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EMBEDDING LITERACY *in* INDIGENOUS EDUCATION THROUGH ASSISTANT TEACHERS: LESSONS FROM *the* NATIONAL ACCELERATED LITERACY PROGRAM

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■ Abstract

This paper addresses the potential importance of assistant teachers in confronting the challenges of Indigenous literacy education. A discussion is raised with reference to a range of relevant literature, while reflections drawn from the author's involvement in evaluating the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) in the Northern Territory are used to highlight an urgent need and vital opportunity to support assistant teachers – as mainstay figures in Indigenous education – in becoming “wellsprings” of literate practice and principled pedagogy. An overview of Accelerated Literacy methodology and the NALP is provided as a framework for considering how to embed strong literate practices and principled pedagogy in remote Indigenous communities through the provision of empowering professional development to Indigenous assistant teachers: facilitating for them a genuine and qualified status as literacy educators. The prospects and challenges of pursuing such an opportunity, in the context of NALP, are likewise considered.

■ Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, to raise a discussion about the importance of assistant teachers (ATs) in confronting the challenges of Indigenous literacy education, taking the Northern Territory (NT) context as broadly representative of Indigenous educational issues more generally. Secondly, I want to share a number of insights drawn from the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP), currently in operation in the NT, and to show how these illuminate a way forward towards assisting ATs in becoming a vital force for Indigenous educational improvement. The implementation of the NALP in the NT has helped raise consciousness and debate around important Indigenous educational issues, establishing a new and challenging context, which, I maintain is full of possibility. In this paper I refer to this context as the “AL moment”, and I will elaborate on its background throughout this paper.

An important part of the implementation of the NALP by NT DET (Department of Education and Training – formerly DEET) has been an ongoing evaluation of the Program, conducted by Charles Darwin University (CDU). I write as a Research Associate involved in the evaluation since June 2007, and as a former remote Indigenous community teacher with experience in Accelerated Literacy methodology (AL). While I personally think highly of AL as an approach to literacy teaching, my interest here is not to champion the methodology, or the attempt by DET to embed the approach in NT schools. Rather, I maintain that, like any pedagogical intervention, the NALP can only be as effective as those who implement it, and so its power to generate educational change is tied to the task of engaging and supporting those doing the teaching.

In light of what is commonly recognised as a crisis in educational continuity in the NT, due largely to high rates of teacher turnover, I urge that Indigenous ATs represent a fundamental point of engagement in working towards lasting educational reform. While ATs

have tended to figure only on the margins of the NALP, there are signs of change. It is these signs of change and the potential for significant reform they signal, in the context of the AL moment and beyond, that I want to bring to light here and now.

Why Indigenous assistant teachers are vital to addressing the literacy crisis in NT education

According to the DET website (DET, 2008), 39% of Territory Government school students are Indigenous, and a high proportion of those students have English as a second (or even third or fourth) language. Further, 70% of Indigenous students are located outside the Territory's major urban areas of Alice Springs and Darwin. In 1999, a review of Indigenous education in the NT, *Learning Lessons*, reported that the "single greatest challenge for the Northern Territory Education Department was to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students" given that, despite "a widespread desire amongst Indigenous people for improvements", there was "unequivocal evidence of deteriorating outcomes" (NTDE, 1999, p. 1).

Within this context, the most prominent educational issues include problems of unequal access to quality education and a related widespread failure among many members of (particularly remote) Indigenous communities to acquire more advanced levels of English literacy. Reasons for poor educational attainment among Indigenous students are myriad and complex, defying straightforward delineation. The *Learning Lessons* report identified a range of direct, proximate and distal causes of Indigenous educational failure, all of which are strongly interconnected (NTDE, 1999, p. 29). Direct factors such as poor attendance and teacher turn-over, are seen having an immediate cause-effect relationship to educational outcomes at the classroom level; proximate factors include such issues as health, housing and second language acquisition, signifying broader socio-cultural phenomena thought to underlie and contribute to direct causes; distal factors describe a wider range of causes again, indicative of more systemic causes often at a Departmental or Government level.

