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## #226: Early enrichment: Giving indigenous children a head start

VOICEOVER

Welcome to *Up Close*, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER MARTIN

I'm Jennifer Martin. Thanks for joining us. More than 40 years ago a ground breaking study into the effect of preschool education began. It became known as the Abecedarian Approach and it followed the progress of 111 infants in what was to become one of the most important longitudinal studies on how enriched early learning programmes affect children's life chances. *Up Close* spoke to one of the key researchers, Jo Sparling, on his visit to Australia in 2010. You can listen to episode 104 on our website. He was here to help set up a programme for indigenous children with Professor Collette Taylor, the chair of Early Childhood Education and Care at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

Today, Collette joins us in the studio to talk about how the programme is progressing. Collette, thank you so much for joining us.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

It's a pleasure.

JENNIFER MARTIN

First of all, I would like to take a moment just to give our listeners some idea of the Abecedarian programme. What is it? What does it do?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

The Abecedarian Approach goes to the rudiments of things. That's the meaning of the word Abecedarian. Fundamentally, it's really tapping the ideas of going to the very rudiments of a child's very first early learning experiences in life and that is from birth in their home situations and in centres or early childhood programmes that they might engage in. In this case the programme is made up of learning games, conversational reading and a process that we call enriched care giving. Those three elements have been studied over 14 longitudinal studies in the past 40 years and they have shown over time to be prime movers for increasing children's social and

academic achievements. The Abecedarian Approach here in Australia we call 3A, Abecedarian Approach Australia. The reason for that being that there is a need to consider the local place, the context, the customs and think about what it means in 2010, 2011, 2012 and beyond for an approach like this being applied in modern contemporary Australia, but also in remote communities.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Yes, tell us about the success of this US model? There were some impressive and quite startling results in terms of IQ, future employment, even teen pregnancy rates weren't there?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Indeed, the early studies indicated and have been followed up in a number of replication studies, the early studies indicated that if one works with particular processes and works quite intensively with young children and their families from birth, that by the age of 18 months, one is noticing, between 18 months and two years, one can notice a substantial change in a child's IQ as measured in the earlier forms by Stanford-Binet tests. This is a proxy for a child's thinking and their learning.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Also, there were strong correlations between those doing the Abecedarian Approach, not only going to further education, but staying in education compared to the control group. Is that right?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Yes. For example, children in the experimental groups began to have a measured cognitive advantage between 18 months and two years. Better cognitive outcomes at age three were predicted by greater child and family participation in the educational programme. More attendance, more home visits, more parent meetings and using more learning games, being more engaged and interested in the learning games from the parent's point of view indicated that the children mastered these games and they did better. Children in experimental groups had higher school achievement in reading and in mathematics as measured by standardised tests through their school history. The educational treatment also had long lasting effects with measurable positive effects across the ages through to 30 years. The preschool educational treatment was associated with an increased likelihood of children getting educated beyond high school and attending a four year university course, having a skilled job and being more upwardly mobile in young adulthood.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Now before we move on to the programme and how it has been implemented in Australia and these remote communities, it has also been employed in other countries around the world. Could you tell us about that? COLLETTE TAYLOR Well, at this stage Professor Sparling has been working in China, that's a more recent development. There is work happening in North America generally, in Canada with First Nations populations, in Peru in South America just to name a few places.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So what do you think it is about this method that enables it to cross those cultural boundaries?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

