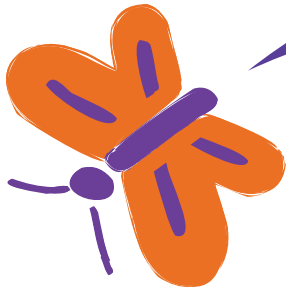


Read to me I ♥ it!



Read to Me I Love It! ***Evaluation of the Better Beginnings program*** ***for Remote Aboriginal Communities***

*Developed through Better Beginnings Family Literacy program,
an initiative of the State Library of Western Australia.*

Dr Lennie Barblett 2012

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
<hr/>	
Better Beginnings for remote Aboriginal communities	
<hr/>	
Description of the program	4
<hr/>	
The evaluation	4
<hr/>	
Findings and Discussion	7
<hr/>	
<i>Better Beginnings</i> delivery and implementation	10
<hr/>	
Perceptions of the effectiveness of <i>Better Beginnings</i> resources	13
<hr/>	
The sustainability of <i>Better Beginnings</i>	17
<hr/>	
Impact of <i>Better Beginnings</i> for remote Aboriginal communities	20
<hr/>	
What factors appear to support or detract from the implementation and outcomes of the program?	21
<hr/>	
Areas of improvement	23
<hr/>	
APPENDIX	
<hr/>	
APPENDIX 1-3	26

When I first arrived the kids came to school with very little [book] knowledge. I had kids turning up in class that didn't know how to open a book, didn't know how to approach it and so now I think the books, like are being used at home because the kids come in and sit down and they say 'I've got this book', and they'll, you know, and they do know how to turn the pages and they're sort of engaged with them. [Teacher Aboriginal Community school]

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We look forward to working again with those mentioned and those we are yet to meet in the ongoing evaluation.

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Better Beginnings for remote Aboriginal communities

Description of the program

Better Beginnings for remote Aboriginal communities started in 2010 with the aim of bringing literacy resources to families with children up to five years of age in remote communities. It was developed as part of the *Better Beginnings* program which is a universal program for children and their families that aims to develop literacy skills through fostering a love of books and language. A finding in the larger evaluation of this project (Barrat-Pugh, Rohl & Statkus, 2010)¹ found that there was a need for targeted strategies and resources to better support Aboriginal families and hence *Better Beginnings* for remote Aboriginal communities was devised.

This program is an initiative of the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) supported by the Department for Regional Development and Lands, Rio Tinto and Royalties for Regions. The program aims to assist in the facilitation of local Aboriginal community councils to empower local Aboriginal people to form a network of distributors who may work in schools, health centres or other services in communities. In this way the community has responsibility for the delivery of the program, which is a central tenant of the *Better Beginnings* initiative for supporting the development of children's literacy learning in remote communities. The resources which are specifically designed and chosen to reflect Aboriginal history, culture and everyday life come in the form of quality books, stories and rhymes, DVDs and posters. The program aims to stimulate children, family and carers' literacy practices in a fun, easy, relevant and meaningful way and compensate for a lack of reading material in remote communities. Resources include T-shirts for children, alphabet and number posters, an Aboriginal newspaper for adults and a pamphlet on the importance of reading to children. The program also aims to get more children and families to use their local library.

The evaluation

Two sites were selected to evaluate the *Better Beginnings* for remote Aboriginal communities. One site (Site 1) is a new site for the program and the research team accompanied the State Library team on implementation in March 2012 and later on their own in October of the same year. The second site (Site 2) had the program implemented in 2010 and received one visit from the research team in October 2012. The sites themselves need to be described to set the context for the evaluation.

Description of Site 1

Site 1 would not be typically described as a remote Aboriginal community, however, the Aboriginal community in town is isolated by social and economic means. The town is geographically isolated as the nearest large city is five to seven hours away by road. Site 1 is a mixed racial town of about 800 people with half being Aboriginal. However this proportion is difficult to confirm, as there are many transient Aboriginal families and/or family members moving from town to town. The town is spread out and has a major highway coursing through it that divides the school, hospital and police station from the residential area. The main street holds the Shire Offices, one supermarket, three hotels, a few small shops and a petrol station.

Job opportunities and employment positions available in the town revolve around service amenities such as the hospital, school, community services, community infrastructure and commercial outlets. Migrant workers on visas are often used to fill jobs such as cleaning, shop assistants and bar work. An Aboriginal Corporation provides some community services and engineering works that offer a number of avenues of employment for Aboriginal people.

¹ Barrat-Pugh, C., Rohl, M., & Statkus, S. (2010) *Better Beginnings: Making a difference. The report on the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007-2010*. Edith Cowan University

At Site 1 the District High School caters for children from Kindergarten to Year 10. Children's attendance at the District High School is sporadic, falls off after Year 3 and is problematic. Stakeholders interviewed spoke of numbers such as 30% to 50% of enrolled students attending and how this improved marginally during the year. The school at the time of this study was undergoing staffing issues resulting from the difficulty in attracting and maintaining a school Principal. During the year the school had three Principals. The Kindergarten, Pre-primary and Year 1 / 2 teachers were all new graduates in their first or second year of teaching.

The educational needs of Site 1 are well documented with very poor NAPLAN and AEDI results (see Appendix 1). The NAPLAN results for 2012 showed that more than 60% of the children were below the minimum standard for Reading while approximately 50% were below for Writing, Spelling and Grammar and Punctuation for their age. Overall in the AEDI results for the area 68.4 % of children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains and 52.6 % are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.

The local library is housed in the Shire office and access is through Shire reception and then the town museum. A sign at the door says that an adult must accompany all children and there is no sign on the outside of the building to suggest the library is inside. Library membership is small and on the first visit there was one Aboriginal adult member who borrows DVDs. The Library duties in the first visit were shared between a Shire administration clerk on the front desk who maintained the library membership and another clerk (an international traveler on a working Visa) delivering a story-time for young children once a week. During the year the duties changed as the front desk clerk left and another international traveler on a working visa was employed who took over all library duties, membership and story time.

Description of Site 2

Site 2 is an original site used at the start of the program so the program has been delivered there for the last 18 months. It is a remote Aboriginal community of around 150 people that was established in 1989. It is more than 2,000 kms from Perth, 200 kms from the nearest town and over 500 kms from the nearest large urban centre. Access to the community is over very degraded gravel tracks and the community is cut off during the wet season. The Aboriginal council has the responsibility for the school which was founded in 1991 and invites services into the community. At the time of the visit the community was suffering from a lack of things to do outside of school. The tele-centre that housed computers and a source of information and communication was not open as there was no one to operate it. This was the same for the Adult Education Centre or Cultural Resource Centre, also closed due to lack of personnel. The health services flew into town every Thursday and held a clinic. Most activities in the community revolved around the school and the small staff were active in providing services outside of their normal educational remit. For example, they held community sport two nights a week on the community oval and basketball courts and invited families to use the school library or come and hear stories read one afternoon after school.

The community appears to radiate from the shop, oval, service buildings and school. It is surrounded by a red landscape dotted with low scrubby bush and in the near distance is a range of hills and rocky outcrops. Next to the school is a corrugated shed with a kitchen and small dining hall called the Home Maker Centre. Some of the women of the community are employed to cook the daily lunch for the school children and this often becomes the social point for the women of the community. At the time of the visit there was no Chief Executive Officer of the community and there had been some disarray due to alcohol coming into the dry community.

All children attending the school spoke Kriol at home and at times at school. Attendance at school was good for the junior part of the school (nearly all young children in the community attended), but as children grew older their attendance after Year 5 was not always regular (especially boys). The senior part of the school had one class of about 14 and comprised mostly of girls.

While no NAPLAN results were found for this community, the nearest town's results from 2012 (see Appendix 2) show that 50% of children are below the national minimum standard for Reading and Writing and 57% are below

for Spelling and 74% for Grammar and Punctuation. Overall in this district the AEDI results report there are 50% of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s and 29.8 % are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.