Given this complex range of factors, the challenges of teaching English literacy to Indigenous students are overwhelmingly apparent. Moreover, the responsibility of addressing these challenges is shared across many sectors, from Commonwealth and Territory Government bodies responsible for allocations of funds, community welfare, housing, maintenance and employment, health services, and the recruitment, training and retention of teaching staff, to school and community councils, families, teachers and principals. Clearly then, there is no single solution to overcoming the problems of Indigenous education in the NT. In view of the challenges faced, however, I urge that Indigenous ATs represent a fundamental point of

engagement in working to ensure long-term and self-sustaining educational progress.

Such challenges as the crisis in educational continuity, owing to high rates of teacher turnover, and (relatedly) the need to somehow embed strong literate practices and principled pedagogy within remote community schools, highlight the importance of ATs as "figures of continuity" in Indigenous education. Indeed, as the *Learning Lessons* report observed, "Indigenous assistant teachers are frequently the longest serving members of the school staff, making them essential not only for continuity but for inducting new staff and mediating the cultural distance between the non-Indigenous teachers and the local students" (NTDE, 1999, p. 90).

Ensuring not merely an Indigenous presence, but an active and suitably qualified role for Indigenous staff in community schools, is likely essential to addressing such basic problems as student truancy and the perceived irrelevance of at-school literate experiences for community life. As figures of continuity, Indigenous teachers and ATs are foundational to long-term social capacity building which, it could be said, represents the prevailing challenge and true test of value for every approach to Indigenous educational reform.

Clearly, qualified Indigenous teachers are important figures of continuity too. Also, theirs is a "voice" that has sometimes been neglected or underrepresented in the context of the NALP. The present focus on just ATs, however, can be justified in several ways. Most classrooms in remote area schools are supported in some way by Indigenous ATs, while Indigenous teachers are comparatively few in number. ATs play a unique role in helping to bridge cultural divides while serving as channels of communication between families, students and teachers. ATs also serve as role-models for students in ways that teachers do not, and so their working knowledge of a teacher's intention and methodology is important to their assisting students to engage successfully in school. Finally, many qualified Indigenous teachers were once ATs. Building the capacity of ATs makes sense since it is likely that the next generation of Indigenous teachers will emerge from that group. None of this rules out the importance of considering the particular needs of qualified Indigenous teachers within the NALP, yet it highlights the merit of considering ATs as a distinct group.

In the following section I present a range of research and literature in support of the twin claims that (a) ATs are potentially vital to Indigenous educational reform, and (b) that they are often among the most insufficiently trained and otherwise marginalised teaching personnel. In light of available evidence, I maintain, there is a need for a shift in emphasis in the training and support of Indigenous ATs. Specifically, the required emphasis must entail a move beyond equipping ATs to provide simply menial, day-to-day support to teachers and students, towards assisting

them to become vital “wellsprings” of literate practice and principled pedagogy in their home communities.

Indigenous assistant teachers and educational reform: Theory and practice

Relatively little systematic research into the educational effectiveness of ATs in Indigenous Australian contexts exists. There is, however, an abundance of anecdotal evidence to suggest that ATs have a vital role to play in Indigenous education (Aitkin & Lawton, 1993; Winkler, 2006). Further, many research projects into other areas of Indigenous education clearly advocate the strategy of employing ATs (e.g., Howard, 2004; Lowell & Devlin, 1998). The distinctive and important roles and responsibilities of ATs in remote area schools have also been heralded by DET, as recent NALP policy statements make clear:

Assistant teachers (ATs) have a crucial role in the overall teaching and learning of the students. ATs bring to the classroom a powerful knowledge, language and culture base regarding the worldview of the families and community in which they are working (DEET, 2007b).

Winkler (2006) has argued that ATs provide “a natural link to the community” while possessing “an expansive knowledge of the parent and local community” and of “Aboriginal culture and customs” (p. 18). The fact is, for schools and teachers, most remote Indigenous communities present a challenging, cross-cultural context in which to work, with a high proportion of students speaking English only as a second (or even third or fourth) language. The potential usefulness, therefore, of trained Indigenous educators in helping to ameliorate these culturally embedded barriers to educational success, is quite clear.

