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Title: Implementing the National Accelerated Literacy Program in Northern Territory: Findings of survey, focus groups and observations of teaching practice

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Abstract

This is the first of two papers on outcomes of the evaluation of the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) in the NT. NALP was an attempt to rapidly improve literacy outcomes for Indigenous students in 100 schools in the Northern Territory by implementing a method of teaching known as Accelerated Literacy (AL). The authors present findings of the evaluation of the implementation of NALP (2006-2008), focusing on the degree to which the implementation program was effective in changing teaching practices according to the requirements of the Accelerated Literacy method. The evaluators conducted a survey of practitioners, focus group interviews with teachers and coordinators in schools and systematically observed AL teaching in 68 classrooms in 36 schools. It confirms that within four years, NALP had achieved the implementation of AL in a large number of NT schools such that teachers and principals in close to the target number of schools had been engaged in the process of change. However, notwithstanding this progress in implementation of the program in NT schools, the results of this evaluation suggest that by early 2008 there had been uneven success in changing teacher practice to achieve the levels of teaching of AL to desired standards in classrooms. The evaluation questions whether the policy commitments were always insufficient to support and sustain the implementation of AL to appropriate levels in terms of quality and completeness of systemic support.

Introduction

This paper reports findings of an evaluation of the implementation of National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) in the Northern Territory (2005-2008, focusing on the implementation strategy and the uptake of the AL teaching method by teachers. Drawing on published program materials, an overview of the NALP implementation program is provided, followed by an outline of the evaluation strategy and methods: these included focus group interviews, a survey of all AL practitioners and an observational study in of AL teaching in 36 schools. The evaluation was conducted under contract to NT DET by a team based at Charles Darwin University. The evaluation team was established as an independent unit that was separate from the University's NALP implementation team, the chief partner of NT DET in development and implementation of AL in the NT under contracts with the Commonwealth of Australia. The development of the evaluation design and instruments entailed extensive formal consultation between the evaluation team and the DET and CDU implementation teams, with the assistance of experienced consultants.

NALP in the Northern Territory

Before the decision to expand implementation in the NT, Scaffolding Literacy, as Accelerated Literacy (AL) had until then been known, had been trialled in approximately 30 schools in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland and later in six schools in the NT. Student outcomes from these pilots, including the six NT schools were said to be promising. Gray & Cowey (2005, p. 22) reported that in a period of two years (1999-2001) 'unprecedented literacy gains in some of the most challenging educational contexts in Australia' had been achieved as a result of the implementation of AL and claimed that, (2005, p. 6) 'students involved in this project are in the process of achieving a major shift in their developmental progression.'

From late 2004, Accelerated Literacy was adopted by the NT Government as the mainstay of reforms intended to improve literacy teaching outcomes in the NT. The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) was an ambitious attempt to implement AL method of literacy teaching and was the largest project of its kind in the Northern Territory. The NALP was charged with implementing AL in 100 schools and with training of 700 teachers in order to reach a target of 10,000 students in predominantly remote locations by the end of 2008. To meet these targets it was necessary to simultaneously bring a large number of schools into the program and to rapidly train new teachers and teacher-trainers (coordinators) in the AL approach. The aim was to support the capacity of schools to sustain the program by building a critical mass of expertise in AL that would be sufficient to overcome the impact of turnover in teaching staff that is a feature of Northern Territory schools.

The rapid transition from pilot to scale presented significant challenges for the implementation of NALP: the AL professional development program and teaching resources were being developed and written as the implementation proceeded; DET AL coordinators received training as Professional Development (PD) workshops became available; teachers and Accelerated Literacy school-based coordinators (ALSBCs) were bought into the program before they had received much if any professional development. As such, far from evaluating a program that was fully developed and resourced and implemented by appropriately trained personnel, the evaluation had to examine what was in effect an ongoing process of capacity-building across a substantial sector of the NT education sector.

During the period reported here, (2005-2008) professional development was delivered using a train-the-trainer model. Accelerated Literacy developers at Charles Darwin University provided training for a team of Accelerated Literacy experts based in regional centres throughout the NT, known as the DET AL team, or DET AL coordinators (NTDET, 2006a, 2007) through three PD workshops (referred to as PD1, PD2 and PD3, and a fourth Assessment Workshop). PD1 was an introduction to AL methodology with an overview of theory and examined the first two stages of the teaching sequence (low order and high order) in detail. PD2 focused on the third, "transformations" and "spelling" stages of the teaching sequence. PD3 focused on the writing stage and the Assessment Workshop on AL assessment protocols. PD workshops were timetabled regularly throughout the year and also on a needs basis. The DET AL team in turn provided in-school PD support based on these workshops in response to the needs of teachers and ALSBCs in schools. ALSBC were appointed to manage the program at the school level, support teachers in day-to-day implementation and to coordinate the assessment of students (NT DEET, 2007a, p. 1).

Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence strategies

The AL teaching sequence consists of four key elements: literate orientation; the transformations strategy; spelling and writing. The teaching sequence centres on a single text (and/or passages from a text) which is studied intensively over time. The study text constitutes the literacy resource upon which all other teaching strategies in the sequence are centred[1].

Literate orientation. Literate orientation is divided into two key parts. *Low order literate orientation* focuses on the general meanings in the text and is the starting point for every teaching sequence and is part of every AL lesson (Cowey, 2005, p. 11). *High order literate orientation* shifts the students' focus from the text as a whole to a close examination of the author's word choices (intentionality).

