

## ENABLING EQUITY IN LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT AMONG CULTURALLY AND RACIALLY MARGINALISED (CARM) SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA AND OVERSEAS

Across Australia and internationally, children from Indigenous and culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) backgrounds are far more likely to experience persistently lower literacy achievement than their mostly white peers. This problem affects a large and growing number of children across the country as Australia becomes more diverse culturally, racially and linguistically; an estimated 50% of Australians were born overseas, or have at least one parent who was born overseas. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 6% of the child population in Australia, while, according to 2021 data from the Australian Council of TESOL Associations, there are well over 600,000 learners of English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D) in Government and Catholic schools in Australia, and EAL/D student enrolments have increased dramatically in the last 10 years<sup>1</sup>.

Literacy matters. The ability to read and think critically is the foundation for everything that follows in a young person's life and future. Beyond the mere *ability* to read, a child's *interest* in reading is further tied to better mental health, their future economic outcomes and success, and their personal and emotional capabilities<sup>2</sup>. The persistent disparity in literacy achievement remains stubbornly entrenched despite decades of reading instruction reforms<sup>1</sup>. These reforms have largely resulted in approaches to reading instruction primarily through a cognitive science lens, focusing on how individual brains learn and process text but often overlooking broader sociocultural factors that influence children's development as readers.

### HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPACT OF UNREPRESENTATIVE CHILDREN'S BOOKS & THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Children's literacy development occurs through complex interactions with texts, instruction, and meaningful opportunities to engage with reading. However, the experiences and perspectives of children from Indigenous and CARM backgrounds remain significantly under-represented in available literature. Instead, children's books typically reflect the voices and experiences of white, middle-class populations. This representational bias has profound implications for the educational outcomes of children from marginalised communities, who may struggle to connect with texts that fail to reflect their lived experiences or validate their cultural identities. One US study tracked academic outcomes among students who were intentionally provided with diverse literature over a 6 month period, and found that children previously struggling with literacy showed increased reading scores in just 5 months to that expected by the national average over 12 months. The same study found that a more diverse library collection led to children spending more time reading, increasing their motivation to read and selecting books (by choice) that reflected their own experience<sup>3</sup>.

The lack of availability of books with diverse and authentic representation was a glaring problem that Associate Professor Helen Adam identified in 2009 while coordinating and teaching a teacher education unit on children's literature. She found that preservice and practising teachers gravitated to texts that reflected their own lives and backgrounds including relying on many classic texts<sup>4</sup>. She saw a need to examine the extent to which educators in Australia were selecting reading books for their students that reflected a diversity of cultures and races. Her subsequent PhD research, completed in 2019, examined how books were selected and used in 4 early learning

<sup>1</sup> <https://tesol.org.au/how-many-english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect-eal-d-learners-are-there-in-australian-schools/>

<sup>2</sup> Sun et al (Jan 2024) *Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure: associations with better cognitive performance, mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence*, Psychological Medicine 54(2):359-373. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37376848/>

<sup>3</sup> First Book (2023) *The impact of a Diverse Classroom Library*. <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol46/iss8/4/>

<sup>4</sup> Adam et al (2021), *The Exclusive White World of Preservice Teachers' Book Selection for the Classroom: Influences and Implications for Practice*, The Australian Journal of Teacher Education, Issue 8. <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol46/iss8/4/>

centres in WA<sup>5</sup>. Adam's analysis of the centres' book collections found that only 18% of 2,314 books portrayed racial diversity, and fewer than 1% authentically represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Adam highlighted the critical role not only of diverse representation in the literature available to children, but also of their teachers in providing *quality instruction*. Early years teachers were reading to children but rarely engaging them in critical conversation about the stories. The teachers tended to introduce diverse books for special celebrations on the annual calendar such as Chinese New Year, Hanukkah or Ramadan, which only served to reinforce difference. The teachers also shared their fear about 'not getting it right', for instance, choosing books that may be perceived as politically incorrect or offensive to students of the culture or race featured in the book. In short, teachers involved in the study described knowing that providing diverse literature was important for CARM children's literacy skills and development, but they didn't know how to cater for and support children 'properly' in practice.

