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Literacy is everyone's business: the South Australian Accelerated Literacy Program

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Summary

What initiatives provide real support and enhance the literacy of Aboriginal students, students in low socio-economic areas, and those whose first language is not English?

The Literacy Secretariat of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services responded to this question by implementing the South Australian Accelerated Literacy Program (SAALP) in 2006. This strategy was adopted because the pedagogy makes explicit the ways of talking, viewing, thinking, reading, writing and spelling for students, so that they recognise them all as core communication skills. It also offers strong support to teachers, providing a common language and framework for both teachers and students, thereby supporting a whole-school literacy strategy.

The SAALP has now been implemented in many schools; some of which are in their fourth or fifth year of the program. In terms of results, the 2010 data analysis provided by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on TORCH shows greater student improvement than the national normed cohort in most year levels. Outcomes for Indigenous students are particularly encouraging.

Target student group

The first students targeted in this strategy were Aboriginal students. Over time, schools with quite different demographics have taken up the program. These include rural, regional, remote and metropolitan schools, and schools identified by the South Australian education department as disadvantaged in various ways, such as those in low socio-economic areas, or with transient populations. The schools also include those with high numbers of students whose first language is not English, including Aboriginal students.

Many schools involved have formed working 'clusters' to assist in the successful implementation of the program across the regions, particularly where the population is transient, and access to sufficient funding is an issue. In 2011, 4,500 students were flagged as requiring particular support within the Accelerated Literacy (AL) program; they were spread across 46 schools with an estimated 460 teachers and principals participating in the program.



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Method

The SAALP grew out of the Deadly Writin', Readin' and Talkin' Project that began at Salisbury North R-7 School in 1998. Over the last decade, it was decided to revisit the extent to which government schools were meeting the needs of a changing student demographic, with the desired aim of raising expectations of student performance in real terms. Implemented in 2006, SAALP, with its strong coaching support for teachers, and capacity to support a whole-school literacy program, was considered an appropriate strategy for a diverse range of schools.

Schools access the program via an expression of interest process. They must commit to substantial leadership support, to a co-payment that supports employment of an AL consultant, and to development of a whole-school approach using this program.

The Accelerated Literacy program

'When students fail at literacy, it seems logical for teachers to work on easier reading material with these failing students, to teach literacy 'basics' such as phonics in isolation, then move up to more difficult, age appropriate material in small manageable steps from there. In practice however, this moving up from low level reading material seldom happens and failing students can often remain on low level reading material for their entire school lives. Shutting students out of high level texts prevents them from accessing the literate resources available in complex texts. These are the literate resources that they need for success in the higher years of education.' (SAALP Information for Schools)

The first stage includes professional learning experiences for teachers and school leaders, by introducing new ideas and research. Accelerated Literacy offers ways of thinking for operating successfully within the literate discourse, in keeping with the aims of the Australian Curriculum. It also uses high-quality, age-appropriate text; which is narrative text in the first instance, as the tradition of 'telling stories' crosses all cultures. Classes typically work on one focus text for a full term to build resources from reading to writing. The rich common knowledge that students and teachers develop about the intent of the author of each text ensures high-level development of literacy skills.

The AL pedagogy does not require the purchase of any special reading series. It uses texts with rich, literate language, not simplified language. It has sequential teaching strategies. Each group of strategies has a clear and specific purpose and provides another



angle to address the teaching focus and deepen understanding. The Low Order Literate Orientation begins the sequence. This builds knowledge that students can bring to the text, familiarises them with the story, encourages them to examine illustrations to find how they contribute to the meaning of the story, helps them develop text meaning before reading, and helps build a bank of common knowledge so that they can all participate in the literate discussion.

The questioning technique in AL is used as a teaching tool rather than a testing tool. It is known as PQR.

- **Pre-formulation** makes explicit the teacher's thinking, and the purpose for asking the question.
- **Q** is question and response.
- **Re-conceptualisation** drives the development of common knowledge and allows the teacher to restate or reframe the answer in a literate way.
- **Transformation** is the step that marks the transition from looking at the text as a reader gaining meaning, to reading as a writer to discover how the author created the meanings. It is where the text is used as a model for writing.
- **Writing** completes the sequence, and has a purpose based on teaching a writing technique.

Professional support

Teachers attend an initial four-day training workshop, an 'Introduction to Accelerated Literacy', with access to refresher workshops as required. Following their initial instruction, they are then supported in their classrooms by consultants who visit each school involved in the program once per fortnight. The consultants model the strategies and demonstrate the pedagogy; they observe lessons; provide feedback, and plan with teachers.

Teachers can attend a two-day advanced course, 'Refinements in Accelerated Literacy', eventually leading to achievement of the South Australian Accreditation in Accelerated Literacy (SAAAL), which qualifies as one of the units in the Graduate Certificate in Accelerated Literacy from Charles Darwin University.

The benefits of this program and the implementation of AL in schools means that not only are students benefitting, but teachers also reap the benefits because AL supports their capacity to address the Australian Curriculum in English by meeting their obligations to address the general capability of Literacy.



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School commitment

Because of the cost and the time dedicated to developing the teachers and supporting the schools that adopt and implement AL, each school contracts to remain in the program for a minimum of two years. The schools also pay a co-contribution each year towards the cost, which is estimated at approximately \$27,000 per year per school. Many schools are now in their fourth or fifth year of working with a consultant and they report that they value the quality of consultants, and the rigour that comes from having regular outside support.