Evaluation questions

A number of questions were investigated to provide data that were analysed to form the key recommendations. The research questions are as follows:

- What are parents/carers and stakeholders beliefs and perceptions of early literacy and family literacy practices?
- What are the levels of children's book sharing understanding?
- How is the program implemented and who receives it?
- What are parents/stakeholders views and use of the *Better Beginnings* resources?
- What are stakeholders' previous experiences of *Better Beginnings*?
- How is *Better Beginnings* sustained through the library, school & community?
- What are the librarian's duties?
- What is the impact of *Better Beginnings*?
- What has hindered or helped implementation and sustainability of *Better Beginnings*?

Data collection and analysis

This project used a qualitative approach. Interviews were the main technique used with the addition of information from observation of program delivery and involvement, case studies and photographs. In both sites permission was sought from and given by all participants interviewed. The interviews were mostly taped but some situations with Aboriginal women did not allow for such formality so notes were taken, or informal conversations noted after they took place. It was hoped that pre and post literacy tests would be used with classes of children but for a number of reasons, which will be described, this was not possible.

The data were analysed by collating answers to questions by tallying similar answers and by clustering answers in common themes. The participants' words have been used to describe the findings as much as possible. As each site had some differences in context that affected the outcome, further description of methods has been given for each site.

Description of methods used for Site 1

The first visit with the State Library team was used to investigate existing Aboriginal family literacy practices and the book knowledge of young Aboriginal children. The visit also allowed the research team to observe the initial set up of the *Better Beginnings* program in a community. Interviews, conversations and observations were the main sources of information on both visits (late March and October, 2012). In two visits 39 interviews were carried out (see Appendix 3 for interview schedule). Of these interviews 12 were with parents/carers/senior Aboriginal women, 4 with Community Health, 2 with foster carers with Department for Child Protection, 3 with teachers at the school, 3 with Aboriginal Corporation workers (playgroup and Women's group), 6 with Shire Councillors and 9 with the Shire Officers. An observation of one of the State Library team giving a familiarisation session to the new Librarian using the information file on how to engage more Aboriginal families with the library was carried out.

Interviews of the teachers were only permissible on the second visit but informal conversations took place on the first visit. Permission to interview the Kindergarten and Pre-primary children was given by one Principal and then

rescinded by the next. Therefore a couple of informal interviews were done with children in their homes but no focus groups could be held to ascertain children's literacy levels. Data about this has been drawn from teacher interviews and general interview data, as well as perceptions gained from NAPLAN and AEDI data for the area.

The issue of continuity of staff was a concern as people changed jobs or left town during the year. For example, the District High School had its third Principal of the year, the Library personnel, playgroup and Women's group workers, and the CEO of the Aboriginal Corporation all changed during the year.

The Aboriginal population of the town also mirrored this as the resources were distributed to 36 children during the months of September and October, of which 12 had been noted to move out of town. Of the remaining 24 children not all were in town during the week of the visit, some of the children belonged to the same family and six were either attending or moved on from the Department for Child Protection foster facility.

Description of methods for Site 2

The *Better Beginnings* program was introduced in 2010 so on the one visit taken in October 2012 the main data collection methods were interviews, focus groups, observations and informal conversations. In this visit 16 individual interviews and two focus groups interviews of children were completed. In the 16 interviews, participants included 4 teachers and the Principal, 5 female Aboriginal ancillary teaching staff of which two were female elders, 5 carers at the Home Maker Centre and the shop-keeper. The playgroup leader who was the distributor was absent from the community and there was no CEO at this time or any other service provider that lived and worked on the site. Focus groups were held with the K-Year 1 (n = 9) children and the Year 2-5 (n = 8) children. Observations were made during class time in the K- Year 1 and school assemblies. Literacy tests were not carried out on the children as there was no baseline data to provide a comparison and the teacher was not sure who had received the resources.

Findings and Discussion

Literacy practices of Aboriginal families and children

Literacy practices of Aboriginal families and children Site 1

The *Better Beginnings* resources had only been given out in September of the same year in Site 1. This meant that the resources had only been in the community for four weeks or less for some families at the time of the second data collection so this needs to be taken into account when reading the findings and discussion.

Mostly all the participants interviewed believed that Aboriginal families did not regularly read to their children. The mothers/carers all agreed that reading to children was important but not all could give a reason why. Those that did suggested that reading to children, "*helps them learn quicker*", "*gets their brain working*", "*is a bonding time for parents and kids*" and children "*learn how to speak*". Of the mothers/carers interviewed, 5 said they read to their children, 4 said no and 3 said sometimes, but not often. One of the mothers said that the books were there for the children to look at.

One of the Councillors who had lived in this area all his life and knew many Aboriginal families said, "*They are rarely home to be reading to their children.*" A therapist with community health who had been a junior primary teacher at the school for the last five years said, "*some kids have quite good literacy practices...but not the majority. A lot of families don't, don't care.*"

Three of the four Councillors interviewed and the Aboriginal Health Nurse (first visit) said that Aboriginal families were more likely to put on a DVD than read to their children. This was corroborated by one mother's response who, when asked on the first visit if she had children's books at home and she said, "*No, but I've got all the DVD's. Play School and the Wiggles.*" One of the Shire Officers said she thought it was "*a hard task to get indigenous people reading*".



The reading material available in the local supermarket.



One of the town Councillors interviewed, said that the literacy of the Aboriginal adults was low and added that *“young Aboriginal men around town don’t apply for the mines for jobs because they can’t read and fill out application forms for jobs.”* He went onto say that he sees *“children who can’t even read the basic cost signs in the shop, even for a bar of chocolate...to change their situation they need to begin with literacy”.*

All of the stakeholders (Teachers, Shire officers, Community health, Councillors and Foster carers) spoke of the importance of reading to children and having books in the homes. One Shire officer said, *“It might help them I guess when they get to school and the teachers, so it’s not just the first time that they’ve seen that sort of thing (meaning a book).”*

The first visit² playgroup leader believed that *“parents don’t understand the value of books”*. She also assisted as an Ambulance Officer and described the many homes she had visited in the course of her duties as not having furniture. She

said she had not seen books and she attributed this to more immediate problems families had of anti-social behaviours and economic worries. The Aboriginal Community Nurse agreed that most families did not have books in their homes. She spoke of the families with younger children telling lots of stories about their day and camping out in the bush, a more traditional way of passing on information.



Children’s reading material available in the thrift shop.

It was a common theme amongst everyone interviewed (service providers, mothers) that most Aboriginal homes did not have books or reading materials in them. Access to books for young children was definitely an issue in town. The local supermarket sold magazines for

² The terms ‘first visit’ and ‘second visit’ denote that it was not the same person interviewed in that position on both visits.

adults, newspapers and a few children's books. No participants in service occupations reported that they had seen Aboriginal people reading in public.

The thrift shop run by the Aboriginal Corporation had a small box of second hand books. The books were all fiction mainly Walt Disney characters. None of the books in either shop depicted Aboriginal life or life in the outback.

Aboriginal children's literacy practices were reported to be poor (supported by the AEDI data) and only a few came to school knowing how to hold or role play reading a book. The first playgroup leader described the children coming to playgroup at 3 years old not knowing how to hold a book. She said her friend who was the Kindergarten teacher in 2011 dedicated part of the morning mat time to teaching children how to hold a book and turn the pages. The current Kindergarten teacher said the children are *"very rough with the books, so we talk about how to hold them, how to turn them, which way we turn them and all of that, and they are a lot better now"*. The Pre-primary/Year 1 teacher was asked to rate her current class on early print awareness. She said the majority of children in her class at the beginning of the year could not identify the title of a book, or turn pages left to right, had no foundation alphabetic knowledge, nor could they distinguish words from letters.