As well as culturally embedded factors, socio-economic issues such as low unemployment, poor nutrition, poverty, and a high incidence of *otitis media* (middle ear infection and related hearing loss) make it difficult for many Indigenous students to engage successfully at school. The importance of ATs, therefore, in helping to bridge the cultural divide and assist families, students and teachers to recognise and overcome such hindering factors cannot be overstated. But, as a central aspect of ATs’ work, the task of “cultural mediation” rests on a number of assumptions about the value of Western discourse/education in Indigenous settings, while also requiring that ATs themselves have significant grounding in such discourse and related pedagogy.

Parkin (2006) has documented an increased awareness of the validity of Indigenous cultures and home dialects, part of what she describes as a general “affirmation of heritage” within Indigenous education (p. 105). While many positive outcomes are associated

with this change of view, she highlights how it has also led to a more “complex attitude towards taking on new ‘white-fella’ learning” (p. 106). There seems to be a conflict of interest between the goals of social inclusion and cultural validation on the one hand, and initiating students into Western discourses and habits of thinking and communicating on the other. Parkin describes the apparent conflict this way:

It could be argued that Indigenous education has two simultaneous goals: firstly to maintain a strong Indigenous identity based on cultural differences with respect to mainstream Australian culture, and secondly, through that strong identity, to work towards equitable learning outcomes, including literacy (2006, p. 106).

Indigenous educationist Martin Nakata also recognises this tension, suggesting that it causes many teachers to “feel constrained and guilty if they focus on English literacies and neglect cultural factors” (2003, p. 10). Nevertheless, Nakata is adamant in arguing the importance of Western discourse(s) for Indigenous students, and in his insistence that one need not sacrifice students’ Aboriginality for the sake of granting them access to English literacy. He writes:

But we fail our students if we do not ensure that they develop the necessary skills for success in non-Indigenous contexts. *And we insult the intelligence of our children if we think that they cannot learn to distinguish what behaviours are appropriate to what contexts, and cannot learn to switch between them* (Nakata, 2003, p. 10).

Such is the complex nature of Indigenous education – the context in which ATs strive to help facilitate a meeting of cultures and so assist students on their journey to new ways of thinking and communicating.

While the challenges of Indigenous education highlighted above make clear the need for some kind of qualified and embedded literacy education support, it is worth considering what evidence exists to show if, and under what conditions, assistant teachers are an effective means to providing such support. Again, conclusive research into the educational benefits of ATs in Indigenous settings appears virtually non-existent. However, a recent survey of research and literature concerning the role of trained tutors in literacy education, conducted by Woolley and Hay (2007), helps to shed light on the matter.

From the research surveyed, a number of key findings stood out, including the point that trained literacy tutors can play a vital role in the application of specific literacy intervention programs (Woolley & Hay, 2007, p. 16). Specifically, an important aspect of the tutor’s role in such programs is providing the kinds of guided-reading interactions which tend to occur

in many Western, middle-class families, but which are often lacking from other socio-economic and cultural settings. Such interactions are evidently foundational for fostering skills and understandings necessary for literacy development and educational success (Elliot & Hewison, 1994; Hewison, 1988; Richardson, 1994).

Overall, Woolley and Hay observe, "there is a considerable body of literature documenting the effectiveness of interventions involving trained adults and peers as tutors" (2007, p. 11), and further that the elements of effective tutoring reflect the best kind of "at home" reading interactions (pp. 9-10). In this way, they conclude, "when children are in an environment of mutual support and where co-operation, shared goals and a sense of responsibility for the reading process are promoted, a sense of belonging, accomplishment and increased motivation will be achieved" (pp. 11-12).