Results

The SAALP has always been a Closing the Gap literacy improvement strategy, focused on low socio-economic schools, with priority given to schools with high Aboriginal enrolments. The program aims to achieve increased growth in the literacy standards of these students when compared with the South Australian state, and like cohorts in other states, NAPLAN results. The program also aims to attain a higher apparent rate of growth for these students, when compared with the normed cohort of like students in the ACER Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH).

The 2010 data analysis provided by ACER on TORCH shows greater student improvement than the national normed cohort in most year levels, statistically significant with 95 per cent confidence. Outcomes for Indigenous students are particularly encouraging. The effect size in NAPLAN is greater than DECD effect size in 8 out of 12 aspects of literacy across the year levels. The effect size is greater for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students.

Lessons learned

The results clearly suggest that this project has been successful and there are several reasons why this is the case. First, the pedagogical approach was thoroughly researched and this was combined with rigorous and consistent implementation. Second, the use of highly quality consultants who were able to work closely with schools and teachers for a sustained period of time contributed to the success of the program because they were fully engaged with the project, the schools, the teachers and the students' successes.

Third, the long-term commitment by the schools, the teachers and the principals, whose strong school leadership ensured that momentum was maintained, has led to a high level of ownership of the program and the successes that have resulted from it.



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This commitment to whole-school planning and the rigorous and coherent professional development that supported it, through the provision of a professional development pathway, has also been responsible for encouraging teachers to keep going and to celebrate their successes.

As is the case with any initiative in any context, the commitment or understanding of leaders – in this instance, school principals – has a significant impact on fidelity of implementation, and on whether the pedagogy becomes a tool for whole-school implementation. When schools commit to AL, new teachers are also aware of what they are committing to. Pedagogy often takes teachers out of their comfort zone and creates resistance no matter how experienced or enthusiastic they may be, so this is an important consideration in managing a strategy such as AL. However, teacher turnover means that schools have to be prepared for ongoing training of new and incoming teachers.

Over the course of the project there have also been several conditions identified as ‘ideal’ for the successful implementation of AL. These include employment of consultants with a thorough knowledge of the pedagogy that is provided via experienced AL practitioners. Systematic collection of the data is also imperative to the success of this program.

Next steps

The strategy will continue to be evaluated in terms of its value to effectively meet the needs of students in the target group.

The discontinuation of the Graduate Certificate in Accelerated Literacy from Charles Darwin University may impact on the availability of a professional learning pathway for teachers. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that this form of literacy support is gaining popularity in schools and that whole-school approaches to explicit teaching of literacy skills have been adopted in both primary and secondary schools. This evidence suggests that ‘as one door closes, another opens’, which may be the case with a similar accredited certificate in AL in the future.

The SAALP has existed since 2006, and will continue until 2013. The program provides a high level of consistent and regular teacher support, which is expensive but sustainable through determination and co-contributions by participating schools and the Literacy Secretariat.



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Teachers' comments:

'I have more confidence. I feel comfortable to take risks as I know I will get constructive criticism.'

'I am able to integrate literacy into other areas of the curriculum with more confidence.'

'I have a better understanding of literacy. My teaching is much more thorough and much deeper. Planning is more thorough and assessment is easier as a result.'

'My questioning and instructions are more precise and direct. My wording has changed – my literacy conversations with children are different. Story reading is more outcome-directed.'

'Specialised support in spelling has been extremely valuable. It made me review my own teaching practice in spelling and make changes to my program to better support my students.'

'I have really enjoyed working with a consultant. I find her approachable and flexible as well as very committed to the program. The consultant maintains the rigour necessary for the program to evolve and make a difference.'

'Even after implementing AL for many years I find the consultant support invaluable.'

Research base

The AL pedagogy was developed by Dr Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey of the University of Canberra. It was originally known as Scaffolded Literacy, and became the [National Accelerated Literacy Program](#) (NALP). The pedagogy was developed for Aboriginal students in remote, high-transience schools, but has been used in mainstream schools in SA, NT and NSW, as well as in Aboriginal schools in SA, WA and NT.

The teaching approach allows students to work with age-appropriate texts. The approach uses quality texts that have features that are designed for teaching about language meaning and function. Teachers provide support for students to work intensively on these texts at an equivalent level to their mainstream peers. Work is predominantly done as a whole class, rather than in small groups.

The approach is based on intensive exploration of the complex grammar encountered in literate texts, as opposed to everyday speech. As students develop confidence, the



emphasis shifts to more advanced decoding, spelling and writing. Teachers explain the cultural context of the text, and teach students about specific words and the meanings behind them. Students are also taught about the author's purpose, the techniques employed and the inferences made.

Accelerated Literacy pedagogy is based on theoretical foundations such as Vygotsky's social constructivism and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. It also draws on Bruner's theories about the scaffolding or support that can be given to a younger learner by an adult.

Research from the NALP in the [Northern Territory 2004–08](#)  shows the variety of schools where AL has been implemented.

Further reading and links

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Robinson, et al 2009, [The National Accelerated Literacy Program in the Northern Territory 2004–08: implementations and outcomes: final evaluation report](#) , NALP website.

Contacts

For more information about this program, see the [Accelerated Literacy](#)  page of the SA Department for Education and Child Development website.