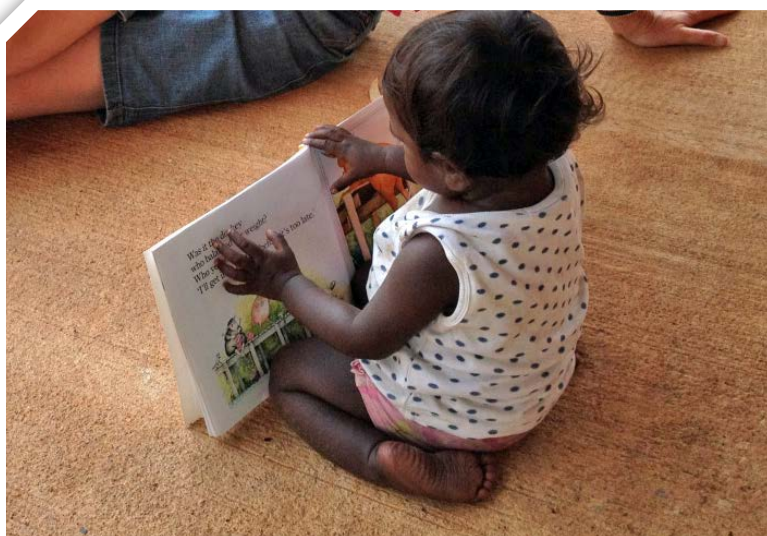
Literacy practices of Aboriginal families and children Site 2

The literacy practices of the Aboriginal families in Site 2 are mixed but most participants (14) reported that parents don't regularly read to their children. One of the Elders who worked at the school said she read to their children. She said it was good to have the books at home *"because when they're feeling tired or something we could read them a bedtime story so they can go to sleep, yeah."* Two of the women talked about the older kids reading to the smaller kids. The

K/1 teacher shared her observations of family literacy practices in the community. She said, *"I don't know so much whether it's parents or whether it's older siblings. I think a lot of the younger mums, like in their twenties and thirties are quite literate, and so I think they're reading a lot and sharing texts and stuff with their kids because they've got that literacy level."* Another teacher said, *"There are definitely a few that read to their children and encourage them. I think there are lots of stories told as a literacy practice."*

The 10 Aboriginal women interviewed (5 school Ancillary staff, including 2 Elders and 5 women at the Home Maker Centre) described the lack of reading material in the community.

The only reading material that went into



Young child displaying book literacy practices

homes (for all- not just young children) came from the school, as there was nothing sold in the shop. When asked if parents in the community read to their children half of the women said no while others said some did. All of the women said it was important for parents to read to their children. Reasons they gave were, *"To keep them (children) strong in their reading"* and they *"learn more"*. When in the Home Maker Centre the research team were able to observe a young child of 18 months being shown pictures from the teacher's discarded magazines. The research team gave her a book out of the pack and it was evident that even at a young age she knew how to hold the book and role play reading.

The acting Principal acknowledged the lack of reading material. She said, *"We give them books. At first I thought we were too liberal with that because sometimes you find books down the tip and stuff, but I think anything to get them reading, that's a huge difference, because they don't have bookshelves or newspapers or magazines, or even*

internet. ...that's why it is really valuable having the *Better Beginnings*." She went onto describe children coming to school, speaking Kriol and not knowing any concepts of print. The school had just begun a "[Name of Community] Reads" project to get adults to come and read to their children in the school library on Wednesday afternoons, to increase family literacy practices.

The school gave children books as prizes weekly (not *Better Beginnings* books) and the only other reading materials observed in the community were the magazines and newspapers that the teachers had received in the mail and had finished with. On the only occasion a man was observed at the Home Maker Centre, he was sitting away from the women and was reading a teacher's discarded *Women's Weekly*. There were two other literacy projects, "*Books in Homes*" and the Indigenous Literacy Foundation that supplied reading material to children over 5, however the projects had finished (as they were not continuous). This meant that *Better Beginnings* was the only continual access point for reading materials in the community for children.

The women described how the previous Principal had ordered bookshelves in flat packs after she had found books at the community tip (not *Better Beginnings* books). Some of the Aboriginal men in the community and teachers assembled them and took them to houses to encourage families to keep books and to treat them well. The women in the Home Maker Centre said it was very difficult to keep hold of books as one described, "*the older kids come and take all kids books away. I have taken out the bookshelf and put the empty cupboard in my room to keep things.*" Only one woman out of all at the school and the Home Maker Centre said she still used her bookshelf for books. She kindly allowed a photo to be taken of her shelf in her house.

Similarities and differences in literacy practices of Aboriginal families and children across two sites

In both contexts, the literacy practices of Aboriginal families were mixed as reported by all participants however most parents do not read regularly to their children. There was description of some older children reading to young children. In both sites the lack of books for children to read was an issue. While Site 1 was in a bigger town with some access to books, general observations from all participants was that most Aboriginal children do not have access to books in their homes. The books sold in the local shops were not quality books for children nor do they depict any Aboriginal families, Australian animals or scenarios that connect to children's lives in the town. In Site 2 no books were available for sale in the community and the school was identified as the only source of books for children. The school staff in Site 2 had endeavoured to improve family literacy practices by inviting families to a Library afternoon once a week. They had also introduced bookshelves into homes in which to keep books such as the *Better Beginnings* resources. All participants in both sites thought that it was important to read to children.



Bookshelf in home

Better Beginnings delivery and implementation

Better Beginnings delivery and implementation Site 1

The local Aboriginal Corporation delivers a number of services, one being an Aboriginal playgroup for young children. The State Library team selected this service as the delivery site for the program and the Playgroup leader accepted responsibility for distributing resources. The Playgroup at the time of our first visit had no children attending as the

Playgroup leader said they had started school. The two white Australian women who worked at the Playgroup at the first visit were waiting for families to visit and at that time there were no Aboriginal children attending. The Playgroup workers had changed by the time of our second visit and the new Playgroup leader had an Aboriginal assistant who was from the town. Rhoda (pseudonym) was a local Aboriginal woman and knew all the families which was invaluable knowledge. Rhoda knew who had left, who was in which house and what was a good day to approach a family or group for distribution of resources and interviews.

On the first visit in March, the State Library team visited the Aboriginal Corporation to explain the program and its delivery. This meeting included the new CEO (his first day on the job) and a regional overseer of Corporation business. The CEO³ was enthusiastic and commented on the need for such a program and both displayed knowledge of the benefits of sound family literacy practices. The State Library team then visited the playgroup workers and briefly explained the program, their role and what the program hoped to achieve. The first bags were left at the playgroup for delivery. The State Library team made visits to the Department for Child Protection, the Principal at the school and Community Health to acquaint them with the program and that it was starting in town. One of the State Librarians also held an introductory session with the first visit Librarian on how to attract more Aboriginal families to the library.

The first bags that were left at the playgroup were not distributed during the first half of the year. The playgroup leaders did not attract families to the playgroup and the second visit playgroup assistant said the new playgroup leader (who was on holiday at the time of our visit and since resigned), did not know what to do with the bags in the cupboard. It appears that when the research team made inquiries about times for interviews on the second visit, some of the bags were distributed at a BBQ in town. The second visit playgroup assistant explained what happened to the other bags, *"...the other lady that works with me and she didn't know nothing about the books. She knew they were there but she didn't know what they was for."* She went on to say, *"Betty (pseudonym, for the Women's business worker at the Aboriginal Corporation) said, 'Jump in, Rhoda we're going for a ride, we're going to go and give these books out. And then later on I want you to continue giving them out and everything'".*

The books had been distributed to 36 Aboriginal children between the age of 1 and 7 and it appears they targeted 4 to 5 year old children in the first instance. Rhoda (the second playgroup assistant) had no contact with the State Library team. The leader may have but Rhoda did not think so as she had not distributed the packs or books. Rhoda did not know about the aims of the program until the research team told her. The playgroup personnel had no means of communication, as there was no phone, or computer access at the playgroup. The playgroup assistant had to walk every day to the Corporation to get the key then walk 8 large blocks to open the centre.

At the time of the second research visit, the playgroup had the second phase of resources to give out. Rhoda said it was difficult to give them out as it was very hot, all the children didn't come to playgroup and walking with all these books around town was not an option. These resources were distributed as the research team went about town to interview parents/ carers. Rhoda said that another bag would be useful, *"as the little kids couldn't carry the new resources away."*

Better Beginnings delivery and implementation Site 2

The *Better Beginnings* program began in Site 2 in 2010 so was near the end of its two year cycle. Ten children aged between four and five were given the bags originally. Since then some children have arrived and some left so the resources from other phases may have gone to the new children of that age. The *Better Beginnings* program was delivered through the playgroup that was run by Martha, an Aboriginal woman in the community, with support from the school. Martha had run the playgroup for a number of years. The playgroup is housed in a demountable building off the school site. Martha was away at the time of our visit as her daughter had just had a baby in town. Martha had been away frequently this year and when she is away, the playgroup does not operate.

