Paper: COW08119

The National Accelerated Literacy Program: its results and potential for improving literacy outcomes for marginalised students.

Wendy Cowey
Charles Darwin University

The context

Low literacy outcomes for Indigenous students are frequently mentioned in the media when the progress of students across Australia are compared and reported upon. If we take the Northern Territory's published results in their Multilevel Assessment Program (MAP) for 2007 as an example, we find that in reading 72.8% of NT students achieved the Year 3 reading benchmark compared with 93% of year 3 students Australia wide. If we study those results further we find that students in provincial schools (Darwin and Palmerston) 85.7% of students achieved benchmark, in remote schools (Alice Springs and Katherine) 71.8% of students achieved benchmark while in very remote schools (all the rest of Territory schools), 37.6% achieved benchmark. With the majority of very remote school students being Indigenous, it is no wonder that this very low level of reading achievement has been noted and discussed. I have only referred to year 3 and to reading to provide a glimpse of the literacy landscape as this information is available to all and serves to highlight the fact that many Indigenous students are moving through school with limited success in learning to read. As a result, achievement in all areas of literacy is limited for these students.

We are probably all familiar with reasons posited for these low literacy outcomes among Indigenous students: attendance, English as a Second Language, hearing difficulties, no literacy in the home and so on. I do not, however, want to discuss *how* these disturbing outcomes have come to be part of the discourse surrounding Indigenous education. Rather, I want to discuss the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) and some aspects of the results achieved by students in participating schools. I will also discuss how these data can inform our understanding about literacy teaching and how successful it can be.

An overview of the NALP

The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) is a classroom-teaching program that can be used by educators to teach all aspects of literacy to students from pre-school to Year 12. The program has derived its name from its success in accelerating the literacy learning of marginalised students including Indigenous students in remote schools (Gray, Cowey, Axford, 2003), although the program has also been highly successful in extending the competence of even the best literacy students where it has been used in mainstream schools. The program aims to teach students to be fully participating members of a literate society: "full members, not just with access, but also with a zest for participating and an instinct to exercise agency" (Freebody, 2004, p. 4).

The program has unique features that would seem counter intuitive to many teachers of literacy. In many conventional programs students in a class work at their 'own level'. In other words, teachers assess each student's individual level of reading competence and then teach just ahead of this individual level. As a result, each student can be grouped with others at a similar level and all work at tasks designed to take them level by level to reading competence. Thus, high achieving students are challenged to achieve their potential and lower achieving students helped to reach

their lower but achievable potential. The outcomes of this type of teaching are that there is never a time when the students being taught at a lower level actually catch up to those students being taught at a higher level: a quite unjust situation.

Accelerated Literacy teaching, in contrast, is based on the understanding that students can be taught in a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as described by Vygotsky (1978), well above the level they can achieve individually. As a result, a whole class can be taught at the same high level from a class reading text (Cowey, 2007).

