

# Reading to Learn in Murdi Paaki: Changing Outcomes for Indigenous Students

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*Despite improvements to educational access and retention of Indigenous Australians over recent decades, the school outcomes of Indigenous students are still a long way from parity with their non-Indigenous peers. There is an urgent need to challenge the common view that disparity in the educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is 'normal' and that incremental gains are acceptable. Teachers of Indigenous students clearly need a more effective set of tools to accelerate their learning and close the gap in outcomes. Central to such a toolkit are strategies that can provide Indigenous students with the literacy skills they need to engage successfully with the curriculum at each stage of schooling.*

*This paper reports on a teacher inservice training program designed to address this need across 17 schools in the Murdi Paaki Region in far western NSW, in which Indigenous students often comprise 50% or more of the student population. The Reading to Learn in Murdi Paaki project aims to improve the literacy outcomes of Indigenous students by systematically implementing an approach to literacy learning known as Reading to Learn, that has been developed with Indigenous and mainstream schools in Australia over the past ten years. A further aim of the project is to provide opportunities for Indigenous parents and community members to develop the skills to support their children's literacy acquisition and enhance their capacity to become active participants in their children's education. The four year project is being implemented by the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) with the support of the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (DEST).*

*This presentation outlines the Reading to Learn methodology, how community stakeholders are involved in implementing the project, how In Class Tutors have been trained to support classroom teachers and the accountability processes of the project.*

## **The Reading to Learn in Murdi Paaki Project**

In 2004, the Bourke group of schools was funded by the Commonwealth as part of the Success Zones project. Funding from this project was used to support the training of principals, with the focus on improving outcomes for Indigenous students. Two schools in the Bourke Success Zones visited schools in South Australia which resulted in a literacy scaffolding approach being introduced in Walgett Community College. From this, it was determined that a four-year commitment to a scaffolded approach to literacy was needed and that the Bourke schools would use the Reading to Learn methodology developed by Dr David Rose, University of Sydney.

The project involves 17 schools in the Bourke and Warrumbungle group of schools in the Western Region of the DET, including Bourke Primary School, Bourke High School, Brewarrina Central School, Cobar Primary School, Cobar High School, Coonamble

Primary School, Coonamble High School, Enngonia Public School, Girilambone Public School, Goodooga Central School, Gulargambone Central School, Hermidale Public School, Lightning Ridge Central School, Nyngan Primary School, Nyngan High School, Walgett Community College Primary School, Walgett Community College High School and Weilmoringle Public School.

The Reading to Learn in Murdi Paaki project aims at developing an effective whole school approach to addressing literacy outcomes for Indigenous students by targeting 'at risk' students in terms of engagement with school learning and literacy competence. Over four terms, course provider Dr David Rose delivers four times two day face-to-face workshops in Bourke to train participants to deliver the Reading to Learn pedagogy appropriate for all learners, and particularly for those students with a high level of disadvantage. At present, almost 70 teachers are participating in the project along with 30 Aboriginal Education Workers, including Aboriginal Education Assistants and In Class Tutors.

By embedding the Reading to Learn methodology into their normal literacy programs and staff professional development arrangements, it is anticipated that the program will be sustainable, an important consideration in an area where staff turnover can be high. The delivery of ongoing in-school teacher training and the inclusion of community members will also maintain sustainability.

A full-time Consultant supports schools to implement the project, with the following roles:

- coordinate and monitor the implementation and agreed outcomes of the program in participating schools
- provide feedback and professional communication on-site
- assist participants to create professional networks for follow-up and eventual self-sustaining programs across Murdi Paaki schools, particularly to develop community participation in the project support participants to create resources and lesson plans for networks to use
- support participants' skills and knowledge in developing a range of literacy strategies and competencies
- support participants to collect qualitative and quantitative data
- target participants to gain professional practice qualifications through the University of Sydney.

A Performance Report will be provided to DEST in relation to the implementation of the program, including a description of the extent to which the program has met the objectives, what activities were implemented that resulted in Indigenous community participation in education decision making processes, reasons why the program was successful and recommendations on what would be done differently in future. The program will provide detailed case studies of up to 15 students participating in the project from a cross section of achievement levels, including student writing samples and analysis of reading to assess their progress in the project. The project will report on teacher improvement in literacy skills, where a sample of eight teachers will provide case studies. Parent and student interviews will be conducted to establish views on the effectiveness of the project.

