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## Accelerated literacy path tackles profound issues, and works

**I**N the past decade there has been a considerable shift in the focus on indigenous education. The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) represents both a sign of that shift and a case study in why sustaining reform is so hard.

Accelerated literacy (AL) is a method of teaching students to read that works for all children, including indigenous students. After successful pilots of the program (known then as scaffolding literacy) between 1998 and 2003, the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training and Charles Darwin University have undertaken to deliver AL to 100 schools by the end of 2008. Concurrently, the program is also being delivered in Western Australia, South Australia, NSW and at Shalom Christian College in Queensland.

A key task during the early implementation of NALP was to disentangle the method's claims for effect from the persuasive sales pitch that necessarily accompanies any program seeking further development funds. Typical of most education programs in Australia, it was

not premised on gold standards of experimental research; nor had it been replicated by fourth parties outside the supervision of its originators. In other words, it did not meet the criteria that are theoretically required to scale up a successful education innovation.

So why the decision to upscale so quickly?

Politically and strategically, it was in the right place at the right time. It attracts heartbreaking testimonials from teachers and parents who bear witness to the results for individual students. It makes a refreshing change from more usual laments about the unteachability of indigenous students when teachers instead say "there isn't a child that I can't teach to read and be literate, to read, write, spell and understand and have a discussion around a text". In addition, AL had good pre- and post-student achievement data, which alone marked it out from the crowd in indigenous education.

Developmentally, the decision to upscale was thus akin to Noel Pearson's determination to proceed with MultiLit in the Cape. While there might still be questions about the intervention, the trial results are good, and endemic failure rates deny the luxury of waiting for 100 per cent proof before taking a considered punt. Of the 4165 students who were registered as participating in NALP in 2006, 914 had a recorded pre- and post assessment measure. The average gain for individual students was 1.74 (where 1 is the expected reading improvement per year level).

The pragmatic reform considerations that

were at the heart of NALP's genesis not only explain why it was put on an expansion footing, but also explain some of its subsequent implementation dramas. At one level, NALP faces obstacles common to all education improvement efforts, such as high staff and student mobility, school leadership instability and at times equivocal levels of support.

Being semi-mandated, for instance, it is resisted by those who feel their teaching practices are being impugned by an intervention they did not choose. Others say it does not accelerate children any faster than comparative programs, were they to be given the same attention.

Such sentiments are simultaneously half-true and to be expected of a program that is still being built as it sails.

But it also attracts critique from "progressives" within the system. AL confronts the range of sympathetic ethnological clichés that abound in education, which assert that Aboriginal kids do not learn at the same rate as others, either because of their cultural specificity or their disadvantaged starting position.

Even sophisticated cognitive attributes, such as multilingualism — that highly regarded competency of the continental European elite

— is proffered as a deficit: Aboriginal children are "ESL", which somehow seems to mean that learning to speak and read English or to compute arithmetically had to be a slowed down, indeterminate process.

One of AL's key innovations lies in its refusal to exceptionalise under-achieving students. The program uses texts that are rich enough to enable interrogation of the language structures within the narrative. Rather than dumbing-down the reading material, non-readers are taught via age-appropriate texts, using highly iterative teaching methods to "scaffold" the learner into competent reading. But it is something of a slippery method.

In the hands of an adept practitioner, AL is highly liberating; but reduced to proceduralism, it can be distressingly boring for both student and teacher. It relies on high levels of professional development and support, in schools that are remote from either.

For those brave teachers who assume the mantle of supporting the practitioners in the field, burnout is a real risk.

Because it attracts national resources, it also attracts its share of critical attention, some constructive, some just bitter. It has complex partnership layers between federal and state, department and university, field and centre, community and school, with as many oppor-



tunities for mutual undermining as for extraordinary instances of collaboration.

At many levels, NALP confronts some of the most profound issues that have to be solved if the drive to improve indigenous education en masse is to be realised.

Its systematic approach is a welcome move away from the delusion of the “good news story” — the perennial hope in education that

reverting good practice in one school will contagiously transform others.

All this to say, sustaining reform beyond isolated school heroics is possible but is not for the fainthearted.

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