³ On the second visit the CEO was absent, then resigned and a new CEO took up his position during the writing of this report.

The acting Principal was not the designated distributor and she was not sure how often the subsequent books and resources got handed out, as the distributor had not been in the community for a while and previously only intermittently. She said she had handed them out to the four and five year old children before the holidays when she found them but as they didn't come in a bag she didn't think the children would know they were part of the *Better Beginnings* program. The acting Principal could not say how often the resources were meant to go out and had not seen them handed out. She did describe the difficulty of taking home the subsequent resources, as the children only have little hands and no bags so she suggested a brown paper bag stamped with the *Better Beginnings* logo be used.

In terms of delivery she suggested a one page access point for distributors rather than the whole file. She said to help those distributors with not a lot of literacy skills that one page with clear dot points and not much text with some pictorial cues would be helpful. She knew that this would help Martha, the distributor in her community. This one page could be the starting point of a discussion with a mentor, something that the acting Principal thought was needed.

The acting Principal said that the community schools were often inundated with offers of projects and when asked how they selected this program she described the conversations between Aboriginal community school staff in the region. She said the discussion with other school staff had been about the quality of the books as they depicted Aboriginal families, Australian animals and scenes or scenarios that their children knew about. Another reason the program was selected was that the staff believed that *Better Beginnings* could make a difference in children's book knowledge and family literacy practices that would help young children's transition to school.

Similarities and differences in Better Beginnings delivery and implementation across two sites

There were issues in the delivery and implementation of *Better Beginnings* across both sites. If it had not been for the endeavour of individuals (not always the original distributor) then the program may have faltered. In Site 1, the transient nature of individuals in positions meant that delivery was not happening as originally thought. The books were supposed to be distributed during the first half of the year and this had not happened. It is not known when delivery would have been carried out if the research team had not gone back for a second visit.

The good will of the senior Aboriginal women and the dedication of Aboriginal Corporation staff ignited the delivery and implementation of *Better Beginnings*. A change of distributor and lack of knowledge of the program hampered the original distribution. It is thought that the second visit playgroup staff did not know what to do with the bags and contact with the *Better Beginnings* team was hampered because of a lack of communication opportunities and access to communication tools. At Site 2 in 2012 the delivery of *Better Beginnings* also rested on the intent and goodwill of the acting Principal. The delivery and implementation of the program before 2012 cannot be commented upon as the Principal and distributor were both absent from the community, and the acting Principal and teachers had limited knowledge of how it was distributed. When the distributor changes or is not available, or access to communication is difficult then if not for the work of other individuals, the program falters.

The transient nature of some of the Aboriginal families means that some families would not receive the subsequent resources. In Site 1 there were a large percentage of children who had moved since the first delivery. In Site 1 & 2 the subsequent resources were given to the newly arrived children.

In Site 2 the Community Council on the recommendation of the staff who had heard good reports about *Better Beginnings* selected the program. The acting Principal told of being inundated with requests to be involved in programs so needed to decide on which would most benefit their community.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of *Better Beginnings* resources

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources from mothers/carers perspectives Site 1

All of the mothers/carers (100%) interviewed said that the bags of books were useful and being used by the children. One mother/carer said that her children had *"no other books before this"*. The carers/mothers were not able to comment on the value of DVDs as all but one had not seen them. The one mother who had seen them described how they had to hide them as the family knew the stories off by heart. One grandmother said that she played the sound of the DVD at nighttime to calm everyone down before bed, while she did other things. All the participants said the DVDs were good to have even if they hadn't seen them.

When asked about the other resources in the bag, only a few mothers could describe what they had seen. Most mothers said they had not looked and that the kids just took them away. One of the grandmother/carers said that the brochures were good and people needed to know about the importance of reading to kids.

One of the younger mothers said she had read it all and she had the poster up in her house. This mother lived in a shared house with a large extended family, so even though she had a three year old boy, many children used the poster. This mother was very proud that at three her child could point to the picture when given the English word. This poster is illustrated in the photo where two young cousins of the little boy are standing next to the poster. She said that her son's favourite book was *"the one about going to the beach"* (My Mob goes to the Beach). She laughed and thought it was funny because *"he's never seen the beach"* she said. Three mothers/carers said the *"Rhyme Time"* book was good and that their children enjoyed it.



Some of the participants interviewed said that including the Indigenous newspaper was a good idea as there wasn't much Aboriginal news for Aboriginal people to read.

Parents/carers were asked what they would change or add to the bags. One parent said that she thought read along DVDs would be good where you had someone read a line and leave some silence for the child to repeat. Another said, *"pop up books would be good"*, while another said she would *"like to see more numbers"*. One mother/carer said she liked everything in the bag and they *"were looking forward to more things."* The Aboriginal playgroup worker suggested a small hand puppet so the children could practice reading the story through the puppet.

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources from mothers/carers perspectives Site 2

Five women were interviewed at the Home Maker Centre, four who were mothers with children aged from around 1 to 16 years and one young woman who had returned from finishing her education at boarding school. It was not appropriate to talk to the fathers and although the research team spoke to one of the founders of the community there were not many men in the community at this time. Most of the women (4) had seen the bags and remembered them. The one woman who had not seen the bags as she was down at a school in Esperance for two years may not

have been in the community when they were given out. All of the women commented on the books and resources as a good thing to give children. Some (3) said that the children had listened to the stories on the DVD and two women knew the songs came with the *Rhyme Time* book. They liked the posters but no one said they had seen them around recently. When asked if the tips for parents on the posters and in the brochures were helpful for parents they said that they were but couldn't remember reading them.

One of the women said that books were great as the older children used them too and read to younger children and then read for themselves. She liked the books because *"they are easy to read."* They all knew Mary G and David Wirrpanda who read stories on the DVD and thought they were a good way of getting children to listen. The books given by the school were the only source of books for children that they could name in their community. When the research team attended the weekly assembly three children received books as prizes and the women later commented that you get more books in *Better Beginnings* than waiting for a prize. In this group were two young women who the acting Principal said would most likely takeover from the two female Elders the research team met at the school. These two women were articulate in their views about the program. One said that she thought a welcome addition to the packs would be how to say the sounds in English on the DVD so children could copy them. She said some people and kids had trouble saying the English sounds so having them both single sounds and blends to say out loud while looking at the charts would be good. The second woman said that a fridge magnet with the alphabet and one for numbers would be good as *"the kids wouldn't take them"*.

The women had a number of recommendations to enhance the *Better Beginnings* resources for their children. They were all quite taken by 'Kimberley Boy' as the photos and subject matter was something they knew about. One of the ladies said, *"We need one of him for this mob"*. Another said there should be *"more writing things in the bag"* and pop up books for little kids.

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources from children's perspectives Site 1

Due to the turmoil at the school, focus groups of children could not be interviewed as planned. Two children were interviewed at home about their views of the resources. One of the girls was aged eight and the other aged six. The eight year old had taken the bag off her brother aged five and put it in her room. Her mother had remarked that no one had seen it as she didn't let them. They were asked what they liked about the books and if they had a favourite. One of the girls said she liked the ones with the *"black fellas"*. They were asked if they had many books with Aboriginal people in them and they both shook their heads. Only one had listened to the DVD (this was the child whose mother had commented that she had hidden it at some stage for a short while as all family members knew the stories off by heart) and the girl said she liked them. When asked what other things could be added or changed both said *"something to write with"* or do some *"colouring"*. Both of these girls still had the books at home and used them frequently.

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources from children's perspectives Site 2

Both junior classes were interviewed in a group situation to get their perspectives on the resources and the program. Some of the younger children recognised the butterfly logo and some of the books. A couple of the older children (Year 2-5) recognised the DVDs and one pointed to *Rhyme Time* and said there was singing on it. All the children said that they liked the books and the T-shirt. When asked what else could be included in the bag answers ranged from clothes, chocolate to Lego. When asked what other reading things could be put in one child said, *"something for my brother and Dad."* After our visit the teacher in the year 2-5 class played some stories on the DVD and on break as the staff were sitting in the staff room, one child stuck his head in the door to hurry the teacher up to get back to the stories. On her way out she remarked how great they were and she should have used them sooner as the kids were really enjoying them.