### **The Reading to Learn approach**

The methodology for this project was developed with the objective of improving language skills among Indigenous students, with a particular focus on improving reading skills in order to improve writing and spelling skills. The Reading to Learn approach involves a

sequence of activities that focus on the structure, language and meaning of high quality, fiction and non-fiction texts that are challenging, age appropriate and used within the mainstream classroom. It is a top-down model that starts with the sequence of meaning in a text before looking at patterns of text organisation, spelling, wording and lettering.

Teachers initially provide high levels of explicit support in reading classroom texts at a level beyond that which many students could achieve independently. Once familiar with the sequence of meanings in the text, the ‘cognitive load’ on students is reduced and they can then attend more freely to other textual elements, such as the author’s linguistic choices, and the patterns of wording, spelling and lettering in the text. The ultimate goal is to gradually empower students to use these literate language features to read and write new texts independently.

Reading to Learn involves patterns of teacher-student interaction specifically designed to generate high level engagement by giving students the cues required to understand the sequence of meanings in a text, and then to attend to the literate language features. For many teachers, this requires a significant shift away from traditional classroom discourse patterns they have been using. The approach recognises that students ‘at risk’ do not need confirmation that they are not as well-equipped to deal with texts as their peers – instead they need to have the obstacles removed. The Reading to Learn discourse sets them up for the right answers and rewards their right answers. In this way it breaks the cycle of failure.

The carefully planned teacher-student interactions in Reading to Learn are known as ‘scaffolding interaction cycles’. In these cycles, teachers manage learning engagement initially through modelling and providing information to learners rather than asking learners to ‘discover’ or explore using their own learning resources. However, the developing interaction process in the classroom is a dynamic one and the roles of teacher and learners shift over time until the learners can function by themselves without teacher help.

This kind of teacher support makes teacher expectations about the ways of learning and thinking necessary for school success clearly visible to learners, especially those who do not have the culturally acquired understandings necessary to ‘tune in’ to school learning without such explicit help. The outcome is the development of students who are literate in a sense of the term that is far broader than being able to read, write and spell. While reading, writing and spelling form the core focus of the program, the program also provides a platform from which students can gain access to the academic ‘ways of speaking and thinking’ that are necessary for educational success. Teachers report that students involved in the program develop high levels of confidence in their literacy and heightened oral language competence.

A key feature of the scaffolding methodology is that the weaker students in a class are supported in classroom learning tasks at levels of engagement that are well above those at which they would function in either traditionally ‘teacher-centred’ or progressivist ‘learner-centred’ programs. In scaffolding activities students move very quickly onto, for example, reading texts that are appropriate for their particular age level. Only by working in this way is it possible to accelerate the development of the children and so allow them to catch up with their more advanced peers.

The Reading to Learn approach builds on several theoretical bases: on the social learning theory of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1986), on the functional model of language known as systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1994, Martin & Rose 2003), on genre theory (Martin & Rose 2007), and the educational sociology of Basil Bernstein (1996).

The term ‘scaffolding’ emerged from scholarly examination of parent-child talk in the

early years (Bruner 1986). It is based on a view of human development and learning as a social rather than an individual, cognitive process and a view of language as intricately interwoven in social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky 1978). ‘Scaffolding’ is now widely used as a metaphor for the temporary supporting structures that assist learners to develop new understandings, new concepts, and new abilities (Hammond 2001). Characteristically, ‘scaffolding’ provides high levels of initial support, and gradually reduces this as students move towards independent control of the learning task or text. Scaffolding enables students to achieve higher levels of performance than they could achieve on their own, or without the strategic guidance of the teacher. In the field of language and literacy, scaffolding activities typically focus on making explicit the literacy demands and learning expectations embedded in texts and tasks required for successful school learning, and on providing opportunities for joint or ‘co-construction’ of knowledge between teachers and students (Gibbons 2002).

