

# **The Role of the Support Unit in the National Accelerated Literacy (AL) Project**

**Dr Anna Alderson  
Learning Conversations**

**April 2010**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this project was to describe the role Aboriginal Independent Community Schools' (AICS) Support Unit staff have played in the development of Accelerated Literacy (AL) and the support they have provided to Aboriginal Independent Community (AIC) Schools as they have adopted and implemented AL in their schools. Like many essentially administrative bodies the work of the Support Unit is often invisible and intangible – and thus unrecognised. This report makes what they do more visible and tangible by documenting what the Support Unit personnel have done and how they have done it in regard to AL and the way in which this has contributed to the well documented improvement in literacy achievement in the AIC Schools.

## **Methodology**

The following activities were undertaken to assemble the required information.

1. Interviews with key stakeholders (about 12 in total), including
  - former bureaucrats from state and commonwealth government departments who have known the work of the Support Unit from an organisational and funding perspective
  - academics who have been instrumental to the development of AL and know the work of the Support Unit in relation to the growth and development of AL, its pedagogy and the professional services required for it to be delivered effectively
  - current and past personnel who have been involved in the delivery of AL in some way e.g. AL consultants, school principals
  - personnel from Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA), the organisation which houses the Support Unit and under whose organisational structure it fits, who understand the administrative operations of the Support Unit and its funding.
2. An examination of the findings of the *NALP Professional Development Review* by Dr Anna Alderson of Learning Conversations (September 2008) as they relate to the role of AICS Support Unit.
3. An examination of the findings of the *Consultancy to Evaluate and Report on the National Accelerated Literacy Programme* by the Education Faculty of Monash University (June 2008) as they relate to the role of AICS Support Unit.
4. Reference to other relevant documents e.g. *The National Accelerated Literacy Program in the Northern Territory 2004-08: Implementations and Outcomes: Final Evaluation Report*.

## **The AICS Support Unit**

Essentially the Support Unit consists of two co-coordinators, one located in the offices of AISWA in Perth, and the other who works from Broome in the Kimberley. In addition, there have been up to 5 literacy consultants simultaneously working from these offices and visiting individual schools and teachers since 2005. Prior to that, from 1999, the AL project's (or its predecessors – essentially the same program but with slightly different names) support for schools was managed by the University of Canberra. From January 2010 there have 5 numeracy consultants employed to work with the schools and teachers on the Resilient Professional Numeracy Network Project.

As the AICS website notes

The AICS' Support Unit was established in 1990 as a direct result of a collective decision taken by the then, ten Aboriginal Independent Community (AIC) Schools. This decision was a response by the schools to pressure being exerted on them by sections of a number of government departments, both State and Federal, to accept a centralised financial, administrative and staffing support. With the aim of overcoming concerns regarding professional isolation, maintenance of academic standards, quality control of staff, financial management and other issues related to school development the AIC Schools established the Support Unit.

The Unit operates under the auspices of AISWA (the Association of Independent School of WA). AISWA is not a system like the Department of Education in WA or the Catholic Education Commission of WA. Nor is the Support Unit a system. However, both AISWA and the Support Unit provide services to schools that resemble those provided by systems to their schools. The differences lie in the authority relationship between these organisations and the schools. While the Support Unit and AISWA can offer advice to their member schools they cannot insist on their compliance with it, or issue them with directives.

The Support Unit provides a range of services to the AIC Schools that are in some respects similar to the services that AISWA provides for other independent schools. However they do this in the culturally and location specific context of primarily remote Aboriginal schools – a very different situation to that of the majority of independent schools, even those of very low SES status. Furthermore, the AIC Schools themselves have many features in common and are involved in a range of cooperative initiatives overseen and facilitated by the Support Unit.

### ***Accelerated Literacy***

One of those ‘cooperative initiatives overseen and facilitated by the Support Unit’ is the Accelerated Literacy project. As described in a recent report from Charles Darwin University that evaluated the implementation of AL in the Northern Territory,

Accelerated Literacy is described as an “inclusive and academically focused” teaching methodology (Gray & Cowey 2005: 5), based on the understanding that “learning to be a literate member of a society requires a student to learn the discourse or tacit ground-rules that apply to literacy lessons in schools” (Cowey 2005: 3). It employs a strongly scaffolded and purposive teaching cycle, largely grounded in the social learning theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jerome Bruner (1986). Cowey (2005: 6) summarises the educational and socially empowering purposes of AL:

The Accelerated Literacy teaching strategies are designed to teach students both how to enjoy and interpret books, particularly narrative, in an educational context, as well as how a literate person thinks and acts to be successful in school. The NALP aims to give each student access to the literate discourse that identifies a student as a successful member of a literate society.

