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Enhancing reading comprehension for Koori students: a cultural focus

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Summary

What teaching characteristics are likely to improve reading outcomes for Aboriginal students in years 2–7?

The Expanded Central Gippsland Koori Literacy Project (ECGKLP) drew on the achievements of the Central Gippsland Reading Recovery Program, both geographically and conceptually.

The project involved the explicit and systematic teaching of phonemic knowledge, word analysis, oral language – vocabulary, sentence and paragraph meanings, topic expansion, the use of language to communicate and to learn – as well as symbolic processing, which is the integration of linguistic knowledge, memory competence and codes for written language. Students were engaged in how to use effective word reading and analysis skills, and in learning reading comprehension strategies that they could use spontaneously and selectively.

Target student group

The target regional areas for the ECGKLP were Gippsland and Mildura. Selected schools compiled a selection list of students in years 2–7 who had achieved below expected literacy achievement levels in the English domain of the [Victorian Essential Learning Standards](#), NAPLAN, [On Demand Testing \(Adaptive\)](#) English: Reading, and the [English Online Interview](#). Baseline testing was administered, and students from each school were identified and selected to participate in the project.

The project involved 123 Koori students from 19 primary schools and one secondary school across two regional sites: Gippsland and Mildura. There were 74 Koori students from 14 primary schools in Gippsland (including one Catholic primary school), and 49 Koori students from five primary schools and one secondary college in Mildura.

Method

The teaching framework for reading comprehension examined in the project involved teaching procedures taken from the high-reliability literacy teaching procedures (HRLTP) model (Munro, 2011). The HRLTP model sees reading comprehension, and literacy learning more generally, as a cultural activity in which students are encouraged to link ideas in a text with the cultures in which they interact. It sees literacy as being learnt socially in collaborative learning activities.



HRLTPs were central to ECGKLP and featured a number of types of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective acquisition of reading comprehension. The HRLTP sequence (getting knowledge ready; while reading and learning; reviewing; and automatising) sees reading comprehension and literacy learning as a cultural activity in which students are encouraged to link ideas in a text with the cultures in which they interact. It sees literacy as being learnt socially in collaborative learning activities. The design of the project recognised that the literacy learning challenges facing Koori students may be multi-faceted. It also recognised that deficit models of thinking and practice can inhibit opportunities to apply innovative and culturally sensitive literacy initiatives.

At the beginning of the project, two focus areas were identified.

Focus area 1: building student literacy learning profiles

Baseline data were established for students' existing levels of reading achievement. This involved collecting the available 2011 NAPLAN data for participating students in years 4 and 6, plus the administration of standardised literacy assessment tasks to all participating students, including the Burt Word Reading Test (NZCER, 1981) and Progressive Reading Achievement Tests (ACER, 2001). School-level student assessment data were also collected, including a range of measures to identify each student's learning strengths and areas for improvement.

Focus area 2: linking students' existing cultural and literacy knowledge with pedagogy

Teachers were provided with support to identify what they needed to do at any time to improve students' literacy outcomes. This included the use of formative assessment to continuously provide targeted and appropriate teaching responses, and building student self-efficacy within themselves as readers and writers.

It also involved guiding students to activate their existing literacy knowledge within the cultures of their family, their community, their classroom, and friendship peer groups both inside and outside school.

There was an additional focus on strengthening teachers' understanding of – and respect for – the totality of cultural knowledge that each student brings to the classroom.

ECGKLP was an extension of an earlier Central Gippsland project designed to provide one-to-one support to at-risk students by using Reading Recovery principles in a literacy acceleration program with students beyond year 1. ECGKLP was framed by three components that formed the basis of its accountability framework:



1. Evidence-based approaches to literacy teaching and learning to accelerate student literacy outcomes.
2. Family, community and school partnerships.
3. Cultural awareness, and the development of culturally inclusive (or culturally competent) schools.

These components were underpinned by key beliefs, understandings and practices about equity, inclusiveness and recognition that involved building relationships with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and community.

On average, two staff members from each of the six Mildura schools participated in the project, and between two and six staff members from each of the Gippsland schools took part, resulting in 53 staff members in total.

A part-time project manager (three days per week) was employed for Mildura schools and a full-time project manager was employed for the Gippsland schools. The Koori Education Coordinator (KEC) and Koori Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) in each region worked closely with the project managers to strengthen partnership arrangements between students, parents and community.

