

ALCN Learning Forum: Where Stories Grow:
The power of reading in Tamworth & Circular Head homes

18 September 2025

Executive Summary

The ALCN Learning Forum on September 18, 2025, showcased two highly successful Australian community literacy initiatives: Tamworth's Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which achieved 98% uptake and demonstrated that children enrolled in the program are twice as likely to develop key literacy skills, and Circular Head's collaborative approach as a UNESCO Learning City, integrating multiple programs including adult literacy, home-based learning, and community book gifting initiatives. Both programs succeeded through direct home delivery that removes access barriers, strong multi-stakeholder partnerships between councils, libraries, and community organisations, and a focus on building intergenerational reading cultures, with 85% of caregivers reporting increased confidence in reading to their children. The forum highlighted that effective community literacy programs require tangible resources, relationship-building, strategic partnerships, and connection to global learning networks to create sustainable, transformative change in local reading cultures.

Meeting notes:

- **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Tamworth Case Study:** Claire Galea, with support from Kay Delahunt, presented comprehensive research on the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program in Tamworth, highlighting its implementation, funding, community impact, and key findings on early literacy outcomes, with Bruce Wilson facilitating the discussion.
 - **Program Implementation and Origins:** Claire Galea described the origins of the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Tamworth, initiated after Jay and Mark O'Shea introduced the idea to the local council following their experience with the program in the US. The program operates as a whole-of-community model, enrolling all children born in the Tamworth local government area from birth to age five, with books mailed directly to each child monthly.
 - **Funding and Community Partnerships:** Kay Delahunt explained that the program is funded by Tamworth Regional Council, local businesses, charities, and organisations, with ambassadors seeking sponsorships. The council fills any funding gaps, and creative fundraising methods such as events during Country Music Week and traditional activities like sausage sizzles are used to support the program.
 - **Research Methodology and Key Findings:** Claire Galea outlined the research approach, which included both quantitative and qualitative data collected from families at birth, six months, and three years. The study found that Tamworth children were read to more frequently and for longer durations than the national average, with 98% program uptake. Early and regular reading routines were established, and children demonstrated stronger emerging literacy skills by age three.
 - **Library and Community Impact:** Kay Delahunt reported that the program led to increased library participation and book loans, contrary to initial concerns. The library expanded its services to include adult literacy classes and community events, with the Imagination Library books serving as a bridge for both children and adults to engage in literacy activities.

- **Broader Research and Replication:** Claire Galea shared that the Tamworth research was expanded globally, collecting 86,000 data points across several countries. The findings confirmed that children receiving books for at least 12 months were more than twice as likely to demonstrate key literacy skills. The research is being shared widely to encourage replication, with resources and data made available to other communities.
- **Circular Head Literacy Initiatives and UNESCO Learning City:** Circular Head team, Kate Grey, Emma Thompson, Glen McLaren, and Pat Joyce (with Hannah) detailed the collaborative literacy initiatives in Circular Head, Tasmania, including the region's status as a UNESCO Learning City, the 26Ten Learning for Life Literacy Project, and community-driven programs supporting early and adult literacy.
 - **UNESCO Learning City Designation:** Circular Head team explained that Circular Head became a UNESCO Learning City in 2019, providing access to global frameworks and partnerships that strengthen local learning initiatives. The designation was pursued after recognising that many learning city principles were already being practiced in the community.
 - **26Ten Learning for Life Literacy Project:** Kate Grey, 26TEN Community Coordinator, described the 26Ten Learning for Life Literacy Project, funded by the Tasmanian government, which aims to ensure all adults have essential literacy and communication skills. The project includes recruiting local volunteers, organising plain English workshops, and hosting literacy events, with a focus on a personal, community-led approach.
 - **HIPPY Program for Early Learning:** Emma Thompson introduced the Home Interactive Parenting Program for Youngsters (HIPPY), a home-based early learning initiative that empowers parents as their children's first teachers. The program provides free activity packs and storybooks, with longitudinal studies showing increased reading frequency and improved literacy and numeracy engagement among participating families.
 - **Rotary Pre-Kinder Book Program:** Glen McLaren, Rotary Club of Smithton, shared Rotary's initiative of gifting hardcopy books to all pre-kinder students, supported by book fairs and community fundraising. Rotary members read to children during school visits, fostering a love of reading and supporting language development.
 - **Soroptimist Books for Babies:** Pat Joyce (with Hannah) described the Soroptimist International Circular Head's Books for Babies program, which provides books to families through child health nurses. The initiative emphasises the importance of reading aloud from birth and is funded through local fundraising activities.
- **Barriers to Access and Strategies for Reaching Families:** Claire Galea, Kay Delahunt, and Circular Head team discussed challenges in reaching underserved families, the importance of removing access barriers, and strategies such as direct book delivery, community outreach, and leveraging local networks to ensure broad participation in literacy programs.
 - **Direct Book Delivery and Accessibility:** Claire Galea and Kay Delahunt emphasised that mailing books directly to children's homes removes geographic and financial barriers, ensuring that families in remote or disadvantaged areas can participate without needing to visit libraries or clinics.
 - **Community Outreach and Data Use:** Emma Thompson explained that the HIPPY program uses census data, school contacts, and informal community networks to identify and reach families not yet engaged. Outreach includes partnerships with local organisations and multiple points of contact to build trust and awareness.