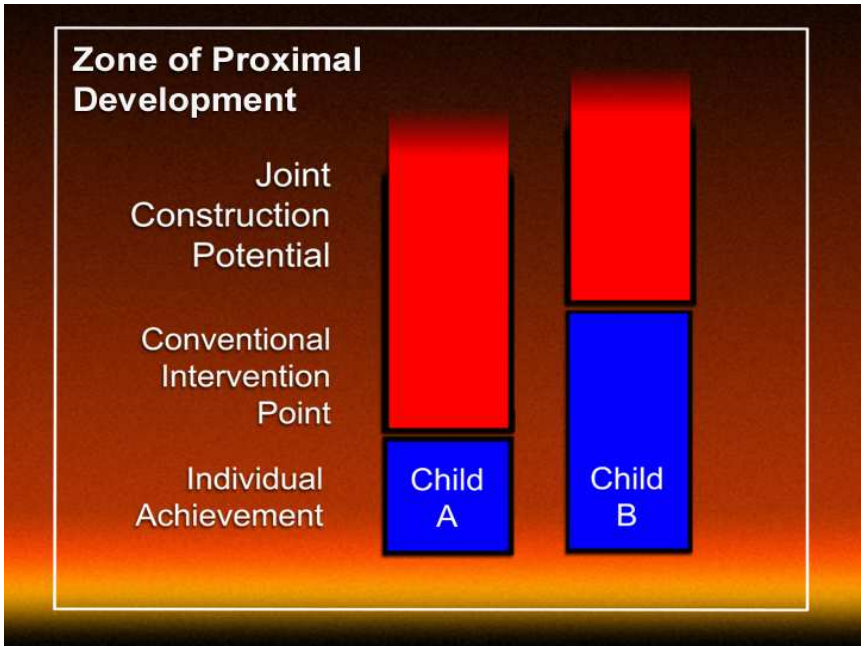


Diagram 1: The Zone of Proximal Development

This achievement is made possible by applying a group of pedagogic tools known as the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence (Cowey, 2007 and www.nalp.edu.au). The stages of the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence are illustrated below.

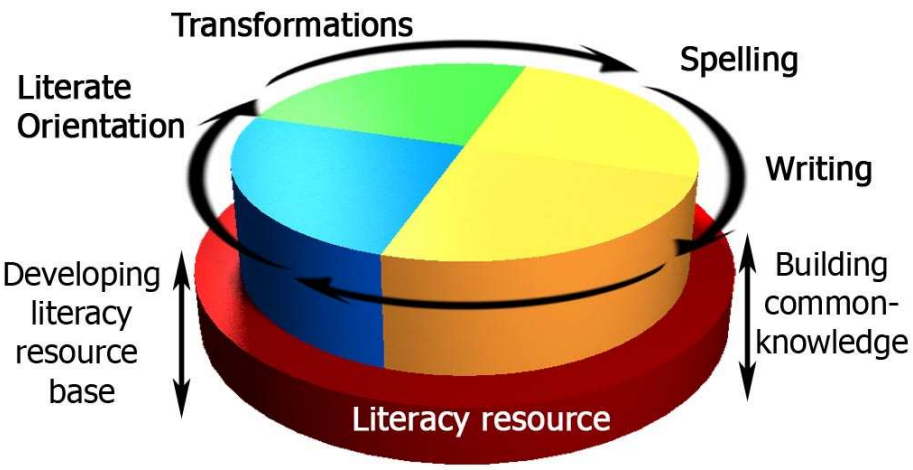


Diagram 2: The Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence

To expand on diagram 2; in a NALP classroom, teacher and students work on a class text over several weeks until all students can read it and share 'common knowledge' about the writing techniques used in its creation (the 'literacy resource' illustrated above). The value of such common knowledge (Edwards and Mercer, 1987) or 'intersubjectivity' (Wertsch, 1987), is that students are able to come from different backgrounds, different cultures and different individual achievement levels and, on one study text, negotiate common understanding and interpretations of this text. They develop a high level of comprehension and can discuss the text critically. Literate orientation, as shown in the diagram, is the initial tool used to examine the study text in fine detail. Transformations provide another dimension to analysing the text, spelling provides explicit teaching in word analysis and decoding and the writing strategy provides a context for practicing the writing techniques of competent authors.

An example of the progress possible through the use of these pedagogic tools can be seen in the following video examples. The student was part of the program from 2001 in a very remote school in WA.

Clip 1: Pre program reading
This clip illustrates a student in year 6 at the time of filming reading a picture riddle book she chose as a book she could read. She struggled to read the text of this book (83% accuracy) and of books at Kindergarten level (first year of school). It is through developing ritualised reading habits on early reading texts that students become 'fossilised' in using ineffective reading strategies. This student attempts to 'sound out' words but is seldom successful. On a low level text such as this, she cannot learn at a level expected of a year 6 student. Put simply, she cannot progress by persisting with reading these early reading texts. Perhaps one of the most profound findings of this program is the number of students in upper primary years levels 'reading' these early reading books and the way teachers and students persist with them in a parody of the reading process. Thus, the very material meant to teach reading becomes the means by which students fail to learn to read.