### **INFLUENCE ON NATIONAL and INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICIES & CURRICULUM, TEACHER TRAINING, PUBLIC AWARENESS & SCHOOL BOOK INDUSTRY PROVIDERS**

Armed with this evidence, Adam set about using her research to equip teachers to provide for and support diverse books for CARM and Indigenous children, as a social justice imperative, as a vehicle to disrupt prejudice and stereotyping, and as means of improving literacy and educational outcomes for Indigenous and CARM children. And it didn't take long before her research also influenced national policy. In 2020, just a year after completing her PhD, Adam's recommendations for the sector on how to provide diverse books in early learning environments were referenced in the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Sample Initial Teacher Education Program Outlines: Reading Instruction. As a result of the newly mandated requirements for the teaching of reading, Adam's work formalised for the first time in ITE guidelines the potential for graduate teachers to understand the importance of culturally diverse literature.

Her research also formed part of the literature review undertaken in 2021 for the Australian Government's revised Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) V2.0, released in 2024. The revised policy provides guidelines and principles for early learning educators in supporting children to achieve the 5 learning outcomes deemed to be priority for learning.

While influential in national policy terms, the EYLF is not a 'how to' resource. As such, Adam has undertaken both strategic and organic engagement with the early years teaching community to build their capacity to provide appropriate culturally diverse books as well as implement culturally responsive teaching. For example, Adam has been particularly active in embedding her research into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs in Australia and across multiple countries, particularly in the UK and US. Her publications and work with pre-service teachers have given teachers the tools for making book selection and understanding of how to use them in the classroom, such as critically assessing books to understand whether they offer authentic representation, or to identify which books portray a culture negatively or promoted outdated or stereotypical representation.

Internationally, Adam's work on book selection in long day care has also referenced in policy of Ministry of National Education - Government of Türkiye<sup>6</sup>; while her work on Authenticity and Invisibility of diverse representation has been references in Policy documents by the Californian Department of Justice, including in

<sup>5</sup> Each centre reflecting different levels of cultural and racial diversity The four centre/study sites included one in the Kimberley region catering mostly for indigenous children, another in a relatively high socio-economic area of Perth, and two other centres in low socio-economic areas and had a fair degree of diversity among its student base.

<sup>6</sup> Üç ayda bir yayımlanır. Hakemli bir dergidir. Government of Turkey , 2021 [https://app.overton.io/document.php?policy\\_document\\_id=governmentofturkey-ebbda9944b0c804d2ca831802a03b1a5](https://app.overton.io/document.php?policy_document_id=governmentofturkey-ebbda9944b0c804d2ca831802a03b1a5)

their Pride Report of 2024<sup>7</sup>. This reach of influence demonstrates the increasing worldwide importance and impact of Adam's work.

Adam has further leveraged her professional association roles to achieve systemic reach through and influence over the professional learning of over 120,000 educators in Australia, including her Presidency of the Primary Education Teaching Association of Australia (PETAA) (which represents 45,000 educators) and her appointment to the Australian Education Research Organisation's Expert Reference Groups for First Nations Education. As current PETAA CEO, Megan Edwards, describes of the breadth of Adam's impact:

*Dr. Helen Adam's research has been instrumental in shaping and enhancing the work of [PETAA]... Her work has directly informed the resources PETAA provides to thousands of educators, empowering them with the knowledge and strategies needed to foster strong literacy skills in young learners... PETAA has sold and disseminated over 5000 copies of Dr. Adam's award-shortlisted textbook "Transforming Practice: Transforming Lives Through Diverse Children's Literature," reaching over 3000 schools and 10 universities across 3 continents.....[Adam's] online professional learning course for teachers, "Using Diverse Books in the Classroom," has been completed by over 300 teachers. A remarkable 97% of these teachers reported feeling more confident integrating diverse children's literature into their teaching practices after taking the course, compared to before. Additionally, 87% noted a positive change in students' engagement with the curriculum since integrating a more diverse children's literature library into their teaching...Dr. Adam's research has not merely contributed to PETAA; it has been a vital force, enriching our offerings, validating our approaches, and ultimately, profoundly benefiting the primary English teaching community and the young students they serve by consistently lifting the profile of the critical importance of using diverse children's books in teaching and learning in primary Australian classrooms and early childhood settings (16 July 2025).*

As Adam's expertise gained national recognition, she was approached by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2020 to advise on Australia's English curriculum. According to ACARA's English Curriculum Specialist, Denise Roberts, Adam's profile as a 'key expert in children's literature impelled the [Curriculum Review] team to select her to offer advice on literature and its place in the English curriculum'. In this role, Adam operated as a 'critical friend', providing advice to the review team on the Foundation to Year 6 Literature strand of the curriculum as well as on the Foundation to Year 2 English curriculum. Additionally, ACARA's English learning area team sought Adam's expertise about proposed revisions to the English curriculum, as these national revisions would be adopted or adapted by all Australian states and territories. As Roberts states:

*The review team valued [Adam's] insightful feedback on aspects of the curriculum such as the links between the Early Years Learning Framework and the curriculum, the importance of providing rich and varied opportunities for children to explore and engage with a range of literature, the role of reading to and with children, and the importance of oral language in learning to write. Dr Adam's research background in inclusive curriculum and classrooms was also of great value to the English review team as they worked to refine the curriculum as one suited to all Australian students by ensuring the curriculum provides scope for teachers to select texts best suited to the diversity of students they teach and appropriate to their school context.*

Adam also harnessed her 2023 Churchill Fellowship study tour to further socialise and promote adoption among ITE programs at overseas Universities as well as influential coalition networks. Her engagement activity has been highly successful. Across Australia and the world, Adam's outputs feature in compulsory reading lists in ITE program courses, such as Queensland University of Technology, Brunel University (UK), Strathclyde University

<sup>7</sup> California Department of Justice; Pride Report 2024 <https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/attachments/press-docs/Pride%20Report%202024.pdf>

(Scotland), and the University of South Carolina (US). Her methodology has been adapted by the US-based *Diverse Books for All Coalition* (which informs the practices of over 50,000 educators in their network). Her book distribution sales total over 25,000 to an international audience of educators seeking to improve their awareness and practices on culturally diverse books.

Beyond the teaching profession, Adam has also sought to influence national debate and discussion. Her tireless media engagement has achieved widespread reach. For example, her work has featured in 755 media mentions including Australian national television broadcasts on Channels 7 and 9 and New Zealand's TV3, and recorded over 700 million viewers in one year alone. With this level of visibility, Adam's research has elevated public awareness of diversity in children's literature from a specialist educational concern to a matter of broad social importance, particularly in countries of such diversity as Australia.

The significant media attention has helped catalyse change among a broader range of stakeholders in the early years reading sector. For instance, following her 2019 article *Five Tips to Make School Bookshelves more Diverse* in *The Conversation* Adam was approached by StoryBox Library – a digital platform for children, parents and teachers to access thousands of books read aloud – to develop commissioned guidelines for subscribers on appropriate book selection for children. StoryBox Library is accessed by subscribers in over 30 countries, including over 2,000 primary education subscribers. As Nicole Brownlee (StoryBox Hub Founder/CEO) reflects: *Dr. Adam's pioneering research into the critical lack of cultural diversity in Australian children's literature has played a significant role in reshaping how the early childhood education and publishing sectors view inclusion... These insights directly influenced StoryBox Hub's mission to ensure all children in Australia can see themselves and others respectfully reflected in the stories they encounter... Her advocacy helped validate and amplify StoryBox's approach to community-centred storytelling... Through this alignment of research and practice, Dr Adam has made a lasting impact. Her scholarship has helped shape a national conversation about diversity in children's media and directly informed the inclusive content strategies that guide StoryBox Hub's First Nations' Story Time, Auslan Story Time, and multilingual storytelling initiatives.. By championing the value of diversity in early learning environments and supporting platforms like StoryBox Hub to lead change, Dr Adam has contributed to a more inclusive literary landscape – one where all children are empowered to see themselves, understand others, and know that their stories matter.*