Transformations. This element of the sequence "is designed to change the student's orientation to the text from that of a reader looking for meaning to that of a writer learning how to use a writer's techniques" (Cowey, 2005, p. 12). Gray notes that Transformations "follow up on, intensify and focus understandings of [author] intentionality already explored within the Literate Orientation stage" (2007, p. 25). The Transformations strategy "allows a closer look at grammatical features of a text, as well as punctuation" and is used "to teach word recognition skills that lead to spelling activities" (Cowey, 2005, p. 12).

[1] See www.nalp.edu.au for more information about the NALP sequence strategies

Spelling strategies. These strategies are "devoted to teaching word analysis skills and the system of English spelling" (Cowey, 2005, p. 12). The key spelling strategy is *chunking*, whereby words are broken down into manageable and/or commonly encountered letter groups or patterns (chunks). The etymology of words, root-words or familiar letter patterns may also be discussed. Students practice saying and writing each chunk, committing the visual pattern to memory, before re-combining the separate chunks to spell the word correctly.

Writing activities. These strategies follow from transformations (with the support of spelling knowledge) and writing workshop activities range in degree of teacher support. Joint reconstructed writing is a highly supported strategy where teacher and students jointly re-write the study passage used for transformations as though they are authors. Independent writing represents the end goal of the entire teaching sequence, where students use their knowledge of readers' expectations, writers' intentions and techniques, knowledge of spelling, grammar and vocabulary, and shared imaginative resources to compose their own texts independently.

Classroom interaction. The interrelation of the various strategies with the literacy resource provides a recursive context for developing a literacy resource base of texts and knowledge about texts and authors to support future literacy learning. The teaching-learning cycle is directed towards building common knowledge about texts and the skills and understandings of the successful learner. Throughout each lesson the developers of AL emphasise the need for positive and affirming interactions with students such that the teacher promotes student engagement, participation and access through cognitively challenging questions, which are pre-formulated when appropriate, and affirms and reconceptualises students' answers and includes students with different levels of understanding in the lesson (CDU, 2008, p. 17).

In summary, although resting on well-established theoretical foundations, the AL teaching strategy is complex and multi-dimensional. Its effective implementation required significant changes in practice on the part of teachers, and significant ongoing support from outside the school and classroom.

Research questions, evaluation design & methods

The phase of evaluation reported here commenced in 2006, and was subject to the circumstances outlined: that is, the evaluation design confronted an already ongoing implementation effort and had to flexibly and pragmatically respond to the realities of uneven program implementation after the fact. AL was implemented cumulatively, as different elements of capacity could be assembled: resources produced and disseminated, coordinators and teachers trained, schools inducted into and withdrawing from the program, et cetera. This unavoidably imposed constraints on the design and execution of the evaluation.

The evaluation took a dual strategy. Firstly, it was necessary to establish whether the implementation effort had lead to the required changes in teaching practice and the actual teaching of AL in classrooms to requisite standards according to the model of the teaching sequence as outlined above. The centre of the evaluation of the implementation was therefore an empirical study of AL teaching in a sample of participating schools by direct observation.

The observational data were then interpreted drawing on findings of a survey of all practitioners and of focus group interviews with teachers and coordinators.

The secondly element of the evaluation strategy consisted of a quantitative analysis of system-wide outcomes for *all* participating schools using available assessment information and applying advanced statistical techniques to estimate the contribution of AL and of key contextual variables to measured progress in literacy learning by participating students. At the time, it was not possible to measure learning outcomes of students taught by teachers in the observational study. The findings of the system-wide learning outcomes are reported in a second paper.

In this study of the implementation program, it was hypothesized that

1. *The NALP implementation would lead to teaching according to the validated methods of Accelerated Literacy in classrooms in participating schools, that is, that observed classroom teaching strategies would accord with AL teaching strategies described in the AL professional development and program literature*
2. *Variations in observed practice could be explained in terms of levels of training and support received as reported by practitioners through survey and interview.*

In order to establish the framework to test these propositions, a systematic review of relevant literature on AL and its antecedents was conducted, followed by a series of extensive consultations with AL developers, managers and expert coordinators in NT DET. These consultations reviewed both the survey design and the elements of the observational protocol for the study of AL teaching practices.

The questionnaire was divided into a number of scales. Respondents provided information about their teaching experience, experience teaching AL, time at present school and a range of other characteristics, including the number of PD workshops they had attended and the total number of hours of PD support including in-school support they had received. Respondents were then asked to rate support received from the principal; support from the ALSBC; support from the DET AL coordinator; access to teaching materials and their usefulness. They were asked to rate their confidence in their AL skills and knowledge; their satisfaction with workload and a range of other issues relating to AL pedagogy. Responses were rated using a *Likert* scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. Questionnaire responses were analysed using error bars to locate the mean response either for individual items-where that was informative-or aggregated subscales of the questionnaire. The analyses compare scores for teachers, principals and AL school based coordinators.

The survey was made available both by mail and online. A total of 259 practitioners responded to the survey, including 184 teachers, 46 ALSBCs and 29 principals. Of these, 136 were in schools classed as *very remote* (Tennant Creek and all remaining remote community schools), 28 in schools classed as *remote* (Alice Springs and Katherine) and 62 were *urban*, based in Darwin.