Woolley and Hay suggest that the most effective instruction tutors can provide is one-on-one (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2000; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Clearly, however, effective literacy teaching in any group-setting requires a sound theoretical knowledge of language learning, as well as a host of more technical skills and personal qualities. As such, effective literacy tutoring – be it in whole-class, small group or one-on-one situations – encompasses an array of diverse and sophisticated skills and understandings. Following studies by Neuman (1995), Roe and Vukelich (2001) and Collins and Matthey (2001), for instance, Woolley and Hay observe, "tutors require explicit information on how to implement instructional strategies when tutoring children" (2007, p. 13). Further, "the tasks assigned to tutors must be consistent with what they can easily and willingly accomplish" (2007, p. 13), which further highlights the importance of self-monitoring and other interpersonal skills. Taken together, the findings of the surveyed research can be expressed quite simply:

Research demonstrates that reading intervention programs using trained tutors can have positive effects on students' reading performance. Successful reading tutoring programs have utilised significant levels of tutor scaffolding and explicit modelling of reading skills to students, and these techniques require ongoing tutoring training and supervision (Woolley & Hay, 2007, p. 16).

Translating the above findings to the Indigenous educational context, it could be said that in their role as literacy tutors, the effectiveness of ATs will depend largely on what training and development they have received in the theory and application of specific literacy intervention programs. This, in turn, raises questions about the assigned status and opportunities for qualification of ATs, in their literacy support roles.

Of course, supporting literacy instruction is only one facet of the complex role of Indigenous ATs. Whatever training may be offered to support ATs in this vital aspect of their work, it will be of little value unless they are equally well supported in other ways by principals, teachers, systems and communities. The provision of adequate time, pay, relevant training, opportunity and respect to ATs is likewise vital to their success. Winkler also reports that there is often a "mismatch between the skills required to be a successful [AT] and the types of training provided" (2006, p. 18). Important yet often neglected areas of training, he argues, include "conflict resolution, time management, effective communication, information technology, basic book keeping skills, and literacy and numeracy pedagogy" (Winkler, 2006, p. 18). These observations are supported by Lowell and Devlin's study of miscommunications between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal teachers, in which they report "an evident need for more in-school professional development ... to develop the skills required for effective collaboration and negotiation between Balanda [non-Indigenous] and Yolngu [Indigenous] staff" (Lowell & Devlin, 1998, p. 376).

NALP guidelines also maintain, "it is the role of the classroom teacher to provide continuity for the students through the ongoing empowerment of the teaching assistants" (DEET, 2007a). This further highlights the need for skills and understandings conducive to collaborative teaching approaches. The wider implications of nurturing such collaborative approaches clearly extend beyond providing ATs with training in specific literacy intervention programs. Nevertheless, given the centrality of the literacy issue to Indigenous education, there are good grounds for directing research and development towards this key aspect of ATs' work.

It is also possible that developing the literacy skills and related pedagogical understanding of ATs will better enable them to fulfil other aspects of their multifaceted roles. The local, Indigenous knowledge ATs bring with them to the classroom is of unquestioned value to the teaching-learning process, irrespective of the ATs own literacy ability. However, to know what knowledge is relevant and when, and how to communicate and act upon this, requires that ATs share an implicit understanding of the literacy teacher's task and of the pedagogical principles involved. In short, if ATs are to help ensure students comprehend with deep-level understandings, then it is vital that they too are operating at this level and beyond.

It is also fair to stress that it is not only Indigenous educators who stand in need of support in understanding and teaching English literacy. In their research into the use of an accredited professional development strategy for remote school teachers in far North Queensland, Shopen and Hickey (2003) reported that many teachers and teaching assistants

– Indigenous and non-Indigenous – admit to lacking a proper understanding of Standard Australian English grammar and that this hinders their work with Indigenous students (p. 25). They write:

Recent graduates often know that genres, registers and discourses differ in their grammatical features but are unable to engage Indigenous students in language learning. They know genres differ but they cannot make the differences explicit nor can they engage with issues surrounding second language acquisition and development ... They know that a student's home discourse is different from theirs but they are unable to engage students about it or understand the social and personal issues surrounding language choice (Shopen & Hickey, 2003, p. 27).