The focus on scaffolding students to successfully participate in academic discourse is a distinctive aspect of AL. AL specifically seeks to remedy the dysfunctional reading strategies developed by students who have been forced to cope with lessons centred on texts that are not suited to their age or interests, and the “cognitive overload” arising from a lack of any shared understanding of the implicit educational purpose of set tasks and teacher questioning (Gray & Cowey 2005). By equipping students to succeed at an age-appropriate level, and by promoting a shared understanding of the educational task, AL purports to offer an effective sequence of teaching strategies for accelerating the literacy gains of educationally marginalised students. (p.24)

AIC Schools have been working with Accelerated Literacy (initially Scaffolding Literacy) since one school became involved in a pilot project in 1999. Since then 13 of the now 14 AIC Schools have taken it on with assistance from the Support Unit’s literacy consultants to help in its implementation, and further involvement from the Support Unit in the administration and maintenance of it.

### ***The Support Unit and Accelerated Literacy***

The information gleaned from the various sources for this project about the role of the Support Unit in relation to the delivery and development of Accelerated Literacy in AIC Schools in WA is presented

under a number of different headings<sup>1</sup>. However, it should be borne in mind that part of the unique nature of the Support Unit is the way in which its various roles and services overlap and are integrated. Any sorting or classification therefore makes it seem much more orderly and even perhaps bureaucratic than it is or could possibly be. In fact, in large part its effectiveness probably arises from the fact that its operations are so integrated, as many of the informants for this study suggested.

While this understanding needs to be borne in mind in assessing the Support Unit's value a further caveat must also be added. As in any organisation (or school) it is the individual people who make it work – not the structure in and of itself. As reiterated by many of the informants it has been, and is, the calibre of the people employed in the Support Unit - the coordinators and the consultants - that has made it the successful, dynamic body that it is.

### *Administration/Organisation*

From the start the Support Unit has been instrumental in organising and enabling AL to be used in the AIC Schools – all the time in partnership with the schools, in keeping with the origins of the Unit being under 'the collective control of the schools'. While it was an AISWA Literacy consultant and a principal of one of the AIC Schools who first investigated AL, it was the Support Unit that sought and gained the initial and on-going funds to employ, coordinate, train and support the consultants in order for the best possible uptake of the program in all AIC Schools. Principals in most schools are rightly focussed on the issues to do with their school and the communities in which they operate. This is even more the situation in small remote Aboriginal communities. They have neither time, energy nor, in most cases, the expertise or inclination to deal with the 'big picture'. Several informants' suggested that AL would not have started in many of the schools and certainly would not have been maintained through changes of principals and teachers, without the Support Unit. As one of them put it, 'without the Support Unit AL would have been dead and buried a long time ago!' The Support Unit continues to provide on-going administrative and organisational advice to principals, teachers, school boards and communities with regard to AL and any other school matters acting as a 'conduit between them and government bureaucracies and ministers.

In the case of AL, the Support Unit also acted as conduit between the originators of the program, their university sponsors and the communities and schools. The university informants in this study emphasised that they would not have been able to introduce AL to the AIC Schools without the active assistance of the Support Unit.

### *Pedagogy*

Members of the Support Unit have not only been involved with organisation and administration in regard AL is but have also been active participants in the dissemination and on-going development of its pedagogy. The consultants and the coordinators have sat on numerous committees tasked with the creation of support materials for AL as a whole. University people consulted as part of this project spoke highly of the very significant contribution made by people from the Support Unit in this respect. Many of the 7 literacy consultants who have worked in AL have contributed to the development of resources for the project that are now available for schools throughout Australia, not just for their own AIC Schools.

---

<sup>1</sup> These headings correspond broadly with the classification of the Total Activities Analysis, a framework developed in the UK by the Centre for Voluntary Organisations at LSE, to analyse the functions of voluntary agencies. While the focus of their work was voluntary agencies the framework applies equally well to all small organisations, profit or not-for-profit.

### *Accelerated Literacy Resources*

Amongst the numerous resources that the AICS Support Unit have developed, taking 2008 as an example (AICS Support Unit, 2009) include

- the preparation of teaching notes to accompany the texts, including the complete Teaching Notes for NALP for 31 (whole or in part) of the 41 prepared that year;
- in-service plans with appropriate resources for on-site professional development and regional and state wide training
- the construction of Teacher Resource Packs e.g. for *Limpopo Lullaby* including spelling journals, alphabet wall frieze and word recognition games; for *The Devil's Own*, including spelling journals, laminated class copies of the passage and picture overheads.
- the creation of videos demonstrating teaching strategies e.g. *Demonstration teaching video: Spooks Incorporated*; *Demonstration teaching video: Lighthouse Blues*; editing and subtitling demo dvds; editing demo lesson dvd's from school visits
- the creation of teaching notes for factual or non-narrative genre texts to support learning areas other than English and to integrate the teaching of literacy across the curriculum
- other professional learning materials e.g. *How to analyse and use assessment data*; *Practitioners' Guide: Assessing Literacy Development*; *Primary Games Booklet*; *NT ESL Levels Support Folder*; *Additional Activities for Spelling*; *Support booklet for marking NAPLAN Writing and a Narrative Marking Template*; *Digital Student Record Booklet*; *Data feedback form*; *Demonstration feedback form*; *Pre-visit checklist*; *Working on comprehension form*; *Observation feedback form*.