The Project Research Partner, Associate Professor John Munro, worked with the ECGKLP working party over the life of the project. Consultations with the schools and local Koori communities informed the project design and collection of data. The KECs and selected KESOs attended the professional learning workshops conducted by Associate Professor John Munro throughout 2012. This was an important component of attaining the project outcomes. It highlighted for all members of the project team the importance of the interrelated social and cultural aspects of literacy learning, and led to the development and implementation of opportunities for students to be engaged in literacy learning that valued recognising their Koori culture.

Results

Assessments were conducted in February and November 2012. A suite of school-based diagnostic tools were used with standardised and diagnostic assessment measures to identify students' strengths and areas of difficulty, and to plan for purposeful and personalised learning and teaching. Positive outcomes identified included:

- an improvement in student and family engagement through a greater sense of cultural awareness of Koori students and families within the participating schools communities
- an increase in cultural awareness in participating school staff working with Koori communities
- a 30–50 per cent increase in participating students' levels of literacy achievement.



The initiative improved the literacy outcomes of all 123 Koori students participating in the project. Literacy improvement was achieved in the areas of reading comprehension performance at each year level: word-reading accuracy, word-reading strategy use and phonological skills, listening comprehension and knowledge of story genre.

The comprehensive level of improvement was achieved by teachers learning to administer diagnostic and formative assessment data to deliver literacy lessons that integrated a set of systematic, evidence-based HRLTPs (Munro, 2011). In addition, teachers were trained to develop a literacy learning profile for each student. The literacy learning profiles established baseline data on what each student knew, allowing targeted, evidence-based teaching procedures to be implemented and regularly reviewed.

Schools in both regions delivered daily literacy lessons of 30–45 minutes duration, with students in small groups or one-to-one teaching. During the intervention, teachers recorded the frequency that they used particular literacy practices. At the end of the program, students' gains in literacy knowledge and literacy-related knowledge were correlated with the repertoire of teaching procedures used. The combined impact of the HRLTPs, the literacy learning profiles and the linking of students' existing cultural and literacy knowledge with pedagogy, enabled students to better comprehend text, develop improved text knowledge and enhance their word reading strategies.

Additional project achievements included:

- demonstrated effectiveness of the HRLTP sequence
- increased levels of student engagement and attendance, as observed and recorded by the project teachers
- improved teacher effectiveness regarding the use of diagnostic and dynamic assessment processes to plan for differentiated teaching and learning, as observed through peer observations, analysis of lesson sequences and self-reported teacher effectiveness surveys
- a successful and documented research design and methodology that can be replicated in other sites in both primary and secondary school settings
- improved student self-efficacy as readers
- improved student self-monitoring of learning and identifying of themselves as readers
- deepened understanding at the project schools of the need to develop culturally sensitive schools to enhance student literacy outcomes.



Lessons learned

The KECs and KESOs were essential in strengthening partnerships between schools, parents, carers and Koori communities. Partnerships were developed through sharing knowledge, building on strengths, and gaining an understanding of what might be required to create culturally competent and inclusive schools to improve student learning.

The term 'partnering' has begun to replace 'parent engagement' in some project schools intent on building strong relationships between Koori families and the school. Partnering builds on strengths rather than operating from an assumption of deficit in relation to the family or community, as it aims to develop partnerships that are ongoing, authentic and reciprocal.

For all members of the project team, attendance at the professional learning workshops highlighted the importance of the interrelated social and cultural aspects of literacy learning, and provided opportunities for students to be engaged in literacy learning that valued their Koori culture. Participating staff had access to professional development that included professional learning conversations, teacher observation, peer observation, self-reflection, individualised coaching conversations, full-day forums and ongoing workshops utilising an action–research model of investigation and evaluation. A major learning was the value of implementing a systematic and inclusive professional learning model.

Next steps

The key recommendations contained in the final evaluation report indicated certain guiding principles must be in place for improved reading/comprehension outcomes.

- Explicit and systematic teaching of phonemic knowledge, word analysis, oral language – vocabulary, sentence and paragraph meanings, topic expansion, the use of language to communicate and to learn – as well as rapid symbolic naming (or symbolic processing)
- Teaching students how to use effective word reading and analysis skills and procedures that allow them to review their learning at the end of each lesson. This encourages the creation of metacognitive-based conversations around what students feel they were able to achieve in the lesson.
- Building student self-efficacy as readers, and developing metacognition for reading comprehension
- Explicitly teaching students about the features of texts, how to comprehend and think about unfamiliar texts, and about self-belief and dispositions towards reading
- Teaching students that reading can be learnt, and that it is a useful and social activity with an important cultural dimension
- Developing strong partnerships between the school, teachers, students, family and community



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Sustaining a Koori workforce has an essential role in working with teachers, students and families to support improved student outcomes in literacy. This is important, in order to use a strengths-based approach to plan for improved student literacy learning that respects and values all aspects of knowledge that children bring to the classroom.