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources from Stakeholder's perspectives Site 1

SERVICE PROVIDERS

Only one of the service providers had seen a *Better Beginnings* bag in or around town over the month they had been distributed. Only the Aboriginal Community Health Nurse and the Librarian had seen inside the bags before the second visit. The Librarian (from Visit 1) liked the books and said they were the best Aboriginal stories she had seen. The second visit Librarian *"had not looked in the bag much."* The Aboriginal Community Health Nurse had seen the bags and books as her granddaughter had been given one when they visited the playgroup. She thought that the books were very important, as kids didn't get much attention from parents. She said, *"some kids don't get attention from their parents, at least that time when they're reading to them they know they've got their attention and have one to one with them."*

SCHOOL TEACHERS

The three teachers interviewed at the school were impressed with the resources in the bags and the subsequent resources. They had not seen them before and liked the parent information that they thought was very useful and much needed. The Kindergarten teacher had not heard the children talk about the bags but had also not asked about them, as she did not know they had been distributed. On her first look through the bag she continually said, *"Wow I like this"*. She asked if she could keep the posters to put up in the room and initiate conversation about them with the children. The discussion centered on Mary G being on the DVD as she/he (Mark Bin Bakar aka Mary G) had been in the school once earlier and was back the next week for a second visit. The teacher talked about (informally off tape) the wasted opportunity of drawing children's attention to these things they had at home and the connections to Mary G and *Better Beginnings*. The three teachers did not know there was a *Better Beginnings* website or that they could make links to children's resource packs at home, or plan lessons around the resources. The Pre-primary teacher was also *"very intrigued"* with the resource packs. Her words on exploration of the bag, were *"That's awesome"* when she read the cover of a book she said, *"I know this book and I really like it"* and *"oh wow I could use that in my class"*. She went on to say that the books, DVD's and posters *"all looks really good...really helpful"*.

All three teachers and the deputy Principal were excited that it was not a one off resource as it was explained that the resources would be kept up over the life of the program. The school did not lend books of any sort to be taken home, either school library books or reading books, as they were not returned. The issue of taking books home not only rested with the school as it appeared that some children did not want to take them home if they had to return them. The only Aboriginal male interviewed in the presence of his female partner explained this when he said, *"Yeah or the kids won't take it home. You know some kids know that their parents are just going to be drunk or whatever when they get through the front door."* He said that it was a good idea that the kids got to keep the books.

The effectiveness of Better Beginnings resources Site 2

The effectiveness of the *Better Beginnings* resources from other stakeholders' perspectives rested with the views of the teachers and the shopkeeper, the only service providers who lived full time in the community.

TEACHERS' VIEWS

All teachers agreed that the resources were effective and well targeted for the children who received them. The early years teacher liked all the resources and said the tips for parents were valuable and she had seen a change in their reading behaviours because of it. She said,

You know, they don't know what are the important parts to point out in a book to a child, and I've notice some of the... because sometimes they're starting to pick up that sort of language, look at the cover, let's turn the page, what do you notice in the writing.

When asked she said she thought that these new behaviours were a result of *Better Beginnings*.

The teachers also mentioned the quality of the books in the packs on more than one occasion. The teachers said that the selection of books in the 'Books in Home' project were not as good as the selection from *Better Beginnings*. When asked for improvements or new ideas, one teacher and the acting Principal both mentioned something to write with and to write on. Another teacher suggested a certificate that teachers could write on, as parents in the community were very proud to put up their child's achievements. He went on to say that any type of positive environmental print was important, as there were so many negative messages of things not to do in the community. The same teacher came up with the idea of a *Better Beginnings* calendar. He said, *"that could be tracked or crossed off or something that keep people up with what's going on. And then you could have like important dates of when to read to your children on certain days on the calendar."*

The four teachers who had worked in the school over the years knew about the *Better Beginnings* program and thought that it was worthwhile. The senior teacher who was on a six month contract did not know of the program but when shown it he thought it was worthwhile. All teachers commented on the limited access that children and families had to books. They said that they thought that the school was the only access point for books. One teacher mentioned that he had seen one family bring back children's books from the Supermarket or Target in a large town but that was all. He said they *"were not great kid's books"*. All teachers liked the way the books weren't one off, the quality of the books, the posters, tips and DVD's. One thought that families may have limited access to the DVDs as they didn't own a DVD player.

None of the teachers made connections from *Better Beginnings* to their curriculum, as they had not seen all the resources that were in the bags and only the Kindergarten/Year 1 teacher had seen the subsequent resources and the initial sound poster. The two early years teachers had used the charts and were surprised to find that there was a website and associated experiences that they could utilise. They had not seen the *Better Beginnings* website or been part of any of the conversations about the program. The Kindergarten/Year 1 teacher thought it was important for the early years teacher to know what was happening and what the resources are that the children are receiving. She said,

Well then I can have copies of those books in my classroom so that the kids get familiar and I can teach them reading skills with those books that they can go home and practice with little brothers and sisters and have known a book that they doing it with, to sort of copy and... because a lot of them, they're just into that sort of role play reading and they're following along and chanting, and so if I knew what books were in there I could help facilitate that a bit more and get those pre-reading skills with them.

One of the senior years teachers suggested some books in Kriol, the language most children spoke at home. He said that he didn't speak Kriol and if the little kids had books that came in both languages it would help teachers and assist children *"to actually value their language"*.

SCHOOL ANCILLARY STAFF VIEWS

Five female ancillary staff in the school were interviewed all of whom were mothers and two who were also grandmothers and Elders. Three of the five staff had seen the books, mostly because they had younger children who received them. All five said it was a good idea to have the books and one especially remarked on the *Rhyme Time* and how much her son liked singing along to the songs. According to the five ladies the school was the only source of books in the community. One ancillary staff member recognised the butterfly symbol and said her son got the baby books (from *Better Beginnings - Birth to Three*) when they were living in the nearest town.

Similarities and differences in the effectiveness of *Better Beginnings* resources across two sites

The resources in the bags and subsequent resources were seen as effective by all participants. The quality of the books and the fact that they reflected Aboriginal lives was remarked upon by a number of participants across both sites. Not many parents on either site had heard the DVDs but all agreed that it was a good idea to include them. Some of the mothers and children commented on the *Rhyme Time* book with songs and rhymes as something they had remembered and used from the pack. All participants thought the tips for parents/ carers about reading and the posters with sounds were important and should continue to be included. The early years teacher at Site 2 had seen a definite change in mothers' reading behaviours, which she attributed to *Better Beginnings*.

Teachers in the junior years in both schools commented on the missed opportunities of using the resources with the children. Teachers also believed using them in class and making connections for children with what was at home or coming home would enhance the effectiveness of the resources. This was also the case in Site 1 where Mary G who is featured on the DVD, is a frequent visitor to the school and community and the teacher spoke of assisting children to make connections between what was at home and at school. All the teachers were unaware of the *Better Beginnings* website and most had been unaware of the resources given to children.

The sustainability of *Better Beginnings*

The sustainability of *Better Beginnings* through the Library, School and Community Site 1

LIBRARY

The physical location of the Library in the Shire Office accessed through the front office and past a museum, hindered the Library assisting with the sustainability of *Better Beginnings*. Most people interviewed in this project did not know the library existed. Although the Library is reported to have 295 members, the Librarian on the first visit said the Library had a regular membership of 19 and on the second visit the Librarian said they had a couple of new members. Of these members one or two were Aboriginal and were described as mostly borrowing DVDs. When asked to describe a new member, the second visit Librarian said;

And then actually one guy came in and I told him about you can sign up for the library, he was really surprised. He's like, you know, for free, is that possible? I told him, yeah you can sign up for it. So he comes in and borrows a few books, which is really good.

