



Literacy program eclipses expectations

'You won't be able to teach me to read, Miss — nobody can.'

This bleak comment reflects the feeling of inadequacy and inevitable failure experienced by people with literacy difficulties, which so often means unemployment, poor health, and a shorter life.

For most people, reading is so instinctive they have forgotten how they learned to do it and take for granted its benefits — from enjoying a novel to fulfilling employment. Imagine then the twelve year-old Northern Territory girl who had just learned to read after years of failure at school. When asked what difference reading had made to her life, she happily replied, 'When I go to the shops now I can read what I have to buy'.

Teachers also experience similar feelings of frustration and inadequacy when students fail to read despite their best efforts. 'No matter what I did, I couldn't get students, even as old as fifteen, to read books higher than Year 3 level' is a comment often heard from teachers. 'I could never get them to the point where they could read the more complex and dynamic language they needed to succeed in secondary school.'

To accelerate the progress of poorly literate students, the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) was conceived. A teaching program designed to improve literacy outcomes to an age-appropriate level, it enables a whole class to be successfully taught on different age-appropriate books. Students, particularly in the upper primary and secondary years, can jump dramatically between two and six years across reading levels in just one year.

Because of consistently successful results in pilot programs, the NALP will be introduced into Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training schools with the aim of improving the literacy outcomes for at least 10,000 students in 100 schools by 2008. With support from a Charles Darwin University team, the NALP has been introduced into about 50 schools across other regions of Australia. The NALP will continue in existing sites while being introduced more widely in the Northern Territory and other Australian sites.

Indigenous literacy difficulties

Irregular attendance, hearing difficulties, language difficulties, a different culture and lack of home literacy are all commonly offered as reasons for low literacy levels with Indigenous students. But these differences should not marginalise a student from a literate education.

A powerful aspect of the Accelerated Literacy program is that it does not confront, in any way, the significance and richness of the students' first culture. Rather, it provides access to English literacy, and focuses on the

potential benefits of participating fully in more than one culture.

For students without literate home backgrounds, school can be a baffling place. The educational ground-rules of conventional literacy lessons may be quite invisible to such students. Their attempts to participate in lessons are often not recognised as legitimate, and are often simply ignored or rejected. For example, when a teacher asks, 'What do you think this book is going to be about?' in a conversation about the story's characters, and a student picks out the tiny Penguin publisher's symbol on the cover and says 'penguins', s/he is bound to be ignored.

Focus on teaching

The approach is implemented through the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence — carefully structured strategies based on a shared teacher/student understanding of a book or passage. Developed over a series of lessons, it gives all students access to a literate understanding of a book. For example, the teacher and students discuss the language choices and writing strategies used in a book, such as the appearance of characters that influence a reader's attitude. This level of discussion develops critical literacy and analytical skills that marginalised students need to read fluently and accurately, and to write effectively.

Teachers find the approach rewarding. One said, 'I was surprised to find what delight achievement in reading English gave them. They were absolutely delighted to see that they had made so much progress.' Another, an Indigenous teacher, mentioned that 'Indigenous students often hate to take risks because they don't like to show their lack of understanding. What I really, really like about this program is that it eliminates all that need to take risks. The kids learn how to be successful'. Yet another commented that in twenty years of teaching she had 'never achieved results like this before, whatever else I've tried,' adding, 'I used

to think that fifteen year-olds reading at an eight year-old level were brilliant. Now I know they have a potential I was never aware of — that is, before I did this program.'

An education administrator of the NALP commented that Indigenous parents wanted their children to be literate to the point where they could engage in the wider economy. They also wanted their children to maintain their Indigenous language and culture. He added, 'If people live longer because they have a higher level of education, one of the fundamental outcomes are greater opportunities for maintaining culture and language.'

Perhaps the most moving outcome of the Accelerated Literacy pedagogy can be summed up in a Kimberley secondary student's description of her experience at Crocfest, an annual event of Indigenous student performances. Before the NALP, this student had low levels of reading and she would have written something along the lines of 'We went to Crocfest, it was fun'.

After participating in the NALP, she wrote: 'On the performance night I felt a bit nervous and happy. It was my first time going on the stage. I felt good when the music came on. I knew what I was doing. I could feel the music in my bones.' Now she had the strategies to write what she felt. She had the voice of an author.

The NALP aims to ensure that every Indigenous person enjoys access to a literate society.

ANTENNAE

In August, Wendy Cowey will participate in a Garma Forum panel discussion — 'How do we ensure students are literate and numerate in English: The art and science of teaching English literacy'. Further details: www.garma.telstra.com

WEB BYTE

Information about the NALP program and team members can be found on the NALP website www.nalp.cdu.edu.au

National Accelerated Literacy Program

The National Accelerated Literacy Program is an initiative of the Charles Darwin University/Northern Territory Government Partnership Agreement. It operates from the School for Social and Policy Research at Charles Darwin University, under the leadership of Associate Professor Tess Lee and Dr Gary Robinson. The NALP team is part of the Education Systems Reform theme in that school.

Members of the team include the program developers — Associate Professor Brian Gray, program academic leader and Wendy Cowey, manager of resources and professional development. They work with researchers and other experts responsible for the development and implementation of the program.

In addition, Charles Darwin University is undertaking independent monitoring and evaluation of the project. This aspect is managed by Associate Professor Ibtisam Abu-Duhou, Ian Potter Fellow in education economics and Dr Kaye Lowe, Senior Fellow, education evaluation and research design.

Ibtisam Abu-Dhou and Tess Lea are profiled on the following pages.



ABOVE
Wendy Cowey, who is developing teaching resources for the NALP, works with a Territory child.

TEXT
Wendy Cowey

PHOTOGRAPHS
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