These observations confirm the importance of collaboration between non-Indigenous and Indigenous educators, and especially ATs. They also highlight the fundamental importance of foundational literacy skills and related pedagogical understanding to Indigenous education, and yet how such qualities are too often underdeveloped. Indeed, Shopen and Hickey cite evidence to argue that, “teachers of Indigenous students, including Indigenous community teachers, are less likely to be provided with professional development than their mainstream counterparts” (2003, p. 25).

As well as being distanced from the kind of training and development that might provide the status and qualifications they require, many ATs appear to be relegated as translators only, or as responsible for behaviour management and menial clerical duties. Of course, the task of translation is of unquestioned value in Indigenous contexts, as Lowell and Devlin have argued (1998). But the *Learning Lessons* report points out how the allocation of ATs to non-Indigenous staff only, promotes the view of ATs as interpreters. Early evaluation of the NALP also confirmed that ATs were largely used solely for “crowd control” purposes, and that many ATs saw this as their major role (Lowe et al., 2006, p. 18).

To be effective – generally but especially for literacy support purposes – ATs are required to have “a foot in both camps” – one in the culture, language and practice of the home community, the other in the world of Western academic and literate discourse. It is therefore important to consider carefully the educational and professional development needs of Indigenous ATs, and how they are to be met. As I will attempt to show in the remainder of this paper, the AL moment sheds significant light on this matter, revealing a vital opportunity that ought not to be missed.

In the remaining sections I briefly outline the theoretical foundations and pedagogical approach of Accelerated Literacy methodology, and offer some

reflections on DET's ongoing attempt to implement AL throughout NT schools as part of the NALP. In this way I hope to show how the CDU evaluation of the NALP has, to date, generally confirmed the picture of Indigenous AT training and development sketched above. Further, I argue that the way in which AL methodology presents the challenges of Indigenous literacy education serves as a useful “lens” through which to consider the task of supporting Indigenous ATs to establish a clear and qualified literacy support role. Indeed, I also highlight a number of recent initiatives, within the NALP, that point a way forward towards this end. Finally, I conclude with some related suggestions about the scope for further research and development.

Literacy learning and educational success: An accelerated literacy perspective

Accelerated Literacy (AL) is described as an “inclusive and academically focused” teaching methodology (Gray & Cowey, 2005, p. 5), based on the understanding that “learning to be a literate member of a society requires a student to learn the discourse or tacit ground-rules that apply to literacy lessons in schools” (Cowey, 2005, p. 3). Cowey writes:

The Accelerated Literacy teaching strategies are designed to teach students both how to enjoy and interpret books, particularly narrative in an educational context, as well as how a literate person thinks and acts to be successful in school. The NALP aims to give each student access to the literate discourse that identifies a student as a successful member of a literate society (Gray & Cowey, 2005, p. 6).

The emphasis, in AL, on scaffolding students in literate discourse (following especially the work of Gee, 1990) is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the entire approach. “Literate discourse” here refers to the customary practices, objects of inquiry and tacit ground-rules that govern Western models of teaching and learning, and how these are framed by language. Indeed, Parkin describes the basic challenges of Indigenous education in this way:

The long-term goal of social inclusion requires students to recognise the need for, and gain control over, a range of discourses for different contexts and audiences ... In particular, for success at school and for access to higher levels of employment and political negotiation, students need increasing control over powerful academic and literate discourses, both oral and written (2006, p. 104).

The literate, academic discourse AL aims to make explicit, then, can be understood as a central aspect of

the “secret English” or “language of power” that many Indigenous groups regard as necessary for engaging effectively with “white” Australian culture, and so to becoming truly self-determining of their own socio-political and economic aspirations. Towards this end, AL employs a strongly scaffolded and purposive teaching cycle, grounded in the social learning theory of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1986). More detailed information about the AL teaching sequence strategies and related literature can be found at the NALP website (www.nalp.edu.au). Generally, however, the AL teaching strategies have been designed to remedy the dysfunctional reading strategies developed by students who have been forced to cope with lessons centred on developmentally inappropriate texts and the “cognitive overload” arising from a lack of any shared understanding of the implicit educational purpose of set tasks and teacher questioning (Gray & Cowey, 2005).