Time allocation and training for the role of the Librarian (as part of their administrative duties in the Shire) was minimal which hindered their knowledge of *Better Beginnings*. Both women ran a small Rhyme Time (the title of a book in the first bag), which is a story and activity time for young children. For Rhyme Time⁴ the Librarian was given half an hour of preparation time and half an hour to run the session. The Librarian changed between visits yet both young women that held the position were on work visas and were from Nordic countries. English was their second language and they both spoke it well and were enthusiastic about their Library duties. They had to look up many common rhymes and songs on the internet as they did not know them due to different cultural backgrounds.

On the first visit of the three families using this service, none were Aboriginal. This Rhyme Time stopped in June with a changing of positions and had only started again with the same three families attending two weeks before the visit in October. The second visit Librarian had seen but not read the folder about attracting more Aboriginal families to the Library and as yet had no contact with the *Better Beginnings* staff at the State Library. She did not know what *Better Beginnings* was or that families in town had been receiving resources.

⁴ Rhyme time here relates to a 20 minute story time session taken by the Librarian.

The second visit Librarian spoke of her difficulty in pitching Rhyme Time at the right level for different aged kids. Although feeling totally lost in the beginning she was now doing some on line training and now she felt there was someone whom she could ask questions. She said that the State Library should know when people change jobs so there could be "... a little introduction or something". The Shire Officer who line manages the Librarian said that they needed more support. She said, *"Basically it's they send us a folder, this is Better Beginnings, that's it. I do know that there is some sort of help you can get on it and I did try to get her enrolled in that course. Unfortunately they were all booked out. So maybe some more online training"*. The Librarian was in the position three months before online training began.

The first visit Librarian was given a briefing by the State Library team on how to attract more Aboriginal families to the Library. The SLWA team member took half an hour to go through the folder and answered any questions along the way. The second visit Librarian had not had time to look in the folder.

Participants were asked how they thought the town Library could attract more Aboriginal members and improve engagement with *Better Beginnings* at the town library. Some suggestions were not to house the Library in the Shire building as it was seen as a *"white fella"* place, so that when Aboriginal people go in there they *"get shame"*. It was also hidden away behind the museum and another stumbling block was that children were not allowed in without an adult. One of the Shire Officers said that *"the only time I see kids in here is when they are disruptive, playing with the museum gadgets."* Another suggestion was a BBQ as some participants mentioned food was a way of drawing people in. The second visit playgroup assistant (who is Aboriginal) thought that having an Aboriginal person working in the library would help more Aboriginal families access its services.

SCHOOL

The school personnel had no knowledge of the resources and delivery of the *Better Beginnings* program. The only person who had previous experience with it (in a community they used to teach in) had left. Of the teachers at the school, the Kindergarten and Pre-primary teachers had heard of *Better Beginnings* because the research team talked about it on the first visit. The teachers did not know about any of the resources or what the process was in delivering the program. Again they had no prior knowledge of the town Library and knew about it because the research team had mentioned it. They were aware that there was a *Better Beginnings* banner in the foyer of the Shire Office, as they had seen it when there on business. One teacher knew there was a poster for Rhyme Time in the supermarket. The Year 2/3 teacher had no knowledge of the program.

The State Library team visited the Principal (who held the position at the first visit) after the research team but unfortunately knowledge of the program did not reach the teachers and the Principal had since resigned. The new Principal was from the Northern Territory and had no knowledge of the program. Another point that one of the teachers raised was that the school children had not had the practice of using a Library as the school's library had been closed to the children for the last 18 months she had been in the school (perhaps longer). A new acting Deputy had worked hard to re-organise the school's library, which had been open for two weeks and was being used before school and at lunch times.

COMMUNITY

The community through the senior Aboriginal women used a BBQ in town as a place to distribute some *Better Beginnings* packs and talk to families about caring for kids. This initiative seemed to have got the ball rolling but the name *Better Beginnings* was not one that people in the Aboriginal communities associated with the bags. Only one parent made the connection between the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* and the current program. She said how much her baby liked the baby book. There appeared to be great goodwill in the Aboriginal community to support this program.

The sustainability of Better Beginnings through the Library, School and Community Site 2

LIBRARY

There is no state or local shire Library in this community. The closest public Library is in the nearest town, housed next to the Tourist Bureau that is not located near any other service amenities that people in this community may visit on business. There was no evidence to suggest that anyone in the community visited or had taken part in any town Library events or services. When asked why, many responded that they didn't go to town. It was a tough drive and needed a four wheel drive to get in and out therefore trips out of the community were on a needs basis or to go camping, for sport or for family business and not necessarily to visit town.

SCHOOL

The *Better Beginnings* program had been sustained over the last year by the goodwill and intent of the school Principal and in the last six months by the acting Principal. The program was delivered through the playgroup that was run by Martha an Aboriginal woman in the community. Martha was away at the time of our visit as her daughter had just had a baby in town. The acting Principal said that Martha had been away a lot during the year and when she was away, the Playgroup did not operate. State Library communication while consistent had been problematic with Martha according to the acting Principal. The only phone in the school is in the school office and when the acting Principal was asked if the distributor had much contact with the State Library she said,

.. the only form of contact is the school, so it means you are not directly contacting the distributor, so I think that's a big problem. So every time [name] rings, they ring to talk to Martha, but Martha's not here, someone's got to take the message to Martha and then try and get Martha back to the phone and connect with [name].

She went onto suggest there be a contact with someone who is more in the office, like the Principal or someone who can mentor such as one of the junior years teachers *"who they could talk to and say this is the message for Martha. Talk to more than one person so that if Martha's not here the books could still go out."*

One of the teachers and the acting Principal both suggested in separate interviews that there should be a morning at the school where parents and the older children are invited to look through the bags. The Principal or a teacher could talk to them about the benefits of reading with kids and explain some of the tip sheets. They can tell them to look for the bags and the later resources coming home across the next two years. The acting Principal said *"there should be a sign in the shop, Better Beginnings tomorrow at 9 o'clock and everyone can come and watch the DVD and read the stories."* They said this way people would be more involved instead of having a bag that gets home and no adults look at it. The teacher said, *"...it's good to have a learning session and get them confident with the materials and then I think they would go into home a lot more."* The acting Principal said they had talked to some of the older kids about using the packs *"with the little kids because sometimes its easier to do that through the kids...many said they were going home to read them to the little kids, and they love that: playing mum- all the girls, and the boys."*

COMMUNITY

The mothers in the Home Maker Centre thought the program was worthwhile as this was the only source of books for the children aged 4-5 years. They all thought reading to children was important and were glad that the community had been part of the program. They wondered how they would get books into homes when the program finished.

Two of the mothers at the Home Maker Centre made the connection to the *Better Beginnings* books that had been given to them by the nurse when they had babies. While the mothers at the Home Maker Centre knew the children got books and some recognised the bags, they did not know the name *Better Beginnings*.

Similarities and differences in the sustainability of Better Beginnings through the Library, School and Community across two sites

Better Beginnings was sustained by the capacity of committed individuals to deliver the program. The participants in Site 1 have access to a State Library branch but as yet young Aboriginal children and few parents utilise this service. The Librarian is given limited time to conduct Rhyme Time and has no knowledge of the *Better Beginnings* program in town. Accompanying this is her limited knowledge of how to attract Aboriginal families to the Library and limited access to Library training. In Site 2 due mainly to geographic restrictions families do not use the State Library service in the nearest town.

The school on Site 1 did not play a role in sustaining *Better Beginnings* because their knowledge of the program was limited. In Site 2 the program in 2012 was sustained due to the work of the acting Principal but the teachers had limited knowledge of the program. Teachers in both sites have not taken part in any information workshops or knowledge broking sessions, so connections that could assist children and parents in sustaining the program have not been made. They were in the most part unaware of the resources in the bags, which could have been drawn to parent's carers' and children's attention. All participants in both communities agree that *Better Beginnings* is a much needed program. Part of that belief comes from the fact that the cycle of the program is two years, not a one off delivery of books and resources and that children get to keep the resources.