Clip 2 Working level reading
Nine months later we see her reading from *Eye of the Eagle* by Ron Bunney, a book that we place at about secondary level. This is the book that has been the study text for Accelerated Literacy lessons. In these lessons she has been taught about the language choices that construct the text and what they mean. She had been taught about the structure of the text and its purpose in the book. Having a detailed understanding about the meaning of the text aided the reader's prediction skills and reduced the load on her decoding. It must be stressed that this is a 'working level' text. It is not an example of what she could read if this text was just placed in front of her, sight unseen.

Clip 3 Individual level reading
Two years later however, we see her reading an unseen text at her year level (Year 8). As she reads from *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo* by Tim Winton we can see that she is able to read with few miscues. In the two years of her learning in an Accelerated Literacy class, she has progressed about 7 reading year levels in oral reading ability.

Implications of teaching in the zpd
Teaching students to read well above their individual level as illustrated has the following interesting implication. The diagram below demonstrates the range for one student who individually struggles with a year 1 text but at the same time could read very fluently from a text at an early year 4 level. As already shown, leaving students

to read at individual levels on early reading material, exacerbates the very problem it is meant to solve. Rather, by actually teaching how to read more complex texts it is possible to break free of counterproductive strategies that have become entrenched or fossilised as 'doing reading' and actively teach students how to read closer to age appropriate levels. As illustrated in diagram 3 below, the student who could not read at year 1 level could read at year 4 level when taught and could thus participate in interesting, relevant and productive literacy activities for a student his age that were not possible on the year 1 texts.

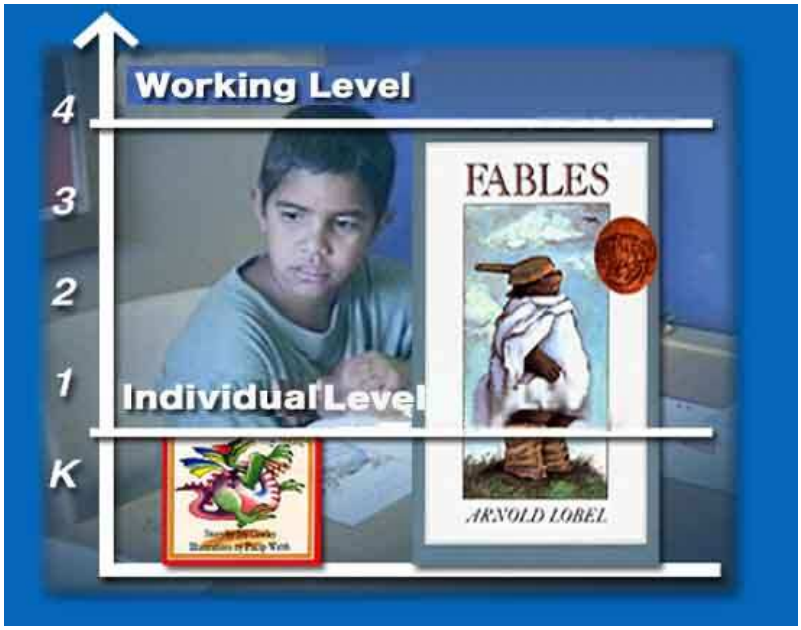


Diagram 3: two reading levels

As a result of such teaching the NALP has been successful in improving literacy outcomes for marginalised students to the extent that it is being implemented in Australia by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training as well as receiving Commonwealth Government support to implement it widely in other jurisdictions in Australia from 2005 - 2008.

