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A reading intervention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

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Summary

This strategy was driven by the belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student education is everyone's business. It was designed to employ effective, research-based literacy strategies to improve the reading and writing skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled at five public high schools in the ACT.

Cultural competency and teachers' understanding of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were critical to the success of the strategy. Student outcomes can be improved by developing a culturally responsive school environment and using explicit literacy teaching strategies that link with the Aboriginal learning pedagogies.

Target student group

The strategy targeted year 7–9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who were struggling with literacy, specifically reading and writing. Some students in this group were identified as disengaged and exhibiting low self-confidence or low self-esteem. The strategy involved five public metropolitan high schools in one Canberra network with a combined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population of approximately 10 per cent.

There were 67 project students (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students performing at or below the NAPLAN benchmark) and 32 non-project students (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students performing above the NAPLAN benchmark).

Method

Evaluation of schools' NAPLAN data indicated a gap in literacy achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students, and this drove the need for a program that would engage students and improve their literacy outcomes.

Each of the five participating schools had its own set of priorities and distinctive character in terms of its community and stakeholders. Consistent across all the schools was the strong support from the leadership team, plus clearly communicated high expectations of staff, students and parents.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were individually surveyed via an interview. The questionnaire focused on students' attitudes towards school and learning, as well as their attitudes, knowledge and experience of reading and writing.



The collected data enabled a correlation between student performance and student attitudes towards school and learning. This information indicated the need for a multi-pronged approach, including:

- the development of core literacy strategies that linked to the Aboriginal learning pedagogies (Yunkaporta 2009), and the building of teacher capacity through the provision of professional learning
- the development of school leaders' and teachers' cultural competency through professional learning
- coaching of teachers to ensure that project literacy and also cultural knowledge and perspectives were incorporated in their practice
- the use of assignment work as a vehicle for delivering the selected literacy strategies
- the provision of support for students through in-class, small-group and individual intensive literacy programs.

Student survey and assessment data were shared with staff from each school, and this led to sharing the culturally responsive environment and literacy strategies. A range of professional learning workshops developed teachers' understandings, and maintained the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.'

Culturally responsive environment areas were developed. These included:

- strong, respectful relationships with students and families, where teachers reflected cultural understandings, values and knowledge
- the physical environment, where teachers acknowledged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and knowledge within the school and the classroom
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum perspectives, where teachers made regular links within any topic taught, as well as teaching specific units of work based on topics relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- ways of learning, where teachers incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander processes into their teaching approaches.

Using the *Four core areas for developing a culturally responsive environment*, individualised focus areas for development were identified through working with school leadership teams. As part of developing a culturally responsive environment, parent 'get-togethers' were regularly held at the schools. An informal environment was created, providing an opportunity for parents to discuss their child's education, to ask questions and to find out more about school programs. Parents were also given the opportunity to guide the content of these meetings.

The five leadership teams in the participating schools proactively supported the strategy through a designated committee. The committee oversaw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.



A key to success was employing Aboriginal staff in the project team to lift the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within the schools. The project literacy strategies were selected to be delivered across the curriculum, resulting in the establishment of a common language to enhance communication between staff and students. A link to the Ngunnawal Centre at the University of Canberra supported the program and data collection.

Results

The project collected pre- and post-data from both the project and non-project student groups. This consisted of NAPLAN data, ACER online Compass data and student survey data. To estimate the impact of the project on reading comprehension, the pre- and post-Compass test results were used to calculate an effect size. This process was assisted by the research partner at the Ngunnawal Centre at the University of Canberra.

Hattie (2009) states that an effect size of 0.2 to 0.4 can be considered average and anything above this has had greater impact than a typical year of academic experience and student growth. Hattie also states that 0.4 is the hinge point, and results above this indicate a 'greater than average influence' on achievement. The average effect size for the project students was 0.55. This indicates more than expected average progress was made over the course of the intervention. Even though the non-project student group is a small group, and care should be taken with interpretation, the effect size was also calculated; it was 0.42, which is considered average. This further indicates that there is a correlation between the project intervention conditions and student achievement. Ninety-three per cent of the project students found that working with a model text, analysing it and using it as a model for their own writing was beneficial.

I now understand the importance of the cultural acknowledgement to our students and their parents that our school undertakes: a staff member who acts as an advocate for our ATSI students. The students feel supported and comfortable in expressing their opinions. Gatherings such as family barbecues to build positive partnerships with parents were important. (Principal)

Lessons learned

Every factor of the multi-pronged approach of the strategy played a role. In particular, the focus on literacy strategies and cultural competency led to greater engagement from the students and staff. The project literacy strategies were delivered across the curriculum, and a common language was established.