Reading to Learn applies the scaffolding principle to analysing learning at three levels, of programming, of classroom activities, and of teacher-learner interactions. Learning is interpreted in terms of the tasks that learners perform, how teachers prepare them for successfully completing learning tasks, and how successful completion is followed up by elaborating on understandings. These three steps – Prepare, Task and Elaborate – are termed the ‘scaffolding learning cycle’.

At the level of teacher-learner interactions, functional linguistics is used to analyse how teachers prepare and elaborate on students’ respond responses, and to plan scaffolding interaction cycles that ensure that all students are continually successful (Martin & Rose 2005, Rose 2004 2007). Extensive research in language across the curriculum, using functional linguistics and genre theory (Christie 1999, Martin 1999, 2000), is also applied in Reading to Learn to analyse the kinds of reading and writing tasks expected of students at each level of schooling. At each level – of programming, activities, and classroom interactions – Basil Bernstein’s model of pedagogic discourse (1996) is applied to analyse how unequal outcomes are produced and maintained by the practices of schooling, and to plan teaching strategies that close the gap between the most and least successful students.

### **Advantages of the Reading to Learn literacy pedagogy**

The Reading to Learn methodology differs in significant ways from many traditional literacy intervention or ‘remedial’ programs offered to adolescent learners underachieving in the middle and secondary years. Where many programs fail to articulate to mainstream curriculum and assessment practices, Reading to Learn supports reading and writing across the curriculum and aims to enable all learners to read and write at levels appropriate to their age and area of study. Importantly, the strategies can be used both as part of mainstream classroom practice and also to provide additional support for students with literacy needs. The approach is firmly located in a view of literacy as social practice and a view of schooling as cultural learning. In this context, the academic-literate discourses of schooling are seen as culturally acquired, the gap in student achievement having more to do with differing degrees of scaffolding or support in acquiring school literacies than with individual cognitive ability.

Reading to Learn has a number of distinctive features that make it a highly suitable intervention for the middle years of schooling. These include:

- Appropriate pedagogy for adolescent learners
- Inclusive of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Effective in both mainstream and intervention contexts

- Linked to mainstream curriculum and assessment practices
- Flexible and adaptable to different models of delivery
- Supportive of different levels of literacy development, including reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar
- Capable of extending the learning of more able students as well as students underachieving in literacy
- Provides a common literacy pedagogy and builds partnerships between middle years teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Lesson sequences are designed, and teacher-learner interactions are carefully planned, to provide a high level of support for reading and writing texts of all kinds across the curriculum. The strategies provide underachieving students with maximum support as they develop the knowledge and language resources required to read and write texts independently.

The Reading to Learn strategies are designed and implemented as part of normal teaching practice in whole classes, and can also be used for additional support in small groups working separately on Reading to Learn activities within the mainstream class setting. This indicates that Reading to Learn is intended as a literacy pedagogy in both intervention and mainstream learning environments and that it is flexible and adaptable to different student groupings.

Advantages of implementing Reading to Learn within a whole class model are that it becomes part of the usual classroom pedagogic routine, rather than creating a differentiated curriculum for underachieving students. This may also give teachers greater flexibility and autonomy over where, when and how often they use the strategies and helps to avoid some of the shortcomings of the withdrawal model, which often compounds some of the difficulties facing underachieving students and can impact negatively on adolescent self-esteem and peer relationships. While the withdrawal model may suit the structure and resources of schools, it may not deliver improved literacy outcomes for those students who are educationally disadvantaged or at-risk. Implementing Reading to Learn within a whole class model also guarantees that texts used are curriculum-linked and those from which students are expected to learn independently.

## Conclusion

The Reading to Learn in Murdi Paaki project offers the best opportunity we have had so far to significantly improve educational outcomes for school students in north-western NSW, particularly the for the high proportion of Indigenous students in these schools. The combination of a well-planned professional learning program, that is supported at all levels from the Education Department to the classroom, with a proven literacy methodology focused on teaching reading across the curriculum, promises to overcome the disadvantages of many of our students, within the four year life span of the project. We think that the Murdi Paaki project will eventually provide a model for other school regions in Australia and beyond, for closing the gap in outcomes that has beset school systems for too long, at the same time as it accelerates the learning of all students, to participate successfully in the society of the twenty-first century.

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