The focus of the three elements is about focused intentional adult child interaction so that every engagement that an adult has with a child is intentional, it's thought of as an opportunity for learning and for coming from the child's interests and thinking at the time. So paying attention to what a child is interested in and engaging from there.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So could you just explain to us, how is it intentional?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Well, if you take conversational reading as an example, an adult and a child engage in reading a picture storybook or a short simple text, one on one and that's the first focus, it's one on one or one on two when a child might be three or four years old, but it has to be one on one and it is very regular in that sense. In that process the adult is working to be in joint attention with the child. So joint attention sequencing is very much what the conversational reading episode is about. That is very particularly noticing what the child is looking at and then feeding the language to match that particular eye gaze at the moment in the moment. So three strategies are used to do that, paying very careful attention, even to the way an adult positions a child, perhaps on their lap in a story. It's a triangle between the adult, the child and the book and the adult needs to be able to see the child's gaze. So it is not a matter of placing the child straight in front and the book in front again because you wouldn't see what a child is looking at. The three strategies that are used inside of that episode is to see, to show and to say. They are very simple but they are not so easy to enact.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Can you explain to us why this approach was considered to have advantages for Australia's indigenous community? Also I would like you first of all, Collette, to give our listeners an idea of just where these communities are, how vast the landscape is and how small that population is? Because even living in Australia it can be very difficult to envisage it.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

We are working with this programme in the remote Pilbara area of Western Australia as a first example. The Pilbara is the vast iron ore region for the country that is well known internationally for its export of iron ore, particularly to China. The Pilbara itself probably covers the size of one of the larger countries in Europe. Western Australia is one third of the continent of Australia and the community that we are working with in the Pilbara is called the Wakathuni community. It's on Aboriginal land and the membership of that community is about 120 people. So it's very, very tiny, in a vast landscape. To reach Wakathuni one has to fly from Perth, the capital city for example in Western Australia for a couple of hours and then drive for another hour to

the local town called Tom Price and then drive on from there to the community for about 30, 35 minutes. So it is very, very remote.

JENNIFER MARTIN

What challenges do these remote communities face? Also if you could give our listeners a context of the indigenous population and where they are in comparison to the rest of Australia with learning targets.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

The challenges faced by any remote community are every day and they relate to having fresh water, obtaining regular fresh food and so on. These things might be taken for granted in a city but in very remote places any of those factors can be an issue. Transport is another major issue, so unless you have a functioning car and you have fuel and so on, you are really isolated in these locations. The community itself is vibrant, committed to developing its early childhood subgroup as well as building its own education and its own activities. The community follows traditional law and also moves around law camps in the broad remote region and that can be travel for several months out in the region itself that is the lands of the people. We work with the Gumala Corporation which is the Aboriginal Corporation who has brought this particular programme and initiative into Wakathuni.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Now that's extremely important isn't it that you are collaborating with the community itself?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Indeed, in the case of our projects the Aboriginal communities have approached us to be engaged and so we left the participation with the communities. The reason for choosing the Abecedarian Approach in this case was that the community related very easily to the idea of the learning games to conversational reading and to enriched care giving under a construct of building it around their own language, their own everyday events and experiences.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So it becomes very much a part of the community.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Indeed and the purpose of working in the Gumala studio that we built on the community for this programme to happen was to enable the mothers, their primary care givers, the families of these children to develop these experiences themselves directly with their children.

JENNIFER MARTIN

This is Up Close. I'm Jennifer Martin. Our guest today is education expert, Professor Collette Taylor, and we are talking about implementing the Abecedarian Approach in indigenous preschool programmes in remote Australia. Collette, could I just get you to give our listeners an idea of the literacy rates amongst indigenous

people as compared to the rest of Australia so we have an idea of the challenges that you are facing?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Sure, first of all many children in remote Aboriginal communities have English, standard English as a second or third or even fourth language. So this affects literacy immediately when we consider literacy as English language literacy entering school. The second point is that many children in remote locations don't regularly attend school when they do reach school age. So part of the reasoning for working with the very young on a community and on any community is that families are very keen to change the opportunities of their children and the preparedness of their children for formal school education far, far earlier than the week before they begin school. In that sense we are hoping to change the literacy, the success rates of children once they are in the primary school that will be their local community school.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So have you had to make specific changes to fit in with each community?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

We have and in the case of the Pilbara group we have worked with the local primary schools and in particular the Tom Price Primary School which set up a welcome centre for the Wakathuni community some year or two before we began our programme on the school site to encourage all children to be at school but to feel comfortable and to have that transition between being on the community and being in a school situation, managed effectively so that it was friendly, it was warm, the school was seen to be a welcoming place and it understood what the lives of these children were outside of the school hours.