After detailed consultation with NALP experts, a protocol was developed for the classroom observations, called The Accelerated Literacy Sequence Strategies Observation Record

(ALSSOR) following the Classroom Observational Schedule developed by Louden et al. (2005). ALSSOR rated the effectiveness of the teacher's implementation of the sequence strategies using nine scales: 1) low order literate orientation: focus on language and content; 2) high order literate orientation: focus on wording of the text 3) transformations: focus on text as a model for writing 4) spelling: focus on word analysis and decoding knowledge 5) re-constructed writing 6) jointly constructed writing 7) independent writing 8) whole lesson interaction and 9) whole lesson organisation. Itemised benchmarks were developed for each of these subscales.

The ALSSOR rating scale applied by observers to each of these criteria was:

1. Expected but not attempted
2. Attempted but not effective (teacher observed implementing AL sequence strategy listed on the ALSSOR but not as required by AL strategy guidelines);
3. Effective (observed implementing AL sequence strategy as required);
4. Outstanding (observed implementing AL sequence strategy in exceptional manner).

Each teacher was observed across three lessons and scores from individual lessons were aggregated to provide a single mean response for each teacher on each ALSSOR item, so that for each of the observed teachers, their observed performance on each item of each scale represented a mean aggregated across two or three lessons. After, training using video samples of practice, inter-rater reliability was assessed scoring live classrooms in a number of pilot schools. On all scales, intra-class correlations of 0.89 or more were attained.

For the observational study, the final sample included 36 participating schools, where 68 teachers were observed teaching 183 Al lessons. In total, 168 of those practitioners who completed questionnaires were in those schools in which observations were conducted; this was by far the majority of teachers who were active in the less 50 schools in the program at the time[2].

Adopting a parallel mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003), focus group data were analysed for convergence with quantitative analysis of the teacher questionnaire. Focus group responses of teachers and coordinators were analysed separately using an inductive approach; subjectivity and bias were addressed through the use of multiple analysts to assess the reliability of coding and the interpretive analysis.

Findings of survey and focus group interviews

Teacher experience and professional development training

Table 1 summarises years of teaching experience, AL experience, time teaching at present school, AL PDs attended, and total (including in-school) PD support received.

[2] The schools not participating in the observational study were in the main very small schools or schools not far advanced in their participation in Al.

Survey respondents reported an average of five years of teaching experience with only two years of AL teaching experience – reflecting the newness of the AL program in 2008. There was clear evidence of high turnover of school staff with 33% of teachers in their first term at present school at the time of survey and only 15% having stayed for 24 terms. Average school tenure was 9.29 terms. In absolute terms, teachers attended an average of 1.97 PD workshops, ALSBCs attended an average of 2.50 PD workshops, and principals attended an average of 1.5 PD workshops. The average for all survey respondents was attendance at 2.0 PD workshops out of a possible 4.0. Attendance at the Assessment Workshop was by far the lowest at only 16% of practitioners surveyed.

Table 1: years of experience and AL PD and support received

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std Deviation
Teaching Experience (years)	211	1	6	4.97	1.66
AL Teaching Experience (years)	210	1	6	2.09	1.35
Time at Present School (terms)	212	0	24	9.29	8.96
PD1 Attendance	257	0	1	82%	3.90
PD2 Attendance	257	0	1	61%	4.90
PD3 Attendance	255	0	1	43%	5.00
Assessment workshop attendance	255	0	1	16%	3.70
Total no PD Workshops attended	257	0	4	2.02	1.26
Total hours all PD participation	216	5	50	25.90	17.57

Teachers' comments regarding PD workshops were varied, but a general view was that the three PD workshop packages (PD1, PD2 and PD3) were inadequate. Teachers often stated that the delivery of PD in separate workshops did not provide a sufficient overview of the whole AL teaching sequence and that theory was emphasised over practice. There was a widespread call from teachers for more comprehensive PD with demonstration lessons and support for text analysis and lesson planning and for follow-up in the classroom.

Access to PD was reported to be a problem for many, with some teachers reporting that they had been expected to teach AL before undertaking PD1 and some reporting that they had been teaching AL for years, even though the third PD workshop – the writing PD – had not been made available to them. In conclusion, exposure to PD for a significant number of practitioners was still incomplete in early 2008.

Participant Opinions of the Value of AL PD and in-school PD support

The survey responses concerning participants' ratings of the effectiveness and helpfulness of support provided by the DET AL team, by principals and by ALSBCs are informative. All rate the effectiveness and helpfulness of these sources of support positively, but range between midway between *neutral* and *agree* and between *agree* and *strongly agree*[3].

The perceived level of support given by principals according to teachers, ALSBCs and principals themselves varied widely with statistically significant differences between ratings of teachers (positive but well short of *agree*) and principals themselves. While focus group data did not clearly indicate whether principals were generally supportive of AL in their schools, those teachers and ALSBCs who reflected positively on the implementation of AL in their school usually cited the importance of their principal's support. Such support included championing the program, attending PD, making provisions for all staff (especially ALSBCs and new teachers) to attend PD and fostering staff collaboration. Such views were strongly supported by both ALSBCs and members of the DET AL team.

Principals' rating of ALSBCs' support was significantly higher than that of teachers: the latter were positive but short of *agree* while principals edged toward *strongly agree*. This raises the question of whether principals underestimated the challenges faced by the ALSBCs and overestimated their effectiveness, possibly at cost of appreciation of their need for support. At interview, many teachers (and some ALSBCs) reported the lack of a clear and well understood role for ALSBCs, suggesting that they had typically low levels of AL experience and/or training. Many ALSBCs reported that their effectiveness/availability was undermined by other responsibilities (such as teaching). The availability of ALSBCs to support teachers was linked to the variable commitment of principals to time allocation, time release for PD and other resources to enable ALSBCs to carry out their role. Nevertheless, teachers reported isolated cases in which the ALSBC was well supported, experienced and readily available, effectively complementing the work of the DET AL team.

