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Books in Homes Primary Programme

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Summary

What happens to children's home and school reading practices when students with limited access to books are provided with nine books of their choice per year?

The Books in Homes Primary Programme aims to develop students' love of reading, and create a legacy of books in the homes of students from schools in low socioeconomic areas. A culture of literate practice in English is created through the donation of nine books per year to students who have limited access to books.

Research in Australia and overseas has shown that the creation of a culture of reading in the home – and the quality of the talk that arises from sharing stories – provides an important foundation for literacy development throughout a child's school years.

In recognition of the numbers of Australian students for whom this home reading culture is not established (nor established in English), the Books in Homes Programme provides students in low socioeconomic status schools with nine books of their choice per year. Data collected in formal program evaluations and testimonials from principals and teachers confirm the impact of this program on students' love for reading, the value they place on books and on the development of their literacy skills.

Method

The Books in Homes strategy

'I cannot tell you how much this program has done for the children – and, in many cases, even the parents – by providing books into their homes. Our results in literacy over the past three years have shown a steady improvement, and the student growth rate between years 3 and 5 has been consistently above state average, according to the Basic Skills Tests (BSTs) each year.'
(Principal, Mt Druitt Public School, NSW)

The books provided to students are written in Australian Standard English (ASE), with 25 per cent of them written by Aboriginal authors. They include picture books, novels, non-fiction books, drawing books, how-to books and special interest books. (All books are supplied by [Scholastic Australia](#)). The books are selected by a committee to ensure they are culturally and age appropriate.

At the beginning of each term, the Books in Homes Programme delivers a Preview Pack of 48 titles and book catalogues to each school in the program. Students view the books in the Preview Pack and select titles in age-appropriate reading levels from the book catalogue. The book catalogue also includes a competition that students can enter to win prizes.



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Towards the end of the term, the three books chosen by each student are delivered to the schools, along with waterproof book bags and book labels (to increase the sense of ownership). Books are presented at Book Giving Assemblies, often with the attendance of role models such as authors, sporting identities and members of the community, to emphasise the importance of reading. Additional books and certificates are also provided to use as incentives and rewards. The school library keeps the Preview Pack it receives each term the program operates, amounting to an additional 144 books per year.

The Books in Home Primary Programme originally began in New South Wales, but has been successfully replicated in low socioeconomic status primary schools in remote and urban areas of the Northern Territory, New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland.

In 2001, the program was delivered to approximately 11,000 students in the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland. (For information on this region, see [Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation](#) website) In 2012, it is being delivered to over 25,000 primary school students from 235 low socioeconomic schools across Australia.

Results

'Since the implementation of the Books in Homes Programme, we have seen progress. Literacy levels are improving across the school. Children are spontaneously reading books before and after school in a reading area that we created using the books that came in the Books in Homes Preview Pack. Students also entered the Premier's Reading Challenge over the Christmas holidays of their own choice. When they returned their forms, Books in Homes titles featured on their lists of books. A passion for reading is developing among some of our students. It is encouraging and exciting to regularly see groups of young students come early to school to sit on the lounges and read. My favourite Books-in-Homes-moment continues to be Christmas 2007, where my students asked if I could buy them bookshelves for Christmas!'

(Deputy Principal, Ngalangangpum School, Kununurra, WA)

Findings from two commissioned evaluations of the program (Galleguillos 2001; Koop 2006) indicate that the Books in Homes Programme has helped develop a reading culture in students' homes, and contributed to their literacy development at school.



Table 1: Study of Books in Homes Programmes 2001 and 2006

2001 Study of the Books in Homes Pilot Project in the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland	2006 Study of the impact of the program on students across the Murdi Paaki region of NSW
The overall learning environment in the home	Impact of the program on the school community
80% of students involved in the program came from bookless homes, and many from printless communities.	Overwhelming support for the program shown by students, teachers, principals and librarians.
It was possible for one book provided by the program to be read by up to ten children and adults in a single home.	Students' attitudes to reading improved, in some cases dramatically.
More than half of the participating schools did not allow their students to borrow books overnight from school libraries.	Hundreds to thousands of books now exist in communities where once there were no books.
Parents and community members do not have to be literate in ASE to listen to their children read.	Parents and community members actively participated in the program.
	The mobility of some ATSI families placed their children at an educational disadvantage, but their children took their books with them and continued to read.
	Some positive impacts on the literacy outcomes for the students.
	The books have widened students' experiences.
	There is evidence of increased library borrowing.
	Students' confidence levels in reading are rising and interest in literature is on the increase.
	Improved attitudes to reading for leisure and for research, with increased borrowing from the library.
	Growing recognition among families that literacy is important.
	Increased self-esteem around reading.
	High levels of parental support for the program, especially in schools where this had been encouraged.
	Other family members are reading the books.
	The book selection was praised highly.



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Testimonials from principals and teachers in the schools that supported the program provide further insight into the impact on students and their families:

'The Books in Homes Programme is an inspired idea and a wonderful charity. By giving children quality books, they can develop and maintain a love of books and reading and improve their literacy skills. This is one of the most amazing programs that I have seen for helping children from culturally and linguistically diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.'

