the Working Well Together rules and how they apply to us as staff. I think it might also be relevant to have some conversations around being positive and constructive in the*

<sup>7</sup> The CPO undertook a substantial study of the Campaign for her Masters thesis. See Weitzel (2018).





**Photo:** Collarenebri Facilitator Kiesha Walford and her daughters Shoquana and Arashiyah, reading together in the Collarenebri Literacy for Life classroom. 'After Literacy for Life, that lifted me as well and made me push harder in life for my family. Anything is possible if you set your mind to it. I did it for my family, not only that I did it to show my kids they can look up to me, they can say my mum did it, so they can do it too.' – Kiesha Walford. Photo credit: Adam Sharman.

*workplace, rather than negative and divisive. Mostly I just want to get across how important it is for us to focus on the good. Perhaps I'll get them to do an exercise where they each have to write down one positive thing about everyone else on the team (CPO fortnightly report, July 2019).*

The CPO also deployed critical reflection as a training tool, assisting the Facilitators to identify areas of improvement in their own lesson delivery. This was highly effective, and the Facilitators grew in confidence and capacity very quickly. Regular group critical reflection also fostered a genuinely collaborative and inclusive workplace in which all staff were involved in decision making. This highly collegial and well-functioning environment

helped the staff maintain a high standard of lesson delivery and student support throughout the Campaign.

## **ONGOING TRAINING AND SUPPORT**

In addition to the phase-based 'block' training<sup>8</sup> new staff undertake, the CPO sought and received the equivalent of two hours per week additional training. This partly reflects the conscientiousness and drive of the CPO and partly the reality of not having a trained and experienced staff member occupying the role of Technical Adviser. The training, which began in Week 3 and took place by phone and email, focused on how to diagnose and

<sup>8</sup> Pre-deployment training (Phase 1); YIC training (Phase 2); Post-literacy training (Phase 3).

meet the literacy needs of the students, as this correspondence with one of the national trainers shows:

*[The CPO] and I are working on how to get literacy improvements despite this large group and without a full-time trained YIC [Technical] advisor. There's no silver bullet but the focus is on Ds and Cs [people who self-assessed at these literacy levels] to shift them hopefully one level. Once we have the ACSF scores it will be easier to target those most in need. If we can do this, I'm hopeful there'll be improvements in literacy as well as maintaining retention (email correspondence, March 2019).*

Training was also key to helping the students consolidate their new literacy skills in Phase 3: Post-literacy. In addition to four days of training around Post-literacy curriculum development and lesson planning, the CPO again initiated further training to develop her knowledge

around scaffolding literacy tasks, as she felt student engagement and attendance in Phase 3: Post-literacy was suffering. The perceived value of the training can be seen in the extract below:

*I really enjoyed the initial training and found it really helpful. I felt like I walked away from that training with a really clear idea of the task at hand and found it quite easy to implement most of the strategies we discussed in the training. I also found the mid-PL [Post-literacy] Zoom session really helpful and morale boosting (Phase 3: Post-literacy staff, written evaluation, October 2019).*

## COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AND COLLABORATION

Perhaps the key component of LFLF's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign model is community ownership. However, the process by which the community comes to feel empowered by and

**Photo:** Coordinator, Katy Jasper, modelling reading. Katy has worked on the Collarenebri Campaign from the very beginning. Photo credit: Adam Sharman.





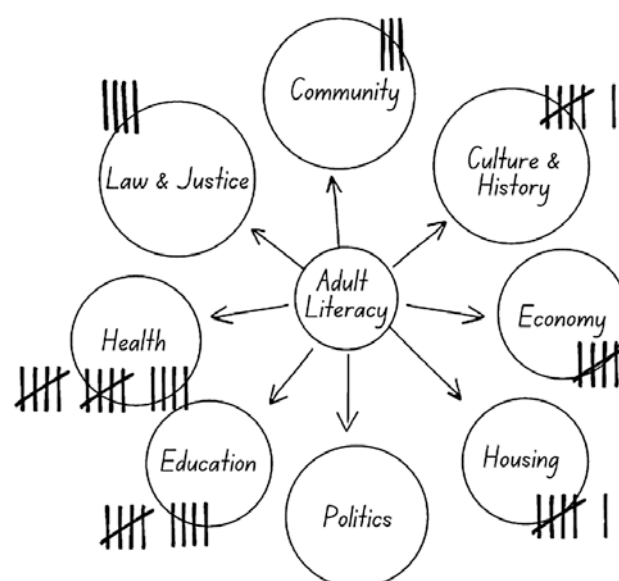
in charge of the literacy Campaign is not an automatic one. Despite having a truncated Phase 1 (to be discussed in the next section), this intake was socialised very well, and the community and local organisations mobilised to support the Campaign.

The main way this was achieved was through effective regular local steering committee meetings. Known as the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), this group met in the Campaign classroom space monthly and drew broad support from existing community leadership, the local medical service, a representative from Centacare and Campaign staff.<sup>9</sup> Particularly noteworthy in this intake was the high number of Campaign students who attended these monthly meetings, learning about minute taking and other procedural matters as well as having a wider forum in which to speak and be heard.

But perhaps the way in which these meetings contributed to community cohesion and buy-in the most was the process of co-design of the Phase 3: Post-literacy program undertaken in early May. The CPO supported by the local staff convened two meetings in one week with the purpose of seeking direct input and views on priority areas for the Phase 3: Post-literacy program. These areas are what LFLF refer to as the 'domains of impact' and are a strategy for targeting the impact of the Campaign in eight areas of people's daily lives. Figure 1 below shows the collaborative curriculum design process at work. The tally marks next to each domain refer to votes for that particular area by those assembled.