By setting students up to succeed at an age-appropriate level, and by explicitly negotiating a shared understanding of the educational task, AL purports to offer an effective sequence of teaching strategies for accelerating the literacy gains of educationally marginalised students. Throughout the AL teaching sequence, lessons focus on a single literate text (typically a narrative), which is selected for its quality of writing, high level of interest and age-appropriateness. Indeed, AL theory identifies Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as indicating a way to “break out of the constraints imposed by finding a student’s reading ‘level’, then working on from there, or ‘starting again with the basics’ when a student is found to be falling behind” (Cowey, 2005, pp. 7-8). The ZPD therefore underpins the AL approach of assigning study texts and learning goals well above a student’s independent level of achievement, and of supporting them to work at this higher level through strongly guided or ‘scaffolded’ teaching strategies. This approach is thought to affirm Vygotsky’s claim that “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (1978, p. 89).

Overview of the National Accelerated Literacy Program in the NT

The implementation of the NALP has been described as “an ambitious initiative that aims to develop the sustainable implementation of a successful and broadly based approach to achieving high level literacy outcomes for Indigenous and other educationally marginalised students” (Gray, 2007, p. 1). The NALP commenced in late 2004, when the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government, through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), agreed to fund the project, jointly committing funding of over \$16 million over four years. The goals of the Program, outlined on the NALP website,

include providing targeted support to 10,000 students in 100 schools (including 90% of remote Indigenous schools) by the end of 2008. This will involve the training of 700 teachers, including 380 in-school AL coordinators, plus the on-going provision of training and support structures, resource packages, and data on students’ progress.

A central aspect of the NALP has been an ongoing evaluation conducted by Charles Darwin University (CDU). The purpose of the evaluation has generally been to monitor the implementation of the NALP in terms of evident changes in teaching practice, factors responsible for effective AL teaching and in terms of student outcomes. While previous research has shown AL to be a potentially effective method of instruction, especially for Indigenous students (Gray et al., 1998, 2003), implementing the program at a system-wide level has generated a range of problems that further reflect the sort of underlying, systemic challenges raised earlier in this paper. A crisis in continuity due to staff turnover and the challenges of conducting education in remote settings are among the major themes revealed by the recent evaluation research (Robinson et al., 2008). Further, although the evaluation has not specifically focussed on the experiences of Indigenous ATs, aspects of their struggle to develop a clear role and genuine status as literacy support teachers have also emerged.

An early evaluation of the NALP painted a similar picture of the role of ATs in literacy education as that suggested by the literature considered earlier. That is, ATs were seen as being denied access to appropriate training and development in AL and were often reported as resorting to menial tasks such as translation, photocopying and behaviour management, despite persistently indicating a desire to be more actively involved in the program. For example, the first CDU evaluation of the NALP (Lowe et al., 2006) suggested that the role and status of ATs had in fact been diminished by the implementation of AL in some schools. In particular, it was reported that Indigenous staff often found the professional development (PD) inaccessible (both in terms of being able attend PD and the way in which it was presented), and felt that their role within AL was not clearly defined (Lowe et al., 2006, p. 18). Of course, ATs are generally an under-utilised resource in remote area schools, and their genuine and effective engagement requires a host of personal and professional skills on the part of non-Indigenous teachers, school principals and ATs themselves. Nevertheless, it is possible that the demands of the new methodology and the logistics of providing large scale training and support led, in the early phases of the NALP implementation, to ATs being further marginalised from the teaching-learning process.