(Principal, Plunkett St Public School, NSW)

'Books in Homes has been beneficial in many ways. The program fosters a love of reading and quality literature; provides endless hours of fun and entertainment for many of our students who are geographically isolated; allows students to experience the joy that comes from owning a favourite book that can be read over and over again; helps our children to develop vital language skills; provides parents with something to read to their children that is of good quality. The books allow children to dream and give them a good start to seeing reading as a lifelong source of pleasure.'

(Class teacher, Pomona Public School, NSW)

The significant unexpected (although hoped for) outcome of the program is the extent of the 'community reach' of the books, with one copy of a book being read by siblings, parents and community members. Parents have commented that children are also reading to younger non-school age brothers and sisters. Important shifts in literate practices are occurring in communities, with some parents learning English to keep up with their children:

'We are trying very hard to improve the literacy of the children in our community. We try to foster a love of books and reading in our children, and it is very important that they have books of their own that they can love and enjoy reading. Books in Homes allows the children to select their own books, empowering the children and teaching them that reading is enjoyable, not just something they have to do at school. Our school library is open to the wider community, and we have noticed a steady increase in adults using the library in the past two years. I believe the Books in Homes Programme is breaking down some cultural barriers, and that adults are learning from their children the importance of books and reading.'

(Principal, Kalkaringi School, NT)



Lessons learned

The outcomes of the Books in Home Programme support the research evidence that highlights the importance of shared book reading for students who need to experience the benefits of a strong 'literate culture'. Building such a culture in the home helps to establish rich linguistic experiences around texts, at the same time revealing the value in reading for pleasure, learning and enrichment.

Schools can see the long-term benefits of this home-reading program in improving their students' attitudes towards reading, and in helping them to sustain and extend at school the reading behaviours they develop in the home. They witness the students' empowerment in selecting and owning books and the influence this has on their use of the books on offer in the school library.

Importantly, schools appreciate that reading books in the home manifests more than just literacy practices: the shared experience brings together family members and helps parents feel confident that they can participate in their children's education.

Next steps

The Books in Homes Programme is heavily dependent on grants and other sources of funding. To ensure its sustainability, some schools have opted to fund the program themselves.

In further recognition of the quality of literate experiences in the home and the need to minimise the disadvantage often experienced by children when learning to read in English (see Bridging the Gap project, Freeman & Bochner 2008), a 0–3 program has been piloted in the Northern Territory where parents choose the books to read to their child. Although the parents may have limited English, the shared reading begins the process of 'book talk'. Early indications are that this pilot program is meeting a substantial need in the Indigenous community:

'Books in Homes has proven to be a critical tool in engaging families and contributing to children's school readiness. It is predominantly used in the community playgroups, where the distribution of books helps parents become actively involved in their children's learning. Having suitable, high-quality books available enables our staff to better model, coach and support family members to engage in pre-reading with their children.'

(Director, Indigenous Early Learning Programs)



Research base

Identifying the need for books in homes

'Books in Homes is an extremely valuable program that has put books into the homes of children who did not have any, or had only a very few. One of the things I like best about the program is that it gives the children ownership and the realisation that they can be a reader. Some of the children may rarely – if ever – get anything brand new that belongs solely to them, but three times a year they get to select and own beautiful brand-new books.'

(Principal, Buronga Public School, NSW)

Several decades ago, a benchmark longitudinal study conducted in the United States (Heath 1983) highlighted the disparity of reading and language practices in children's homes differentiated by culture and socioeconomic status. The reading practices, vocabulary and use of literary language valued in schools was noticeably absent in the families of disadvantaged communities. More recently, a large-scale study that examined 70,000 cases in 27 countries also established a relationship between the reading culture and practices around books in the home and children's literacy development at school (Evans, Kelly, Sikara & Treiman 2010; Henderson & Mapp 2002). Data from the OECD has shown that, in Australia, home-education resources such as books have been found to be lowest for Indigenous students (De Bortoli & Cresswell 2004). As a result of findings such as these, there has been strong advocacy for programs and initiatives to encourage family participation in children's literacy education (for example, Cairney & Ruge 1998).

The Books in Homes Australia Primary Programme, which began in 2001, is a charitable, not-for-profit foundation, supported through grants, donations and the voluntary assistance of academics, librarians, authors and representatives from education departments and jurisdictions and Aboriginal communities. The core objective of the program is to reach students in low socioeconomic status schools and:

- encourage and support reading and literacy in the home
- increase the involvement of parents/caregivers/community members in supporting students' literacy development
- improve students' literacy levels.

communities come from bookless homes, lack access to public libraries and are not read to in the home by parents or caregivers.



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Through the process of selecting nine books per year to keep and read at home, it is hoped that students and their families view reading as an enjoyable activity; interact around the shared reading of the book; create a legacy of books in the home from which other family members can benefit; gain access to the written conventions of Australian Standard English; and build foundations for English-language learning in the home.

Further reading and links

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