As another example, in 2023 Adam was approached by Daniel Czech, Marketing and Communications Specialist at the School Catalogue Information Service (SCIS) – which provides high quality, consistent catalogue records for school libraries - to develop guidance for school librarians making book selections and who are based all across Australia. Adam provided recommendations to this large network of librarians on the importance of selecting culturally diverse literature for students from the catalogue. In both examples, Adam's research has impacted the commercial sector's offerings to their large national and international subscriber base including not only schools but also young families.

### **IMPACT ON TEACHING PRACTICE, NATIONAL SCHOOL BOOK RESOURCES & RECOMMENDATIONS, SCHOOL CULTURE, CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR**

Following her Churchill Fellowship, out of which she published the 2023 report 'Culturally responsive pathways to a more equitable education for Australian children', Adam developed the Model for Equitable Literacy Learning Environments (MELLE). MELLE integrates 3 core dimensions: quality instruction that builds upon rather than replaces children's cultural knowledge; equitable opportunities to access diverse books and meaningful reading experiences; and authentic representation in reading materials that provides both mirrors reflecting children's identities and windows into others' experiences. MELLE has overcome a frequently held but false dichotomy

between evidence-based practice and culturally responsive pedagogy, and is increasingly being adopted across Adam's large international network of educators, schools and ITE. The MELLE forms the basis of her new book *Creating Equitable Literacy Learning Environments: A Transformative Model*, which is due for worldwide release in November, 2025 and has been described as a 'must read' by leading scholars and political leaders alike, including Teresa Cremin, Professor of Education (Literacy) from the UK's Open University and Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, WA Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Adam's positive impact on school culture and children's behaviour has also become evident over time. Educators who have drawn on Adam's frameworks in the classroom have reported transformative changes among their students, including enhanced enjoyment among children during book sharing, a strengthened sense of belonging, and decreased bullying behaviour towards Indigenous and CARM children. Parents from CARM backgrounds have also felt more included, sharing books written in their own languages with school communities. Such changes resulting from the use of Adam's work in classrooms have changed school culture. As WA based Marmion Primary School Principal, Bill Boylan, observed:

*...we were oblivious to the impact and importance of selecting reading resources that reflect culturally diverse literature to support the principles of diversity. [Adam's work] has led us to review every aspect of our approach to reading, including the representation of our reading resources and classroom instruction. We are currently undergoing a significant overhaul of our school library reading resources, using [Adam's] research frameworks to guide our audit and give us clear direction for future resource planning. [Adam's] work has clearly had an impact on the role of our school library as central to ensuring we make available, to the whole school community, a diverse range of children's literature. We are now...working with the wider school community to make parents and carers aware of the importance of working with their children to select a diverse range of reading material [and] encouraging parents and carers to look critically at home reading libraries to ensure they reflect diversity...(16 April, 2025).*

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

While mainstream publishers have begun to publish a more diverse literature in recent years, and the number of literary awards being won by diverse books has likewise increased, Adam's research has significantly contributed to this change. She has led the charge across Australia and worldwide in the training of early years educators, the practical implementation of culturally diverse books in teachers' professional practice in the classroom, as well as guidelines in national policy and industry practice on the importance of culturally diverse literature for early learners. With Adam's forthcoming book already attracting worldwide endorsement and interest, it is expected that the MELLE and its rationale will gain momentum and impact across all levels and stakeholders of literacy education.