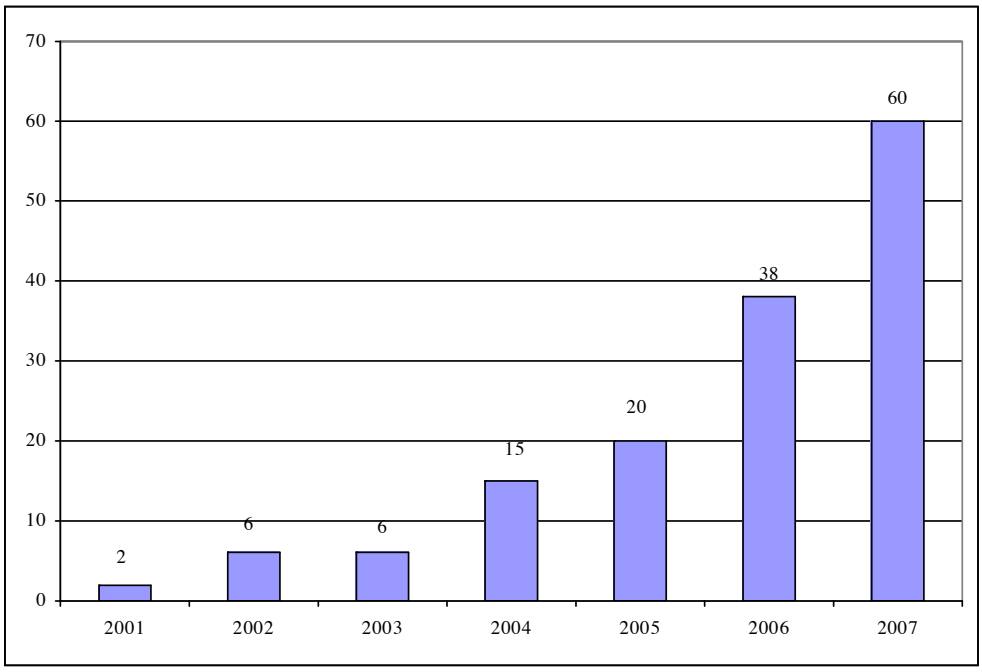
Ongoing results

We will now look at some of the outcomes of the program since it moved beyond the pilot stage into the project to embed it within NT schools.

Since 2005, a data base of student oral reading and comprehension data has been recorded at Charles Darwin University (CDU) on a system known as the Accelerated Literacy Information Analysis System (ALIAS). It is these results, specifically those for students from Northern Territory schools that I will discuss next.

Number of schools

The following graph shows the number of NT schools that have provided data for ALIAS. It can be seen that there has been a tripling of the number of schools implementing Accelerated Literacy since 2005 and this rapid growth has stretched the resources of the program significantly. Of course there has been a corresponding explosion in the number of students entering the program (at least double).



Graph 1: Number of school sites with recorded assessments year by year

Type of records

The reading records kept in the program are observational reading records. The oral reading assessment is based on the PM Benchmark Kit 2 (Nelley and Smith, 2002) and provides information about each student's ability to decode and read fluently from texts at age appropriate level. They allow the observer to determine the reading behaviours or strategies being employed by the reader rather than simply examining the results of a test. Thus, they provide information that helps teachers make decisions about teaching most productively in the context of the classroom. As a listener observes the reading behaviours of a student it is possible to monitor whether that student uses meaning prediction as a cue, whether the student rereads to check and self correct or whether the student has become so confused and overloaded in the reading process, that he or she reads nonsense words. This diagnostic observational reading record is in accordance with Marie Clay's Running Records, and Miscue Analysis as described by Max Kemp in his text on observational reading records (1987). There are many elements of literacy not assessed in these records but they do determine whether a student can actually read.

Additionally, students whose observational reading record is at Year 4 level or above also completed a sequence of Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH) (Mossenson, Hill, Masters, 1987). A ToRCH test provides information about reading comprehension. This assessment tool is from West Australia and tests students' ability to obtain meaning from a reading text.