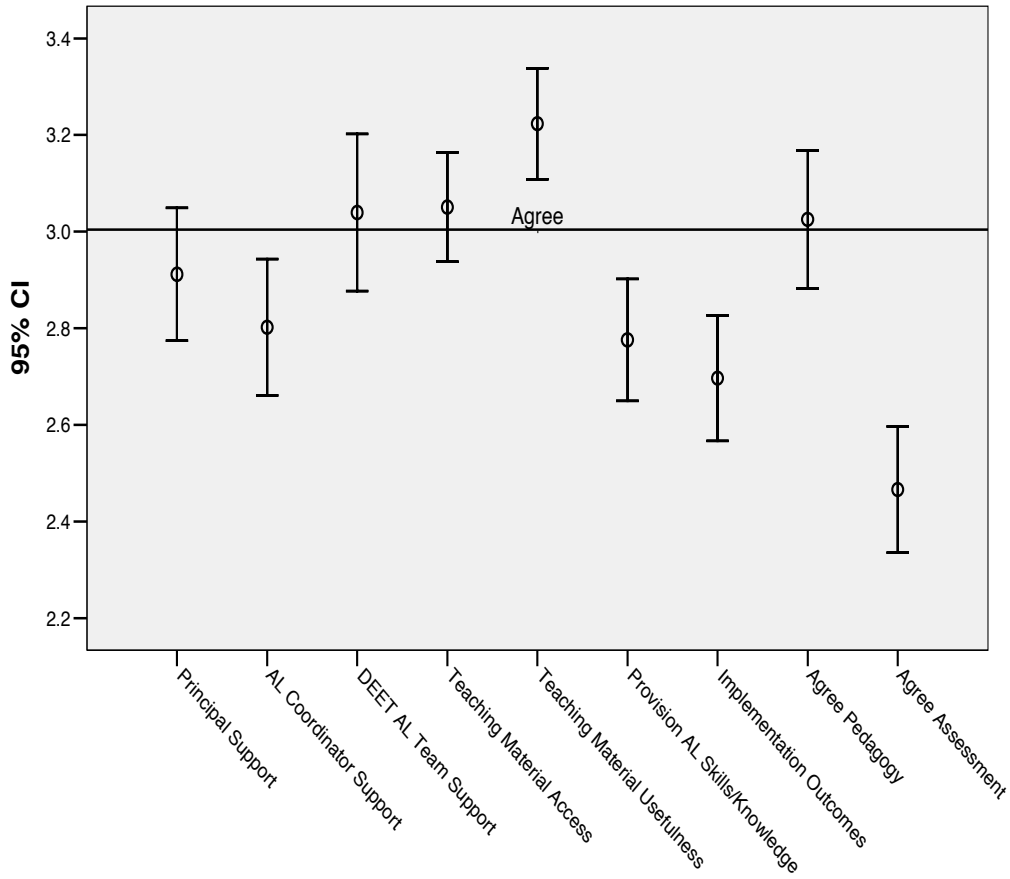
In summary, internal, in-school expertise was identified by most participants as being necessary to maintain teachers' engagement with the program and to cope with the major systemic issue of staff turnover. Teachers were far less certain that this had been achieved than were either ALSBCs or principals. The positive rating of the importance of support offered by the DET AL coordinators, practical support such as joint lesson planning, observation, feedback on teaching and support for analysis of texts, *et cetera* is consistent with feedback about the need for practical follow-up on PD workshops. These kinds of feedback led to the introduction of an intensive form of PD workshop in 2008, aiming to overcome the separation between theoretical workshops and practical demonstration.

Taking all of the major categories of implementation support identified in the survey, it is conspicuous that practitioners rated their confidence with skills and knowledge of AL pedagogy, awareness of program outcomes and assessment far lower than other elements.

[3] A *neutral* response was 2.0; 3.0 was *agree* and 4.0 was *strongly agree*.

Figure 1 below shows variation in agreement with the effectiveness and usefulness of nine areas of implementation.

Figure 1: Practitioner ratings of nine areas of implementation[4]