On the basis of that initial report, however, NALP developers began to recognise the vital importance

of ATs and, correspondingly, the need for appropriate training and development. Currently, a DET operated NALP e-space community offers guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of AL staff, including the specific role of ATs throughout the AL teaching sequence (DEET, 2007a, 2007b). A number of print and online resources for collaboration by teachers and ATs have also been developed. Such recognition of the value of ATs and of their need for targeted support within the NALP is certainly a welcome development. The most recent, Stage Two, Evaluation of the NALP (Robinson et al., 2008) also indicates an increasing awareness of the scope for increased AT participation within the program and the potential benefits for students.

For example, comments made by school-based AL coordinators and DEET AL support staff during focus group interviews signalled how the training and development of ATs could help alleviate the problem of teachers not having time to conduct assessment, to provide much needed one-on-one assistance to certain students, and to reinforce the value of literacy education and foster positive models of collaborative teaching. One teacher commented:

I know the [assistant teacher] I have in my class, she gets somewhat bored and frustrated during the time when I'm presenting to the class the low order and high order at up to spelling because she's, I mean, she's just busting to work with the kids and keep them on track and she feels kind of wasted, I guess, just sitting and the back of the classroom for that time, which can extend to half an hour or 45 minutes, and yeah, she's frustrated and wishes she could be doing more at that stage (Robinson et al., 2008).

Evaluation findings, however, have not revealed any systematic or wide spread approach to the appropriation of Indigenous support staff within the NALP. Instead, specific training for ATs tends to be sought independently by schools and/or provided in a fairly piecemeal fashion by school-based, DEET or CDU AL consultants. In some cases, anecdotal evidence suggests, this has proved quite effective. For example, the Community Education Centre at Ramingining in remote Arnhem Land reports that, "Indigenous staff play a critical role in the daily implementation of AL lessons" (Lloyd, 2008, p. 3). Such developments have been attributed to the in-school professional development and the support and encouragement of the teaching staff.

Through my involvement in the most recent evaluation of the NALP, I have recognised a strong desire among Indigenous staff – and especially ATs – to undertake professional development in AL: to learn sophisticated ways of talking about English literacy and so to take a more active responsibility for the teaching and learning of their children. This desire

for empowerment and involvement has been evident at least since the time of the first evaluation (Lowe et al., 2006, p. 92), yet, to date, it has not been widely met with systematic training and support. While the possibility of providing the requisite support depends on the commitment and understanding of many sectors – from teachers and school leaders to DET and local communities – establishing a proven approach to providing the kind of core skills and understandings that can qualify ATs to actively contribute to literacy education will be an important first step.

■ Seizing the AL moment: An opportunity for action

Findings drawn from on-going evaluation of the NALP have confirmed the need for some form of embedded literacy support in Indigenous educational settings. The urgency of this need is highlighted further by the fact that the retention rate of NT teachers trained in AL during 2006, as of Term 2, 2007, was a paltry 53% (CDU-NALP 2008). The relative continuity provided by community-based Indigenous teachers and ATs, as well as their voiced desire for greater participation within the program (and literacy education more generally) lends support to the strategy I am proposing of targeting ATs with training and development tailored to equip them as skilled and qualified literacy tutors.

In view of DET's present commitment to the NALP and the resources and support structures already established, the AL moment signals a vital opportunity for assisting ATs in this way. Further, I maintain, the theoretical framework underpinning AL methodology, and its structured approach to literacy teaching, may prove invaluable in both highlighting and meeting the professional development needs of ATs, in view of the challenges of Indigenous literacy education already discussed.

Through its focus on discourse AL cuts to the heart of the Indigenous literacy dilemma, by showing the importance of attuning students to the implicit ground rules of Western models of teaching and learning. In this way, AL shows that the task of the literacy teacher, and hence the literacy support teacher, is one of opening doors to culturally embedded forms of understanding: ways of thinking and communicating that underpin the entire enterprise of schooling, but which are often far removed from the everyday experiences of Indigenous students, and so remain thoroughly opaque. Something like this view of the challenge of Indigenous literacy education, I believe, is needed to help ATs develop a clear understanding of their teaching support role.