JENNIFER MARTIN

You mentioned that the role of the parent is absolutely crucial to the success of the Abecedarian Approach. How has it been accepted by parents and also the extended family in these indigenous communities?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Well, there are a number of young mothers in particular who have changed quite markedly the activities and the lives of their very young children on community by participating in the programme. It's terrific to see the early signs of success in very young children who perhaps didn't have a regular set of everyday experiences that are priming their language development, their articulation, their speaking and their propensity to work with books. In that sense their parents have been very directly involved in supporting that. An example may be too, parents perhaps haven't traditionally been regular visitors to the school in which their older children attend and already since this programme some of the mothers have been attending school events and this has been a great source of joy and delight to their children who are very pleased to see their mother arrive at the school site.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Now, a comment by one of the teachers on your video footage on your website, and we will put those links on our Up Close page, really struck me. She was just so passionate and saying how we needed to stop seeing learning as something that was out there and instead see it as something we all do, all the time, every day and that it's fun. Just how well do you think her comments capture the spirit of the Abecedarian programme?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Well, the way we are enacting it in Australia they absolutely capture it because we are working with the construct that families are the child's first teachers. With families as first teachers which is a large strategy across the Northern Territory, another location where 3A is being developed and implemented, this idea is grasping that from the very roots, taking the rudiments of early learning, taking the child's first teachers, their families and introducing these concepts and ideas into everyday life events, using the language that the families use. Not necessarily English in the first instance because the whole set of processes then become a bridge between a strong family building a child's learning and understanding and a strong formal school system where eventually these children will move into and take part.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So Collette, it's very early stages isn't it?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

It is. We have been operating the implementation part of the programme since the beginning of 2012. So the steps are small so far. The idea of implementing the model through families as first teachers and bringing the families into the centre of this process means that it's going to be bit by bit, a slow release is what we are calling the idea because there is little point we think in doing some intensive external experts orientated instance training and then leaving the programme to develop on its own. The community owns the programmes and we want to make sure that the way we implement and mobilise these programmes is that the community keeps owning these programmes.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So what are your hopes, Collette, for the results of this programme? If you could cast yourself 40 years down the track what would you hope to see?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Well, we would like to see Australian evidence of an Australian adaptation of the Abecedarian studies that have been done to-date showing dramatic effect size differences in children's academic achievements and their long term learning outcomes in school over time. That requires rigorous science, good randomised control trial studies. The content in and of itself is already tried and tested but the form of implementation here is new and it's focused around families. It's focused in playgroups, supported playgroup settings as opposed to long day care centres where the original studies were done. So there's good reason to collect the research evidence and track our own effects.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Well, the best reason of all, educational outcomes for young people.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Indeed. Already, even the small number of children that we have been engaging with directly are showing some marked increases in their motivation to be in the programme, to come along every day, to take part in the learning, to support each other and these are very good signs. Just their confidence in interacting with others is increasing and of course their language is growing.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Do you have any specific examples of children?

COLLETTE TAYLOR

We have written a case example of Benji, a young three year old who lives in the Wakathuni community and Benji was in situ when the architecture students from the University of Melbourne and a couple of us from the Graduate School of Education were out on community building the facility in the first place. He was there around as an infant and he has been one of the first participants and he is there every single day.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Collette, thank you so much for your time today.

COLLETTE TAYLOR

Thank you. It's a pleasure.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Professor Collette Taylor, chair of Early Childhood Education and Care at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne and we have been speaking about implementing the Abecedarian Approach amongst indigenous pre-schoolers in remote communities in Australia. Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au).

Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne Australia. This episode was recorded on Tuesday, 6 November 2012 and our producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel. Audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jennifer Martin, until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER

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