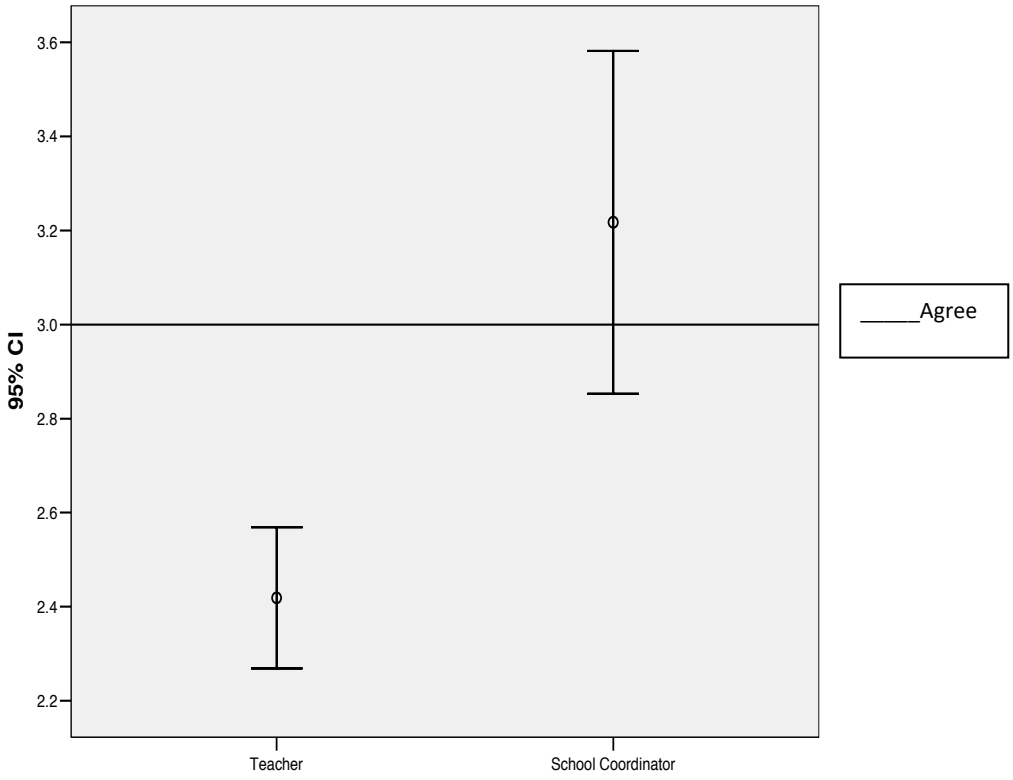


The following figures compare responses of teachers and ALSBCs, the latter clearly feeling confident in their skills and knowledge of the teaching sequence, the teachers clearly much less certain.

Survey items such as agreement with the usefulness of assessment clearly in part reflect the low levels of formal training in these specific areas of low PD workshop attendance and follow-up. Thus for all respondents and locations, participation in the four PD workshops declined from around the mean of 82% to an overall average of 14% participation in the final Assessment Workshop.

[4] Note that this includes ALSBCs and principals who rated all elements higher than did teachers.

Figure 2: AL PD and support have given me the skills and knowledge to confidently teach each stage of the teaching sequence



Not withstanding positive ratings of various forms of support, the test of the effectiveness of professional development and support is in the confident deployment of skills in practice by practitioners who receive it. While there was some evidence of a lack of confidence in skills and knowledge on the part of many teachers, the most important test of the transfer of training to practice was provided by the observational study.

Observational study: the transfer to practice

Compared to the non-observed teachers participating in the full survey, this sample was significantly less experienced (4.52 vs 5.13 years), had significantly more PD1 attendance (97% vs 76%), more PD2 attendance (81% vs 54%), but were not different in PD3 and Assessment Workshop attendance. Overall they had attended significantly more of total available workshops (2.37 vs 1.89 for the full survey). To reiterate the significance of teacher turnover: as for the full sample, for teachers in the observational sample average reported tenure was just above 8 terms or two years, (just over 9 terms for the full survey sample).

Table 2: Characteristics of observed teachers

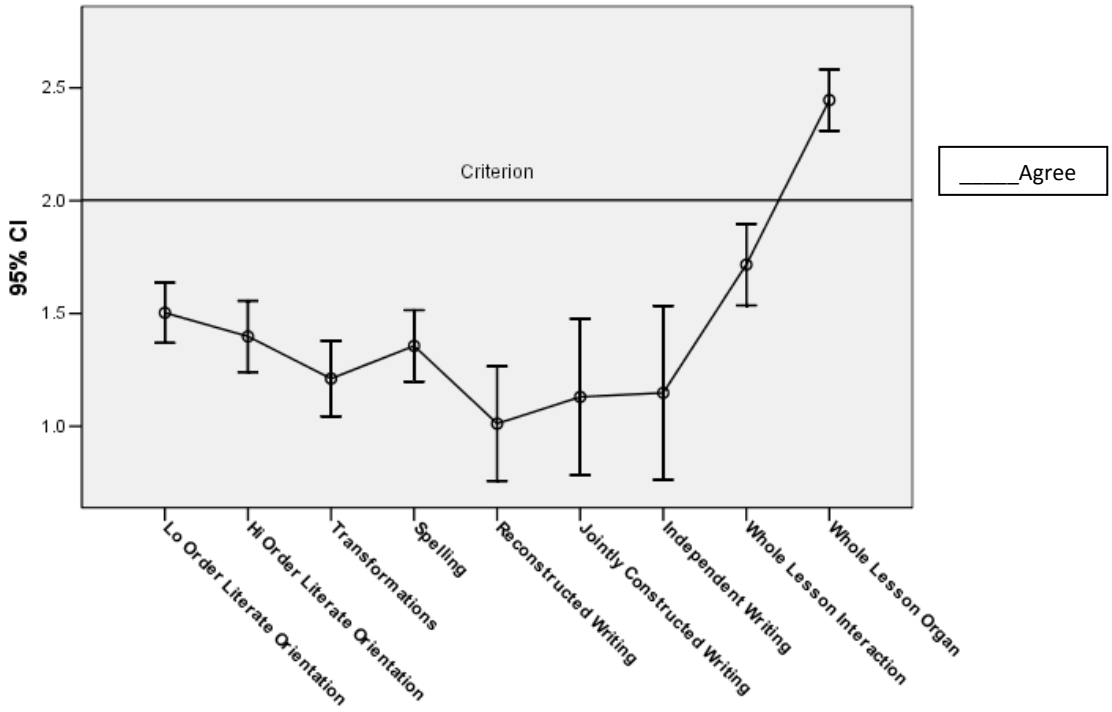
	N	Mean	Std Deviation
Teaching Experience (years)	68	4.52	1.85
AL Teaching Experience (years)	68	1.90	1.08
Time at Present School (terms)	67	8.56	7.79
Total workshop & in-school PD received (hours)	66	25.92	17.55
Number of PD workshops attended	68	2.37	0.88
ALSSOR Total Score	68	79.66	31.71
Questionnaire Total Score	68	116.51	66.16

The observed teachers were not significantly different from the full survey sample of teachers in terms of AL teaching experience, time at present school, Total hours of PD support (including in-school support) received, or overall agreement with the AL implementation as measured by survey responses. Thus in general, the characteristics of the observed sample did not suggest that they were not unrepresentative of teachers in the program at that time.