The number of these resources prepared by the consultants of the AICS Support Unit over the last decade are far in excess of the number produced by any other jurisdiction involved in NALP.

### *Professional Learning (PL)*

An integral part of AL in WA AIC Schools has been the quantity and quality of professional development that is provided for the teachers in the schools. This is in several forms. At the start there is induction in AL for all new teachers, even those who do not start at the beginning of a term or a year. As a review of the AL Professional Learning found

The initial AL PD would appear to have been remarkably efficient in providing many of the [teachers] with the necessary skills and strategies to begin teaching literacy from day 1 in the schools. The repetition of the details, the intensity of the program over several days and the clarity of the sequence seems to impact significantly on the teachers' confidence and capacity. (p.6)

All teachers, new and returning, attend several days of Professional Learning (PL) arranged and conducted by members of the Support Unit with a strong focus on AL at the beginning of each year.

In addition to this initial PL there are two other PL blocks during the year. One is a mid-year gathering where the major focus is again on AL. The other is at the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> Term when AISWA hosts a more general PL conference for AIC Schools and other teachers in the Kimberley, when there are further optional PL sessions on AL. The Support Unit is responsible for organising and, in most instances, delivering all of these.

An uncommon but extremely valuable aspect of the on-going support provided for the AIC School teachers using AL is the regular school visits made by the AL consultants. On these visits the consultants support teachers by demonstrating lessons, observing lessons and providing feedback, assisting with assessment, writing teaching notes and offering help with planning and text selection. They stay in touch with teachers by phone, email and other electronic means after their visits. While these visits were modeled on those initially conducted by the originators of AL (or Scaffolding Literacy as it was then) who visited WA at its inception in AIC Schools, they have been refined and

developed their own flavour and momentum over the years. According the *NALP Professional Development Review*

the visits of the consultants to the schools were ... important in sustaining the commitment, building the skills and refining the understanding of the teachers about AL. ... The subsequent comparison of evidence-based professional learning models affirms the importance of school based PD i.e. 'Professional learning is focused on and embedded in teacher practice (not disconnected from the school)'. (p. 5)

This continuous and intensive PL is very important for the program in two major respects. In the first place, AL is in many ways different to the approaches to literacy teaching to which most student teachers are exposed in their pre-service Education courses at universities in Australia. Some teachers, new to the approach find it initially quite confronting though once they see the positive results that have been achieved and come to understand the underlying social philosophy and pedagogical intent, many become convinced and even enthusiastic supporters. However to deliver AL well requires significant discipline and application by teachers as well as new skills and knowledge, and thus comprehensive and effective PL is absolutely necessary.

Secondly, teacher turnover is, and probably will always remain, a significant problem in small remote Aboriginal schools regardless of what efforts are made to turn this around. One of the contributors to low achievement in literacy for Aboriginal students, that is well documented, is the constant change in approaches to literacy teaching which often occurs when teachers change. This is difficult enough when the change is from year to year, but is very much exacerbated when students experience more than one teacher a year. The introduction of AL has provided a constancy and stability in literacy teaching in the AIC Schools in the last decade which has no doubt contributed to its success, but this can only be achieved if teachers are well informed and skilled. This can only occur in schools with high staff turnover if there is constant provision of induction PL for new teachers and additional, intellectually challenging PL for continuing teachers.

To ensure the on-going quality of the PL the Support Unit commissioned the *NALP Professional Development Review* in 2008 (mentioned above) and implemented many of its recommendations.

The PL process of visiting consultants developed and maintained for AL has now been used as a model for the recently instigated numeracy project now being implemented in AIC Schools.

#### *Professional Support*

Schools and teachers are not only provided with high quality PL, they are also provided with on-going professional support outside the specifics of AL pedagogy by the visiting literacy consultants and the coordinators of the Support Unit. This might be matters to do with student behaviour and management of students, cross-cultural sensitivities, staff interaction – literally anything to do with school life that having a fresh external, expert perspective might help. And all of them can impact on the ability of a teacher to deliver an effective AL program. The physical, social and educational isolation of these schools makes this kind of support, particularly the visits of the consultants particularly important, even if their main focus and intent AL. These visits are sometimes, nothing less than a life line!