**Figure 1. Preferences for domains of literacy to target in Post-Literacy. CAC meeting, May 2019.**

### PHASE 3: POST-LITERACY CO-DESIGN PROCESS



These meetings provided an opportunity for the staff to explain to community members and services how and why low English literacy impacts so many areas of people's lives. Where initially there was some confusion, by the end of the meetings, the people there had a much better understanding of the implications of low literacy and more importantly, what they as a community could do about it. This co-design process no doubt contributed to the sense of empowerment and cohesion the community experienced as a result of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign.

<sup>9</sup> A key feature of every Campaign is the establishment of a local steering group that guides LFLF staff on how to appropriately conduct the Campaign according to the local context. This body is often called the Campaign Working Group but in Collarenebri was known as the Community Advisory Committee.



**Photo:** The Literacy for Life Collarenebri classroom, 2019. Classroom staff were clearly committed to the learning experience of each student. They regularly went overtime on their afternoon lesson preparation sessions, striving to find the 'right way' to present lesson content to each student. Photo credit: Adam Sharman.

## 5.2 AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

This section highlights lessons learned from this first Collarenebri intake that may be of value for planning future Campaigns.

### BETTER FORWARD PLANNING, INCLUDING CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Phase 1, in which the community is socialised to the Campaign model and mobilised to support the Campaign, suffered from unavoidable staffing changes. A similar situation arose regarding the Technical Adviser role, which as indicated earlier, was beyond the resources of this Campaign to fully address.

#### Recommendation

- 1 While LFLF's ability to plan ahead is somewhat curtailed by the year-to-year funding cycle, this has always been the case and therefore, contingency planning should be embedded in the planning of each Campaign and at the phase level. This includes 'catch-up' schedules for staff who join Campaigns outside of the usual training program.



**Photo:** Left to right: Students Louise Simms and Jedda Flick, with Facilitator Kiesha Walford. The Collarenebri Campaign achieved outstanding participation rates and literacy results. Photo credit: Adam Sharman.

## INCONSISTENCY IN THE INTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

As a result of not being able to fully resource the Technical Adviser role, several different LFLF staff members, including the CPO, were involved in assessing the students at the end of Phase 2: YIC lessons. Despite establishing a process for 'handover', there was some misunderstanding among the local staff.

### Recommendation

- 2 LFLF should work towards securing a full-time Technical Adviser (who is not the CPO) who can be on site for the entire Phase 2: YIC lessons period before commencing a new intake.



## REALISTIC WORKLOADS

As was stated earlier, the CPO was obliged to work overtime to complete necessary tasks such as lesson planning for Phase 3: Post-literacy, administrative tasks and email/phone correspondence.

### Recommendation

3

With the high attrition rate of CPOs in the past, managing workloads is crucial for the retention of experienced and skilled staff. Properly staffing each Campaign with a minimum of a CPO and classroom-based Technical Adviser should be a priority.

## TRANSITION FROM PHASE 2 TO PHASE 3

The last area for improvement involves the transition of students and local staff from Phase 2 to Phase 3. Post-literacy did not enjoy the same level of participation and attendance as YIC lessons. The average daily attendance was around nine students and on the least attended days, only three students came. While there is often a dip in attendance as students adjust to the less structured environment of post-literacy activities, the lull in this Campaign persisted through much of Phase 3.

### Recommendation

4

As Phase 3: Post-literacy is the phase in which newly acquired literacy skills are consolidated, it is vital that students attend Phase 3. LFLF might consider not taking a break between Phases 2 and 3, being clearer with students that the Campaign is a six-month commitment and finally, retaining Facilitator involvement in the interest of continuity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

On the evening of Friday 13th September 2019, approximately 80 people assembled at the Collarenebri Town Hall. Sixteen students from the first intake of the Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign were graduating. Several students and locals had been there since the day before setting up tables, hanging banners and making last minute preparations. On the day of the event, local staff worked with the Collarenebri Central School preparing a beautiful meal for the occasion. As each student proudly stepped onto the stage to receive their certificate, family and

friends cheered and cried with pride. All agreed 'it was the kind of day Colly needs more of' (local leader, graduation speech).

This report has highlighted the main outcomes of the first intake of LFLF's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in the small north western NSW town of Collarenebri. Chief among these are the outstanding participation rates and literacy results. Thirty one students enrolled in the Campaign, with 22 completing the Phase 2: YIC lessons, and 16 of these going on to graduate. 92% of students with pre- and post-training ACSF scores improved on at least one literacy indicator. By the end of the Campaign, no student remained at ACSF Pre-Level 1. Staff and students alike reported a range of other benefits including greater



**Photo:** Student, Joyce Sands. Staff and students alike reported a range of benefits including greater confidence and voice, and the community as a whole felt more united as a result of the Campaign. Credit: Adam Sharman.

confidence and voice, and the community as a whole felt more united as a result of the Campaign. These results are even more significant given that the Campaign was not fully funded. Through the engagement of many local services and agencies in Phase 3: Post-literacy, this intake has also shown that the substantial investment LFLF makes in this usually neglected section of the community not only works in its own right but also provides the opportunity for other agencies to do likewise. By all accounts, this has been a highly successful Campaign.

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