Observed Conformity to AL Teaching Practice

Figure 3 represents the confidence intervals for the mean item response of all observed classes on each ALSSOR scale. For example, we can see that on the low order literate orientation scale, the average score across all observed teachers was around 1.5 and we can be 95% confident that the true value lies between approximately 1.4 and 1.6. An "effective" rating lies at the 2.0 level. Note that all measures related to writing related strategies were close to the "attempted but not effective" rating of 1.0. The wide confidence intervals were in part due to the small number of observed classes in which writing took place.

Figure 3: Mean scores, nine ALSSOR subscales



ALSSOR Whole Lesson Organisation and Whole Lesson Interaction Subscales

The items for the *whole lesson organisation* dimension are:

1. Was the study text from an AL booklist?
2. Was the study text age-appropriate?
3. Was there evidence of teacher planning and preparation?
4. Did the teacher use AL resources?
5. Was the classroom organised in a way that maximised the students' ability to participate at each stage of the lesson?

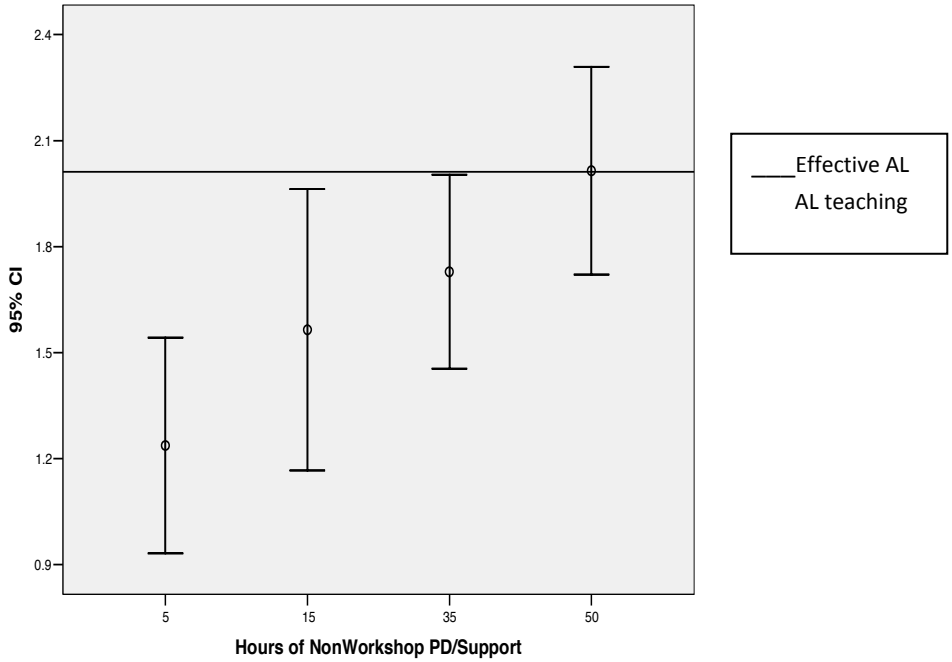
Unlike the other dimensions (or stages of the AL teaching sequence), this dimension is mainly procedural and relates to access and use of resources required to implement an AL lesson. Reaching criterion level for this dimension requires an understanding of AL procedures and does not necessarily presuppose advanced understanding of AL methodology. The findings for this dimension confirm that AL resources were available and being used by observed teachers as intended. Other studies of effective teaching, for example Louden *et. al.*, (2005, p. 68), have found that the most frequently acquired teaching skills demonstrated by teachers were those that related to supporting classroom procedures.

Relationship of PD Support to Observed Teaching Practice

The observed sample of 68 was too small to generate the statistical power for attribution of causality to differences in observed teaching practice according to tenure at present school, PD workshops completed, teacher experience and AL teaching experience or other variables. However, it was possible to estimate the relative importance of these variables for observed teaching performance as measured by the ALSSOR scores.

Regression analysis showed that 21% of variation in AL observed teaching practice could be accounted for by the Total level of PD (including in-school support) received and that no other variable contributed further explanatory power. Thus attendance at AL formal workshops alone did not predict the level of observed AL teaching practices as measured by ALSSOR.