#### *Co-ordination*

As already noted, the fierce independence of the schools can make coordinated effort extremely difficult. The work of the Support Unit to attract and maintain AL is an exemplary example of how the Support Unit has been able to coordinate these schools, though it has not always been easy. None of the schools independently could have mobilised the cooperation of all the other schools in

the way the Support Unit has been able to do. And from the sustained work with them on AL over such a long period others like the Resilient Professional Numeracy Network Project have been able to be built.

#### *Community/School Liaison*

All of informants noted how important the Support Unit personnel are in building and maintaining relationships with the communities and the schools. In no small part this derives from the long association the coordinators in Perth and Broome have had with the schools and the communities preceding the creation of the Support Unit. By and large, the consultants are also people who already have relationships with one or more schools and communities. The AIC Schools are independent and have deliberately chosen to be so. As such they guard their independence closely. As one informant put it, the Unit has maintained the alliance of the schools 'despite their almost anarchic structure'. As far as AL is concerned there was little doubt from those consulted for this project, that it was this close and trusting relationship the Unit had built with the schools and communities that enabled AL to be successfully introduced into the AIC Schools and which has ensured that it has continued in them for what is now over a decade. While other agencies, like AISWA itself might be able to provide some of the services currently provided by the Support Unit, AISWA personnel themselves acknowledge that they are unlikely to be unable to provide the community engagement support that the Unit does.

#### *Publicity ad Lobbying*

It is very easy for schools like the AIC ones to be out of sight and out of the minds of decision makers, they are far away from the centres of power and extremely small in the number of students they serve. Individually they have little of clout or influence. Decisions are often made that have a profound impact on them but those making the decisions are likely to be completely unaware of this. The Support Unit has frequently been willing and able to take up the cause of these schools and sometimes even reverse adverse decisions. Having the Support Unit to champion the cause of AL on behalf of the schools, promoting what they are doing and they way they are doing it, has contributed significantly to the ability of the schools to continue to use AL.

#### *Funding*

Funding, or perhaps more accurately, lack of funding has been a constant issue from the beginning of AL in the AIC Schools. AL is resource intensive especially in terms of the professional support provided for the teachers in the school setting. Because of the distances involved in remote areas travel costs are great and constantly increasing. Yet, as the *NALP Professional Development Review* found 'Professional learning [that] is focused on and embedded in teacher practice' is considered to be 'best practice' and as such can only be commended.

Another reason however for the intensive use of visiting consultants and extensive PL is that AL is also about cultural change in these schools. As reported in the *Consultancy to Evaluate and Report on the National Accelerated Literacy Programme*

AICS is using NALP not just as a tool to improve student learning outcomes but also to turn around in a more systemic way teacher attitudes towards poor results in Indigenous Education. As one of the unit co-coordinator suggested, NALP is beginning to significantly change the status quo of Indigenous Literacy by challenging teacher attitudes towards the normalisation of failure of Indigenous students' literacy. Throughout the implementation of NALP in 2005-2008, AICS are attempting to challenge deficit norms towards Indigenous education while improving the learning outcomes of the students. (p.159)

This inevitably means this is not a short term program. It is long term goal which requires intensive intervention over a long period of time. It is totally consistent with the current COAG intention of 'closing the gap' in Indigenous education outcomes, but it cannot be achieved inexpensively,

something that the Support Unit has always found difficulty in conveying to funding authorities with their constantly changing funding guidelines and the personnel who administer them, though they have always understood it has been a necessary, if arduous part of their role.

### **Conclusions**

This brief review of the relationship of the AICS Support Unit to the Accelerated Literacy program being used in AIC Schools has sought to make visible the work of Support Unit. Without exception the people interviewed spoke highly of the work of the Support Unit in all that it does, not just in relation to AL. There was little doubt in their minds that AL would not have succeeded (and may not even have begun) with the intervention of the Support Unit. Few, if any believe AL would be able to successfully continue in the schools if the Support Unit was not there to coordinate, promote, professionally support teachers, principals and communities.

### **References**

- Aboriginal Independent Community Schools' Support Unit, (2009) *Accelerated Reading and Writing Programme for Indigenous Children in School: 2008 Performance Report*, (pp 3-7)
- Alderson, A, (2008) *NALP Professional Development Review*. Unpublished paper prepared for AICS Support Unit
- Doecke B, Long M, Rennie J, Kostogriz A, Auld G & Miller J, (2008) *Consultancy to evaluate and report on the National Accelerated Literacy Programme*. DEEWR, Canberra
- Harris, M. (1993) 'Exploring the Role of Boards Using Total Activities Analysis'. *Non-Profit Management and Leadership* Vol 3, No 3, spring 1993
- Robinson, G. et al (2009) *The National Accelerated Literacy Program in the Northern Territory 2004-08: Implementations and Outcomes: Final Evaluation Report*, School for Social and Policy Research, Institute of Advanced Studies, Charles Darwin University