Impact of Better Beginnings for remote Aboriginal communities

The impact of Better Beginnings Site 1

At this stage it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the *Better Beginnings* program in this site. The program though introduced in March had not started delivery of the bags until September and October, so most families had the resources for less than four weeks. What was evident is that the bags of books and DVDs gave families and children access to books and stories in their homes they would not normally have. The families and children really liked the bags of resources and the adult stakeholders were appreciative that the children had access to books in homes, which is not usually the case. Another positive feature of the program described was that the resource provision is not one off but ongoing over two years. All service provider stakeholders thought it was important to improve family literacy practices and this was a good avenue to affect this. It certainly put family literacy practices and children's book knowledge under the spotlight as a community concern, where as in the first visit it was viewed as a school concern.

The impact of Better Beginnings Site 2

The two year cycle of the *Better Beginnings* program in Site 2 is nearly at an end. It is clear from the evidence gained that *Better Beginnings* has been effective in this community. The three teachers and acting Principal who knew about the program believed that it made a difference to literacy practices in young children in the community. The early years teacher who had been at the school for six years said that she could see the tangible difference that *Better Beginnings* made to the young children in the community. She said,

I can definitely see it's made a difference from when I just started here and kids came to school with no literacy knowledge. At least now I don't have to actually teach them what a book is because they know straight way which makes my job easier.

At another interview time, as previously described, the teacher had explained the change in parent's book knowledge of what to point out to children when reading to them. When asked the teacher attributed this progress to the *Better Beginnings* program. The teacher in the Year 2 -5 class said she had also noticed the difference in children's book literacy skills and when asked she also attributed it to *Better Beginnings*. She said, "*Because of them books, yeah. Oh definitely I mean I've only seen it walking into the other classroom... they love their books.*"

One of the teachers said that she hoped the program would be extended to the nearest town as children who came to stay at the community from there, had no book knowledge. She said it was quite telling of how the book knowledge of local children had grown over time.

The acting Principal said she also thought that *Better Beginnings* made a difference to the book literacy of the children and the family literacy practices. She spoke of the change in the young children, *“But I ’m sure it makes a difference when they get to kindy and they’ve seen a book before and they know.”* She said that it would make some difference, but not a huge difference for the families literacy practices, she said, *“... just because people don’t...generally people don’t keep things, so I can’t imagine that they have them up on the bookshelf and get them out every night.”* On the other hand one of the teachers said while they don’t keep things it just moves locations, she said,

They have started to have more books with Better Beginnings and they have been taking books home as prizes. Everything is shared, they do the rounds. There’s more books entering homes more regularly than when I arrived here four years ago.

Similarities and differences in the impact of *Better Beginnings* across two sites

It is too early to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of *Better Beginnings* in Site 1 due to the late distribution of resources. However all participants agree that this program should assist Aboriginal family literacy practices. For many families these are the only printed resources in the home and they are being utilised. The evidence from teaching staff in Site 2 suggests that *Better Beginnings* has had a significant impact on children’s book literacy knowledge and skills. Teachers had mixed views on the depth of the program’s impact on family literacy practices although evidence would suggest that there are more books in homes that are being used by children and perhaps by older siblings as well. Teachers in Site 2 commented that parents’ knowledge of what to point out when reading a story had changed as they had become more knowledgeable through *Better Beginnings*.

What factors appear to support or detract from the implementation and outcomes of the program?

This evaluation suggests that the strengths of the program are:

- *Access to books and resources over a two year cycle.*


Most families involved in this evaluation commonly do not have access to books and reading material. For many the only access is through the *Better Beginnings* program. Resources for parents to assist them to establish literacy practices with their children could not be found in other programs operating in the communities.

It is unequivocal that *Better Beginnings* in Site 2 where it has nearly completed its two year cycle has had a positive impact on children’s book literacy skills and knowledge. Most participants interviewed believe that the continuous distribution of resources over the two years is a strength of this program.

The two year cycle is important as change in these communities happens slowly. The teachers in Site 2 who have seen the program nearly through its two year cycle believe the program is effective as they have seen the changes over time. Other programs that have been ‘one off’ have come and gone. For these communities due to the two year cycle more books and resources are getting into homes making this the only on-going access children have to books.

- *This is a unique program for Aboriginal children in isolated communities in Western Australia*

The Aboriginal Council in Site 2 chose this program with the assistance of the Principal because no other program offered a number of high quality resources over a two year period. The other projects observed did not address the literacy needs of children under Year 1 nor did they have quality selected resources other than books. These other



projects rested on getting books into homes but did not provide adult resources to address the importance of reading to children. The unique posters and DVDs assisted family members to know and understand what to talk to children about when reading to them. The initial sounds, blends and number charts were resources not included in other programs.

- *The quality of resources that Aboriginal children can access*

It was evident that young Aboriginal children in these sites did not have access to books or quality resources in order to obtain the book knowledge and skills to assist them with a smooth transition to school. In one town the quality of resources available for purchase was poor and they lacked themes or matter that connected with Aboriginal children's lives. On the other site there were no books, or written matter for sale in the community. Simply put, in these communities there were no books (quality or not) or printed text in many homes so parents/carers had no opportunities to read to their children even if they wished.

The resources selected to go in the program are of high quality. Aboriginal children in the two sites had limited access not only to books but to books that depicted Aboriginal people, scenarios, Australian animals or traditional tales. All the teachers in both sites and the town Librarian commented on the quality of the stories and books. The charts and posters also draw on pictorial cues that are more familiar to Aboriginal children. The teachers of the junior years on both sites wanted to use them in their classrooms, as they had not seen such good resources pitched to the major cultures of their students.

For some the well known Aboriginal people used on the DVD's was a draw card and some adults expressed a view to see them once they had been shown. Role models for Aboriginal people reading were helpful when not many adults were observed reading in the communities. It was also helpful that children can identify not only with the characters in the book but identify as readers with those on the DVDs.

- *The belief by all participants that this program will assist family literacy practices.*

Most participants, even though many perceived it as a difficult task believed that such a program would assist the development of family literacy practices. The fact that this program put books in homes where none existed and the knowledge parents/carers could gain was seen as a positive step towards this change.

Many of the service participants strongly believed that many of the issues in their community could be assisted with better literacy practices and this started with the children. The fact that most children started school with little book literacy knowledge made for an uneasy transition to school with many children dropping out by Year 3.

- *The good will and intent of individuals and community members that assisted with delivery and implementation.*

A strength of this program is the good will and intent of members of the community to make sure that it is delivered when distributors (for whatever reason) are unable to distribute or deliver the program. In both sites, committed individuals who saw the value of the program assisted in delivering and distributing the resources.

- *Harnessing the capacity of Aboriginal distributors*

Better Beginnings used Aboriginal distributors for distribution in both sites, which in doing so harnesses the knowledge and skills of local Aboriginal people. In Site 1 the playgroup assistant who is Aboriginal had more access and knowledge of the local community members. It was through her knowledge and understanding of the local families, their movements and habits that resources were distributed. It was also the senior Aboriginal women who held a BBQ that attracted families where some of the bags were handed out.

Areas of improvement

Both *Better Beginnings* sites evaluated were in different positions in their two year cycle. While to draw any definite conclusions from Site 1 would be premature, however the success of the program in increasing children's book literacy knowledge and skills has been shown in Site 2. There are, however, some issues that impact on the success of the aims of the programs to date. These include (in no particular order):

1. *Increased links with schools and teachers in the junior years*

It was apparent on both sites that teachers in the junior years were unaware of the program to a large extent. The State Library team dealt with the Principal and in most cases knowledge of the project did not filter down to the junior years teachers. If there was a change of Principal then all corporate knowledge of the program was lost. All teachers were genuinely pleased with the resources in the programs and wanted to make links to children's lives and the resources they have at home. Many thought that not knowing about this program in their community had resulted in lost opportunities for enhancing literacy practices and sustaining children's use of the resources. For example not being able to draw children's attention to Mary G who visited the school and read stories on the DVD.

At Site 2, the teachers and the acting Principal also thought that they could have assisted in sustaining *Better Beginnings* and getting the Aboriginal adults and families more involved. The teachers would have welcomed the opportunity to involve adults in the implementation and to have pointed out the important aspects of the program, especially if parents' literacy levels were low. They believed by just sending the resources home that many parents wouldn't get to see them or investigate what was in the bag.