- **Organic Growth and Peer Influence:** Kay Delahunt noted that program enthusiasm spreads organically through social networks, with participating parents often encouraging others to join. The library tracks participation data to identify areas with lower engagement and targets outreach accordingly.
- **Partnerships, Collaboration, and Program Sustainability:** Tamworth and Circular Head team highlighted the importance of multi-organisation partnerships, collaboration between local government, community groups, and businesses, and the challenges and opportunities in sustaining and expanding literacy initiatives.
 - **Role of Partnerships:** MC Bruce Wilson discussed with Tamworth and Circular Head team how successful literacy programs rely on partnerships between councils, libraries, service organisations, and local businesses. These collaborations provide funding, resources, and community engagement necessary for program delivery.
 - **Challenges in Collaboration:** Circular Head team acknowledged that while collaboration is a community strength in Circular Head, formal coordination between different literacy groups is still developing. The process of preparing for the meeting highlighted opportunities for deeper collaboration and sharing of best practices.
 - **Sustaining and Expanding Programs:** Kay Delahunt and Claire Galea shared strategies for sustaining programs, including creative fundraising, leveraging tax-deductible donations, and sharing robust research data to attract new partners and encourage replication in other communities.
- **Sharing Research, Replication, and Knowledge Exchange:** Claire Galea and Leone Wheeler described efforts to disseminate research findings, support replication of successful models, and promote knowledge exchange through publications, presentations, and open access to data and resources.
 - **Research Dissemination:** Claire Galea announced the recent publication of her thesis and peer-reviewed papers, with all research materials made transparent and available for other communities to use. She offers presentations, webinars, and direct support to groups interested in replicating the Tamworth model.
 - **Frameworks and Asset Mapping:** Leone Wheeler encouraged communities to use UNESCO frameworks and asset mapping to identify and leverage local resources for lifelong learning, regardless of formal UNESCO Learning City status.
- **Program Impact on Families and Intergenerational Literacy:** Participants including Claire Galea, Emma Thompson, Glen McLaren, and Pat Joyce (with Hannah) discussed the intergenerational impact of early literacy programs, highlighting how shared reading routines foster family bonds, caregiver confidence, and a culture of reading across generations.
 - **Family Engagement and Confidence:** Claire Galea reported that 85% of caregivers felt more confident reading to their children, with many sharing stories of how the program helped them establish positive routines and connections, regardless of their own literacy backgrounds.
 - **Intergenerational Stories:** Emma Thompson and Glen McLaren shared examples of families passing down books and reading traditions, with children and grandchildren benefiting from early exposure to books and shared reading experiences.

MC Bruce Wilson – Final Summary:

Bruce thanked participants for their contributions and reflections, noting the value of bringing together diverse experiences and contexts. He highlighted **four key points**:

1. **Books matter** – the tangible presence of a book provides focus and opportunity for learning from the earliest stages of life.
2. **Relationships around books** – learning is amplified when books are shared within families, across generations, and within communities.
3. **The power of partnerships** – effective learning initiatives rely on collaboration across organisations and sectors. Partnerships are challenging but essential, requiring time, commitment, and the development of social infrastructure.
4. **Global frameworks and networks** – frameworks like UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities represent cumulative learning from around the world and provide a valuable resource for reflection and adaptation in local contexts.

He closed by thanking organisers, speakers, and participants, and encouraged everyone to continue their work and join future ALCN events.