Figure 4: Mean item response on ALSSOR subscales (excluding writing) by total hours of all PD support

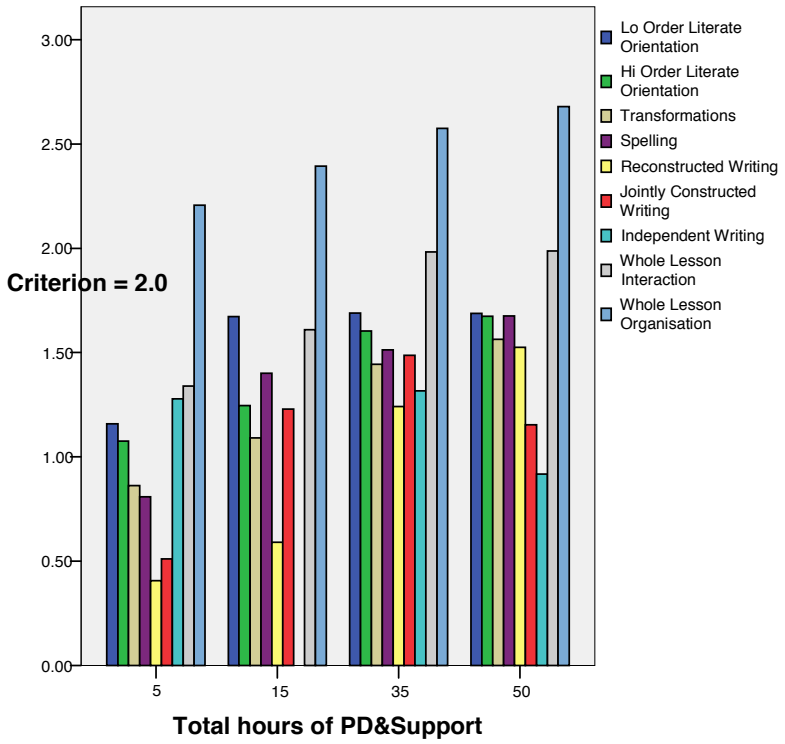


With 35 hours of Total PD support, ALSSOR mean response error bars *approach* the criterion level of 2.0 (This was about the same level required for teachers to positively rate the implementation overall.) AL teaching practices appeared to increase in a linear relationship with total PD support such that at a self-reported mean level of 50 hrs teachers evidenced the criterion level of AL teaching in observed classes. This far exceeded the questionnaire sample's mean level of total PD support: observed teachers had received 26 hours of total PD support, ALSBCs 37 hours.

Figure 5 shows that improvement in AL related practices with total PD support was primarily due to the gains made in whole lesson organisation and secondarily to whole lesson interaction and, initially, to low order literate orientation. This may not be surprising given that the relatively low mean of participation in 1.9 formal PD workshops largely focused on

the first two – three PD workshops, with the other forms of PD support only partially making up the rest of the ground.

Figure 5: Mean item response, all ALSSOR scales by total hours of all PD support (criterion = 2.0)



The remaining elements of AL practice show a weaker relationship to the total hours of PD support received, particularly after the first 15-35 hours. Even allowing for small numbers, independent writing varies wildly and shows no relationship to hours of support received at all. Interestingly, it appears that, after 35 hours of PD support, most elements do not further improve, suggesting that not only were low workshop attendance levels were affecting performance, but that other forms of in-school support had reached a plateau in effectiveness.

In-school PD support reiterated elements of workshop PD and was the main source of practical follow-through and reiteration of key content *in situ*. It may be indispensible in changing classroom teaching practice and in maintaining support for change. Further, the ability to maintain quality practice over time is likely to be highly dependent on effective, well targeted in-school support. The evidence to that point suggested that a combination of inadequate exposure to and/or limited effectiveness of initial PD workshops, combined with ineffectively targeted PD support render continuing and sustainable improvement of practice beyond initial gains and the adoption of basic procedures unlikely. To achieve gains in all elements of AL practice, and in the advanced synthesis and confident exposition of all skill elements, a more effective combination of workshop and follow-up support would appear to

be necessary. This is all the more necessary to compensate for the high levels of teacher turnover experienced by NT schools, in particular very remote schools, as indicated above.

Table 3: Years of experience and AL In-school PD support received by location of school[5]

		N	Mean
Years of teaching experience	Darwin	49	5.10
	Remote	25	5.40
	Very remote	114	4.77
	Total	188	4.94
Years of AL teaching experience	Darwin	50	2.06
	Remote	23	**2.96**
	Very remote	120	1.95
	Total	193	2.10
Time at present school (terms)	Darwin	50	9.62
	Remote	25	**14.76**
	Very remote	114	7.93
	Total	189	9.28
Number of PD workshops attended	Darwin	60	1.93
	Remote	28	2.36
	Very remote	136	2.01
	Total	224	2.03
Total hours of all PD support	Darwin	52	32.50
	Remote	25	30.40
	Very remote	115	**21.91**
	Total	192	25.89

Data on survey respondents show that Alice Springs and Katherine (remote) had significantly higher levels of AL teaching experience, and longer tenure at their present school, than both Darwin and very remote schools. However, very remote respondents experienced significantly lower total levels of all PD support, at 21.91 hours, compared with the mean received by major centres and with the overall mean of 25.89 hours. The variable, total hours of PD support is a teacher reported estimate of hours of support ever received in the form of both PD workshops and as provided in the form of in-school PD support. Given that these teachers appear to have attended as many PD workshops as other teachers, the low number clearly reflects access to other forms of support, including regional variations in supply of in-school support from the central team, and the effects of shorter tenure at present school. The low number of total hours of PD received by teachers at very remote schools may therefore be an indication of the limited achievement of self-sustaining capacity in these schools, in the form of the availability of experienced teachers and the availability of expert coordinators able to provide high quality PD support to teachers and to ALSBCs in locations subject to highest turnover.

[5] Items in bold highlight statistically significant differences from total means.

Conclusions: the effectiveness of the NALP implementation strategy

In summary, the findings of survey, observations and focus groups are consistent with the view that by early 2008 – approximately four years into the program - there had been a limited transfer of the desired AL teaching practices to the classroom, and that there were indications that the effectiveness of the then current combination of PD workshops and other forms of PD support had plateaued.