The leadership teams and all staff from the five schools took part in the professional learning associated with the project. The professional learning was flexible in order to meet the needs of individual teachers in each school. Coaching was implemented on two levels.



On a formal level, the coaching worked effectively as one-to-one, in-class modelling and support with resources and teaching strategies. On an informal level, discussions were held with individual teachers and small groups. Workshops took place in staff meetings and involved the whole school. It was shown that time – as well as process – is an important factor in building teacher capacity.

The support of the five leadership teams was also important. Across the schools, the teams supported the strategy by designating a committee to drive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Critical to the success of the strategy was employing Aboriginal staff in the project team to enhance the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within schools. Improving literacy outcomes for students is linked with their confidence levels and sense of connection with their classes, as well as their connections with home and school. Timetabling is also important, to allow for possible withdrawal of students when required.

Students gained increased meaning from texts and began to verbalise the reading strategies they were employing. But, more importantly, as the students gained confidence, and were more able to understand and make meaning in a text, new doors opened for them. (Teacher)

Next steps

Each of the five participating schools had its own set of priorities and distinctive character, in terms of community and stakeholders. The initiative could be implemented in any school setting, provided that it had strong support from the leadership team and provided the expectations of staff, students and parents were clearly communicated.

For the participating schools, the twin focus on literacy strategies and cultural competency led to greater engagement from the students, and staff were reminded to teach the relevant literacy strategies in an explicit manner.

The literacy strategies have been made available to schools, outlining the strategy, the impact for students and questions for teachers in Project literacy strategies.

Strong school leadership and whole-school engagement are essential for sustainability. The five school leadership teams have incorporated actions in their 2013 school annual operating plans to ensure approaches are maintained and developed beyond the life of the project.



Some of the areas planned as next steps include the following.

- A space (or room) will be established and maintained in each school. The space will have a distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence. It is provided so students can do a variety of activities, from studying to cultural activities. It is also a place where students can share their cultures with their friends and peers. Parents are also invited to visit.
- A designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander section will be developed and maintained in the school library. There will be a range of resources and books.
- An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander teacher will be employed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with literacy and numeracy.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' homework groups will be established.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives will be embedded within the curriculum in a purposeful and meaningful way. Also, units with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus will be developed, and links will be made throughout the whole curriculum.
- An online cultural competency course for staff will be trialed.

Research base

The work of Sarra (2011) and Perso (2003) was influential in understanding the need to develop students' connections to school. This work showed the need for teachers who demonstrate cultural competence and also behaviours and attitudes that engage, build and maintain relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Teachers also need to be willing to critically reflect on their own position of privilege and power in relation to students and their families.


Students' engagement with reading is the most influential factor in further developing reading skills. If students are required to practice reading, they need to be engaged with the texts. At the participating schools, e-readers were used to engage students with reading and assist with making text accessible.

Hughes (2004) states there is no single Aboriginal way of learning; however, there are consistencies in cognitive styles within various cultural groups. Tyson Yunkaporta (2009) uses the term 'ways of knowing'. According to Hughes and Yunkaporta, ways of learning and knowing include:

- learning through observing, listening and imitating
- holistic learning
- visual and symbolic learning
- kinesthetic and non-verbal learning and contextualised learning.



It was important to combine research-based literacy practices that reflected these ways of learning. The work of David Rose (2012) and Tovani (2000, 2004) directed the project literacy strategies.

[Reading to Learn](#)  by Rose highlights the importance of preparation before reading. This process enables students to understand text in general terms by providing the background knowledge required to understand its field, explaining what it is about and summarising the sequence in which the text unfolds. In moving from reading to writing, genre models (or text models) are analysed, starting from the text level and moving to the word level (whole to part).

Students use the knowledge they have gained about text structure, sentence pattern and word usage with new content. Rose concludes that these are powerful techniques for students to control both academic language and fields.

Tovani (2004) states that reading strategies give readers options for thinking about text, when reading words alone doesn't produce meaning. Meaning is developed in the text when teachers 'think aloud' and explicitly show students how to determine which strategies to use. This approach complements the Aboriginal learning pedagogies, as it enables the students to observe and listen to the whole reading process so they can see what good readers do.

Focus reading strategies include:

- read on and re-read
- visualise
- ask questions
- seek answers
- infer
- connect to self, knowledge and texts
- use clues for words
- text structure
- prediction.



Further reading and links

ACT Tuggeranong Network Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Community Partnership for Literacy Excellence Project 2011/12, *Four core areas for developing a culturally responsive environment*

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The Ngunnawal Centre, University of Canberra, www.canberra.edu.au/ngunnawal 

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Contacts

ACT Education and Training Directorate
Email: ETDContactUs@act.gov.au