Average student progress rate

A summary of average student progress rate since 2005 is shown below on table 1. The results shown here are of students' Individual level (IL) reading of a benchmarked text that has not been taught in class. Note that these results are available on the NALP website with a more detailed analysis that there is time for here.

Table 1 – Average student progress rate – Individual Level (IL) and TORCH

	IL			TORCH		
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**
Number of participating students - Term 4	2,534	4,165	5,167			
Number of students with assessment sequences - on scale	526	914	1,599	212	415	548
Average progress rate	**1.67**	**1.74**	**1.18**	**1.34**	**1.22**	**1.35**

The average progress rate is based on the understanding that an average student would be expected to progress one year in reading level in one school year. Progress of 1.67 then indicates that in 2005, the 526 students with assessment sequences made more than a year's progress in one year. With this rate of progress the possibility exists that these students could make up some of the lag they have experienced as a result of being kept on low level reading material.

Similarly, the students who carried out a Torch test in 2005 progressed an average of 1.34 years in one year.

In every year the records have been analysed, students have made more than one year's progress in a school year. This rate of progress allows the possibility of 'catching up'.

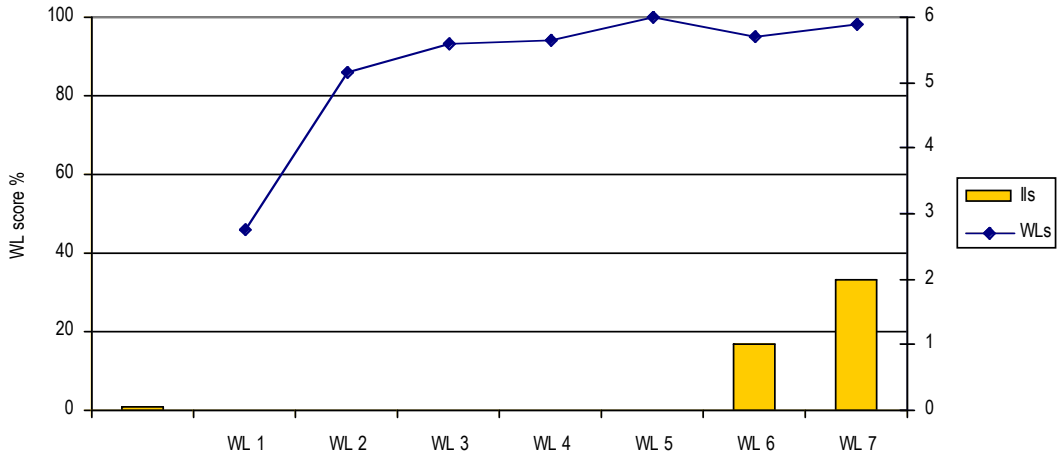
There are, however, some aspects of the assessment figures that provide some interesting information about the NALP.

In 2007, results provided information about the oral reading levels of 5,167 students at Northern Territory (NT) schools (Dunn, 2007). Of these students records 1,599 provided records provided assessment sequences. That is, they provided oral reading records of the same type in more than one term. In addition, 548 of those students, who were able to read at Year 4 level or above, completed a sequence of ToRCH tests. If we look at the significance of the difference between 5,167 students and 1,599 we can see that there are some students who do not register on the scale at all and are thus not included in the average progress rate figures.

There are many finer analyses of these figures freely available but for the moment, I am going to return to the notion of working level assessments. These figures are not included in the official reports on the program. What students can do when they are taught is seldom valued despite the view of Vygotsky that what a student can do with help is the only true measure of his/her potential.

Graph 2 below shows an analysis carried out by another analyst (Begg, 2008) who was interested in the link between working level and individual level assessment for students who appeared to be making no, or little progress in their IL.

What he found was that there is a very definite link between the two types of assessment to the extent that he believed he could predict when any student would improve in their IL from studying their WL assessments. While this example is only one student, he found a similar pattern repeatedly in the data.