It is clear that high levels of support may be necessary – particularly when one considers the impact of staff turnover within the NT system – not only to achieve, but also to maintain the required standards of literacy teaching according to the AL method (or any comparable system of practice). However, the evaluators did not draw the conclusion that increasing the quantum visiting in-school PD support to participating schools should be the sole response to the findings of the evaluation. Rather, improving access to all forms of PD, and investigating their effectiveness in circumstances of high teacher turnover, appeared to be indicated.

Practitioner views and school level implementation

The differences between respondents (coordinators, principals and teachers) concerning the effectiveness of the implementation combined with the comments of practitioners at interview pointed to the need for effective leadership and support for the program at school level, and confirmed that achievement of these key elements of capacity at school level was elusive for many, if not the majority of schools.

While all practitioners positively rated the role of the DET AL team in providing support at school level – qualified by concern about lack of access to the team in many schools – the picture is not so positive about the role of ALSBCs. Principals appear to significantly overestimate the effectiveness of ALSBCs, compared with teachers who gave at most a neutral assessment overall, and at interview were very mixed in their views. As outlined, there was critical opinion among teachers about the effectiveness of PD workshops and in-school support[6]. However, the generally lower amount of PD training received by principals combined with their apparent overestimation of the effectiveness of ALSBCs pointed to a need to specifically target school leadership and functioning if school capacity were to be strengthened and sustained.

Targeting Specific Areas of Concern

As findings of the evaluation of learning outcomes of NALP indicate (Robinson et al 2009; Tyler et al, 2009), a major challenge for AL is to meet the needs of those students in the early years and beginning readers in older years. This was a relatively new area into which the AL approach had expanded, and here, the ability of Al teachers to integrate AL with existing practices and models of teaching did not appear to be well advanced. The findings suggested, firstly, that then current levels of training and support were inadequate to achieve quality AL

[6] There is considerable convergence between the messages derived from quantitative and qualitative elements of this evaluation concerning the effectiveness of the program of PD and support. The professional development workshop model was not considered entirely adequate by many teachers who were more positive about in-school PD support provided by the DET AL team. Many teachers referred to the need for follow-up assessment and quality controls around their implementation of PD workshop theory in classroom practice.

teaching for early childhood and beginning readers, and, second, that AL pedagogy and PD needed to provide more effective direction in early literacy instruction relating to phonological awareness, letter-symbol knowledge, decoding, word attack, and spelling skills.

Observational findings regarding low levels of performance in writing and spelling suggested that most teachers were not spending sufficient time in the writing stage of the AL teaching sequence to ensure that students acquired writing skills. These findings were also consistent with focus group reports: many early childhood teachers at interview were particularly uncertain about the AL strategies for early literacy skills acquisition and about how to incorporate their existing teaching skills and training into the AL approach. The limitations of the AL program in this area concern not only the effectiveness of the PD and the pedagogy itself, but also give some indication of the sequence of steps needed to achieve a confident synthesis of skills on the part of practitioners.

NALP: sustainability and policy responsibility.

The NALP partners clearly achieved the partial implementation of AL in a large number of NT schools in a relatively short period of time, given the complexity of the intervention, and the levels and complexity of training and support required. Elements of the implementation program appear to have been effective in building capacity and engaging a large number of teachers and principals in the process of change. This represented a significant achievement of systemic capacity.

However, the results of this investigation suggested that by early 2008 there had been only partial and at best uneven success in achieving the teaching of AL to desirable standards in classrooms and that continuing work to improve the effectiveness of PD workshops and other forms of PD support were needed if desired standards of practice were to be met and maintained. Particularly in very remote schools, the total amount of PD support received needed to be lifted to achieve quality teaching and to sustain it against the higher levels of turnover at these schools. Visiting support undoubtedly needed to be backed by more continuous presence of expert coordinators employed at a significant number of these schools, rather than just accessed on a fly-in fly-out basis. The program in 2008 fell short of the goal of local, school-level sustainability.

The specific findings regarding early childhood teaching and literacy acquisition for older beginning readers highlight the complexity of the challenges encountered by NALP. Not only is AL a highly structured teaching model requiring significant changes to classroom practices. As the program was developed for the NT and other jurisdictions, the implementation challenge was extended across much wider and more varied student populations and, in effect, for all ages and stages of learning.

The extension of AL, originally developed in the middle years, to take on early childhood and all beginning readers significantly multiplied the challenges which the scaling up of the program already brought with it. This may have been acceptable, if the frameworks to test the modified intervention, to effectively target the PD and support and to evaluate outcomes in order to build evidence for its effectiveness, had been adopted in an adequately designed series of stages. However, they were not.

Similarly, the policy commitments of time and resources to implement a program of this kind were not sufficiently secured to ensure that the program could be implemented to the required standards, and its effectiveness appropriately tested by evaluation. NALP appears to have been subjected to unrealistic expectations about what it could achieve in a very short period of time – particularly given the limited evidence for its effectiveness based on the earlier trials. At least a further four years would have been required to address the issues highlighted in the 2008/2009 evaluation reported here. It is arguably a product of policy instability and, perhaps also of policy irresponsibility that a program on the one hand can be "rolled out" with such conviction in its ability to solve the most pressing problems and at the same time, is not supported long enough or well enough to have a chance of even being properly tested against evidence of its outcomes. In educational reform as in other fields of policy, political support – or lack thereof - is very often its own evidence.

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