For ongoing success, ensure that:

- teaching staff continue to be committed to the collection and analysis of data to inform teaching and learning
- there is continued ongoing consultation with the local Indigenous community
- community and parents are included in professional development
- high expectations for the students remain in place.

Possible areas for further investigation include:

- longitudinal tracking of the ECGKLP cohort of students to assess the degree that literacy gains made in the project are maintained
- exploration of each school's sense of cultural awareness and cultural competency, and measuring its relationship to student literacy development.

Research base

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2009, 2010, 2011) identified a range of school-level, teacher-level and student-level factors shown to contribute to improved outcomes; for example, explicit teaching of literacy skills.

Language is culture, and the recognition and valuing of Koori English supports Koori students in developing a strong cultural identity on an individual basis and belonging to a group with a strong cultural identity (Armstrong et al., 2012). Participating teachers and schools recognised Aboriginal English (or Koori English) as a language in itself, and not an inferior model of Standard Australian English. Incorporating Aboriginal English and culture has been shown to impact on self-identity and resilience, which in turn positively impacts on student outcomes. Students and parents valued inclusive texts incorporating vocabulary from Koori English.

Munro (2005) identified that building the capacity of schools to learn professionally – in systematic, sustained ways – is a key way to get better results and make optimum use of the resources directed to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. These understandings underpinned the professional learning model that formed a key part of this project.



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The teaching framework for reading comprehension involved teaching procedures taken from the HRLTP sequence (Munro, 2011). This set of teaching procedures matches those identified as effective intervention teaching strategies by the National Reading Panel (2000) and by the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (2010). HRLTP identifies a number of types of integrated knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to scaffold students for the effective acquisition of reading comprehension. HRLTP sees reading comprehension and literacy learning more generally as a cultural activity in which students are encouraged to link ideas in a text with the cultures in which they interact.

The HRLTP sequence was selected because it can be applied to any literacy program or curriculum. It is a framework of teaching procedures that teachers can use to teach students how to think about text and to build their knowledge of it. It guides teachers to explicitly scaffold students' literacy learning and thinking in systematic and decisive ways. This includes teaching students how to selectively use – ultimately independently – a range of cognitive strategies with increasingly complex texts, and to build an evolving knowledge of texts.

It also teaches them to manage and direct their own reading activity and to become self-managing and directing comprehenders by teaching relevant metacognitive strategies and positive attitudes towards reading and themselves as readers.

Most literacy programs can be aligned with at least part of the framework. One reason for using HRLTP was to cover the range of literacy programs used across the two regions. The HRLTPs also provided a common language for discussing student activity and relating teaching procedures across the different programs. This prioritised the focus on student learning activity and the linked teaching activity, rather than on the literacy programs.

Further reading and links

Videos

Several professionally shot and edited HD web files/videos have been produced as part of the project and are available for viewing.

Introduction to the Victorian Closing the Gap Indigenous research project (video 1 of 8):
<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=9DN4T4>

The evidence-based teaching model and procedures investigated (video 2 of 8):
<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=GZS9HX>

Understanding the HRLTP teaching framework and procedures (video 3 of 8):
<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/?5ZRCZR>



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Getting your knowledge ready for reading (video 4 of 8):

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=Q5CJJC>

While reading strategies (video 5 of 8):

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=8PK8SJ>

Reviewing and consolidating strategies (video 6 of 8):

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=TN4YHG>

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the HRLTPs (video 7 of 8):

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=F5BTMJ>

Teacher evaluations of the effectiveness of the HRLTP teaching procedures (video 8 of 8):

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=YW2BJC>

Mildura South Public School Good News Story:

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/?NFWMR9>

Chaffey Good News Story:

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=B99B47>

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High Reliability Literacy Teaching Procedures: A means of fostering literacy learning across the curriculum:

https://students.education.unimelb.edu.au/selage/pub/readings/literacyld/art_VATE_02.pdf



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Contacts

Mark Landy

Email: landy.mark.m@edumail.vic.gov.au

Phone: 03 9637 3788