2. *Implementation changes and follow up on programs should be put into practice*

The use of only one distributor at each site as the communication point has seen the program stumble in some sense. The transient nature not only of the Aboriginal people in the north but others in occupations means that a one person point of contact does not work. Opportunities for and access to communication tools for both distributors were difficult because their daily work places had no means of outside communication. If not for the goodwill of others the program may not have gone ahead. Therefore, there needs to be another contact person who has some stability in the community. For most in geographically isolated places (little access and few services habituated in the community), it would seem the

school is that point. More than one contact point and more than one delivery agent would suggest that the program would continue if a distributor leaves the community.



In communities that are spread out, thought needs to be given to how the resources will be distributed. It was evident on both sites that it was thought children would come and the resources would be given. This did not happen on one site and the distributor needed the use of a vehicle. Such a distribution method needs to be considered in towns or communities that are spread out or the children don't come to

the distribution point regularly. Also a paper bag for the subsequent resources would help distributors and small children carry the resources home. Additionally, it would serve to brand the materials as *Better Beginnings* resources and connect them to materials they had received earlier.

Apart from this, there needs to be regular contact or a follow up program between the mentor/ other distributor and the State Library. The State Library contacts their distributor but may not have knowledge that a person has left (either permanently or for a period of time), as even though messages are

left the State Library team are not contacted back. This means that a more comprehensive follow up program needs to be devised for regular two-way communication. Perhaps distributors can be asked to contact the State Library on particular dates for an update. In this way the responsibility is on both parties rather than the State Library alone.

Such a communication system should also apply with town Library personnel where *Better Beginnings* is being delivered. Contact with the Librarian was a visit and support in the form of a file of information that was explained. When the position changed the new Librarian felt alone and isolated and her line manager suggested there be more online support as the online classes were booked out. The Librarian had little time (one hour a week) to devise and deliver Rhyme Time let alone pay attention to supporting *Better Beginnings* in other ways. She had not read the folder with information about how to attract Aboriginal people to use the Library. She explained she would get to this in her own time as there was no work time. The town Library does have a part to play in linking with families and holding events to sustain *Better Beginnings* but this can only happen with more time allocated, better contact with the State Library Indigenous Unit and more effective training.



3. Strengthen support systems for distributors

Support systems in the form of mentors need to be built for the distributor so that if they leave the position or the community then someone is there to make sure the other distributor picks it up. The mentor can also assist with communication. For this reason in isolated communities a school is a good place to source the mentor. There is always a communication point in the school that a distributor can access. If it is a telephone, fax, email or website then the mentor can help the distributor access them.

4. Sustaining *Better Beginnings* and promoting the brand

There are two ways this evaluation found that could be more effectively utilised to sustain *Better Beginnings* and make it more effective in communities. The first is engaging parents to look in the bags and understand what is in there, and how it will help with children and families literacy practices. In these two sites children took the bags home and it was hit and miss if parents investigated the contents. Participants made suggestions such as a morning at the school including parents and older students to investigate and be told of the importance of reading to children. Therefore to maximise the effectiveness some thought should be given to how to hold events in the community that herald the beginning of *Better Beginnings*.



Secondly, the links between service personnel and *Better Beginnings* needs closer attention. Teachers, community workers and town librarians need to see the resources with suggestions of how they can help, for example by making links in their curriculum or conversations on home visits. The suggestion of a sign saying the '*Better Beginnings resources are coming home this week*' in the town shop seemed an easy way to signal those sorts of conversations should be taking place that week or month. For the sustainability of the program and to garner full effect, links need not only be made on an initial visit but there needs to be

some way of linking when the program is up and running. The State Library team needs to look at ways of sustaining communication with service personnel in the community with regular updates. The *Better Beginnings* website may be one way to achieve this, but as no service personnel had seen the newsletter or website they will need to be better promoted to fulfill this function.

Many of the participants had not heard of *Better Beginnings*. While the brand is on the initial bag, DVDs and on the posters, the books do not have the brand. The books are the resource that appear to have longevity and should have the *Better Beginnings* logo stamped on the inside cover for identification. The subsequent books (that are stamped) can be placed by distributors in a paper bag with the *Better Beginnings* logo so participants would know these resources are the next installment of the program. At the moment, subsequent books do not have any identification of the *Better Beginnings* brand.

5. *Creating books in home languages and other resources.*

There is no doubt that all participants valued the quality of the resources in the bags and subsequent phases. These were books and resources that Aboriginal people connected with especially the book *Kimberley Boy* that reflected the lived experiences of people in one community. A desirable but not essential outcome could be publishing or using already published books in Kriol or home languages in communities. Similarly perhaps resources for other members of the family could be included occasionally not just in the initial bag where an Indigenous newspaper is included.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

NAPLAN results 2012 Site 1- Year 3

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation
No. Of students	11	10	11	11
Average score	260	269	284	278
National minimum standard				
Above ▲	9%	40%	27%	18%
At ♦	27%	10%	27%	27%
Below ▼	64%	50%	45%	55%

AEDI results 2012 - Site 1

Domain	Percentage of children on track	Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable
Physical health and wellbeing	44.7%	28.9%
Social competence	28.9%	57.9%
Emotional maturity	34.2%	23.7%
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	44.7%	42.1%
Communication skills and general knowledge	34.2%	44.7%

APPENDIX 2

NAPLAN results 2012 Site 2 - Year 3 (taken from local town)

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation
No. Of students	24	24	23	23
Average score	250	250	275	241
National minimum standard				
Above ▲	12%	21%	17%	13%
At ♦	29%	29%	26%	13%
Below ▼	50%	50%	57%	74%

AEDI results 2012 Site 2

Domain	Percentage of children on track	Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable
Physical health and wellbeing	56.6%	24.3%
Social competence	57%	13.2%
Emotional maturity	40.3%	28.1%
Language and cognitive skills (school-based)	48.3%	29.8%
Communication skills and general knowledge	54.5%	23.5%

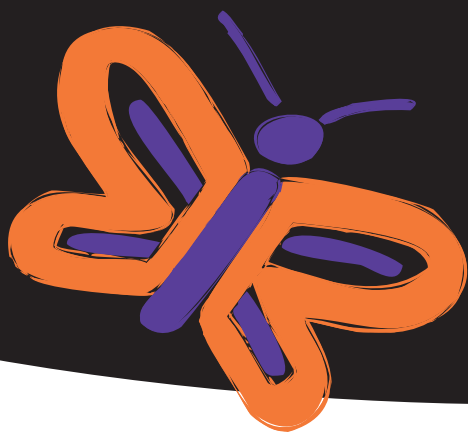
Appendix 3

Interview Schedule Site 1

Stakeholder	Interviewed 1 st Visit	Interviewed 2 nd Visit
Aboriginal Corporation		
CEO	First day on the job	Absent later resigned
Play leader (changed at second visit)	Yes	Absent later resigned
Play assistant (new, second visit)	Yes	Yes
Women's business leader (changed since first visit)	Yes	Absent
Shire Office		
Deputy CEO	Yes	Yes
Front desk- Administration & Library membership (changed at second visit)	Yes	Yes
Administration & Library story time (changed at second visit)	Yes	Yes
Community development Officer	Yes	Yes
Youth Support workers	Yes	Absent
Shire Councillors - 4 interviewed by phone all others declined to be part of the study	Yes	Yes
Aboriginal community health		
Community health - Aboriginal liaison (changed at second visit)	Yes	Yes
Occupational therapist	Yes	Yes
Teachers		
Principal (changed at second visit)	Could not formally interview teachers as Education Department had not given ethical approval so informal conversations conducted	Yes
Deputy Principal (changed at second visit)		Yes
Kindergarten teacher		Yes
Pre-primary teacher		Yes
Year 1 / 2 teacher		Yes

Playgroup initiated	Visit 1	Visit 2
Mothers/Carers	One mother and her son at the Women's centre	12 mothers/carers in their homes
DPC foster carers visiting day care	Yes	2 Yes
Senior Aboriginal women visiting playgroup	Yes	2 Yes

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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