Graph 2: WL/IL Link for one student

Note that in March 2007 the student was unsuccessful in reading at transition level. In May 2007 this student registered a WL of just over 40% accuracy. It could be expected that other teaching had occurred between March and May but the first recorded WL score was low. It indicated that the student could only read 4 words in every 10 correctly: not enough to make meaning from the text or read fluently. The next WL, however was scored at over 80% accuracy and then three subsequent texts were scored at above 90% accuracy which meant that the student was making about 1 error in every 10 words: a degree of accuracy that allows students to obtain meaning from the text.

Consistently, once a student has scored at 90% accuracy on three consecutive working level texts there is transfer from working level to individual level. By the end of 2007 the student returned an IL at Transition level. A few months later, in February, 2008, this student was able to read an unseen or individual level at Year 2 level: a not inconsequential progression.

The analysis of working level data has shown repeatedly that there is a close link between explicit teaching in the ZPD and reading progress. While that statement seems glaringly obvious, these students were not left to progress at their own rate. They were taught to read as closely as possible on age appropriate texts using the pedagogic tools explained briefly earlier in this presentation.

Implications for teaching

Teachers have many decisions to make about teaching literacy. They have to navigate their way through a vast array of possible methods for teaching students to read. There is an impressive array of decisions to be made about teaching phonics. How? Commercial kits abound. Reading schemes? All claim to be effective. What to do?

Accelerated Literacy, as a program, has kept careful and meticulous records of how readers progress from being non-readers to being able to read at age appropriate level. Results have also been documented about progress with reading comprehension. Valued above all by administrators are results in the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and previously state and

territory standardised tests. For students who have been reading at low levels or not at all for some years, progress in NAPLAN requires them to not only read a text and comprehend it but also to understand how to do a test. I could expand further on this topic but for now, the Accelerated Literacy results show that:

- Students who cannot read can be taught to read, however,
    - They need to be taught on texts that go beyond early reading texts
    - Their progress can be predicted by carefully analysing their 'working level'
    - Transfer from working level to individual level can be followed and teaching can influence how this can occur.
    - Further progress to national testing standards will take more time but low scores do not mean that nothing is happening.
    - All students, Indigenous or not, can be taught to read by a skilful teacher.
    - Whatever problems are posited, attendance included, are not as important as the quality of the teachers and the program they have at their disposal.
- There should be no excuses for Australian students not learning to read.

References

Begg, B. (2008). Oral presentation at Kaltye Irrtyeke Ikerte: Learning Stron Conference. Darwin. July 2008.
Cowey, W. (2005). *A Brief Description of the National Accelerated Literacy Program*. TESOL in Context, 15 (2): 3-14.
Dunn, B. (2006). Student Progress 2006. Accelerated Literacy NT Schools. Darwin. Charles Darwin University.
Dunn, B. (2007). Student Progress 2007. Accelerated Literacy NT Schools. Darwin. Charles Darwin University.
Edwards, D. & Mercer, N. (1987). *Common knowledge: the development of understanding in the classroom.* London: Routledge.
Freebody, P. (2004). Foreword. In A. Healey & E. Honan. Text next: *New resources for literacy learning.* Marrickville, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association.
Gray, B., Cowey, W., & Axford, B. (2003). *Scaffolding literacy with Indigenous children in school.* Final Report to the Indigenous Education Branch. Canberra, ACT: DETYA, University of Canberra Press.
Kemp, M. (1987). *Watching Children Read and Write*. Portsmouth. Heinemann.
Mossenson, Leila, Hill, Peter, Masters, Geoffrey (1987) Torch Tests of Reading Comprehension, ACER, Melbourne
Nelley, E. & Smith A. (2002). *PM Benchmark Kit 2.* Victoria. Nelson Thompson Learning.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* (M. Cole, S. Scribner, V. John-Steiner, & E. Souderman Eds.). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
Wertsch, J. V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Boston, Mass: Harvard University Press.