Further, through its highly structured, routinised teaching strategies, AL lends itself to the training of tutors to lead discrete components of the teaching cycle, or to supplement whole-class lessons with more intensive one-on-one support activities. Indeed, there is a strong confluence between AL methodology

and the recommendations drawn from the literature concerning trained tutors, as surveyed by Woolley and Hay. To reiterate, findings indicate the value of specific literacy intervention programs that require a high level of on-going training and support. Further, the best programs are seen to provide the kind of at-home reading experiences enjoyed by most children of literate households. It is worth mentioning that AL began as a parent-as-tutor training scheme at the University of Canberra, and in its present form it retains strong elements of a guided reading approach to literacy development.

In short, there is much of value in the AL approach to literacy education, especially where the training of expert literacy support teachers for Indigenous students is concerned. Further, given the centrality of the NALP in NT education right now, the time is ripe to begin targeting Indigenous ATs with the kind of expert knowledge, skills and resources a program like AL can provide. Whatever its merit or even its future in addressing the challenges of Indigenous education, the NALP has provided a vital opportunity to develop and trial a principled approach to the professional development in Indigenous ATs: one which aims simultaneously to build and extend their own literacy skills while providing a basic grounding in important principles of literacy education, together with a range of practical strategies for in-class support.

The NALP Indigenous Educator Forums: A step in the right direction

Since the conclusion of data collection for the NALP evaluation, the provision of tailored training and development for Indigenous ATs has been factored in to DET's NALP training and support strategy. Two forums for Indigenous educators were held in 2008 in Alice Springs (June) and Darwin (July), offering workshops in such areas as "Spelling Knowledge" and "Supporting and Assessing Students" according to AL pedagogy. These forums represent a step in the right direction inasmuch as they are a direct response to feedback drawn from schools, teachers, ATs and the findings of the NALP evaluation, and because they reflect an understanding of the importance of Indigenous educators in confronting the crisis in continuity in Indigenous education. A DEET review of the forums reported:

The forums provided opportunities to open up dialogue relating to literacy learning and Indigenous students, as well as highlight the potential of AL to respond to this critical area of need. The two-day forums were designed to provide AL Indigenous educators and support staff with information about the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) and an opportunity to participate in practical workshops (DEET, 2008, p. 1).

My own experience of the forums was that feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, and that much was done to clarify the role of Indigenous support staff in AL classrooms while providing a practical range of resources and activities for use in class. The following feedback came from a teacher who did not even attend the forums:

I just wanted to let you know a positive story that came back after the Indigenous Forum in Alice Springs. I was talking to a teacher two A/Ts attended from her school. She said she was amazed when they came back because although one AT has always been a great help, he seemed to have gained so much confidence in the classroom and was taking charge of activities he had generally only participated in passively. She was quite choked up by it and just noticed such a difference in the way he interacted with the kids and gave direction during a spelling activity she usually taught (DEET, 2008, p. 4).

There is a strong indication from the forums, therefore, that targeted training and support for ATs as part of the NALP may prove a valuable strategy in improving Indigenous education. Of course, the forums also raise questions about how regular and accessible such professional development opportunities are, what it was about the content and delivery that made it such an apparent success, and to what extent knowledge gained translates into modified classroom practice and student outcomes. An active research and evaluation component is therefore required to document the development and delivery of such training initiatives and their effect on classroom practice, with a view to supporting the provision of high quality and accessible professional development.

Conclusion

The complexities of Indigenous education, compounded at times by the logistics of system-level initiatives such as the NALP, threaten to swallow up the question of Indigenous ATs and their potential role in establishing firm foundations for lasting educational reform. While initiatives such as the NALP and concurrent research and evaluation have been helpful in identifying the range of issues pertinent to Indigenous education, it may seem from some perspectives that the role of ATs is too modest a piece of the puzzle. Yet if AL teaches us anything it is that one of the main reasons for the failure of students in learning to read and write is the diminished expectations of their teachers, which too often translates into paltry efforts at teaching and learning. Translating this lesson to the field of system-level reform, the potential contribution of ATs to the future of Indigenous education, as illuminated by the AL moment, should not be underestimated and is far too important to ignore.

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