

- Perhaps because of the focus on data collection which characterises these projects, precise attendance levels came under the spotlight. In every one of these projects where teaching students was the focus of the work, poor attendance was almost always associated with lower levels of student improvement. Common sense says this should be a fact. Findings from these projects validate common sense. Nor can the issue of teacher turnover and its impact on student success be ignored. It might appear that both these issues are rehearsals of the well known and obvious, but they must be included in any consideration of the success of Indigenous students at school.

Scaffolding Reading and Writing at Wiltja (Project L7)

The project is an accelerated reading and writing program for primary and secondary Indigenous school students from remote communities in South Australia. Coordinated by a team of researchers from the University of Canberra, the project has been implemented on two sites — the Wiltja Annexe of Woodville High School in Adelaide, and the Amata Primary School located south of Uluru. This case study is drawn from the Wiltja Annexe.

Wiltja provides three programs for Indigenous young people from the Anangu and Pitjantjatjara lands. The opportunity is provided to access urban secondary schooling, and to complete South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) courses. Students with potential for further academic development are nominated by their teachers in these remote communities, and following consultation with parents and family members, travel to Adelaide to participate. Students live in a hostel at Northfield, and participate in a tutorial program on most week-nights that is designed to support their school-based program. Around seventy students are enrolled in the Wiltja program at any one time. The demand for places far exceeds those that are available.

Brian Gray, with his University of Canberra colleagues Wendy Cowey and David Rose, have been developing a ‘scaffolding’ approach to literacy for more than a decade. The reason for this work has been the apparent gap in literacy outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The team’s research indicates that many of the current literacy practices in use with rural/remote Indigenous students limit their chances of success. The team found, for example, that the copying and memorising of text were common practices, and that relatively few students were able to independently read and write by the time they reached secondary school age. Many adolescents were being instructed with literacy materials designed for much younger students in the early years of schooling.

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'We have found that much of the literacy work that we do with teachers of Indigenous students is 'counter-intuitive'... a typical response of a teacher confronted by a student who cannot do something, is to reach for something at a lower standard ... another is to reduce kids' activity to 'busy work'(colouring in, painting and so on) often as a means of maintaining order or controlling behaviour. (R1)

Building on the work of Bruner and Vygotsky, the team has developed an approach that makes the knowledge of literacy development more explicit.

The approach employs a sequence of strategies that provide scaffolding support for students to read complex texts fluently and accurately, and then to use the features of literate language that they are learning to read in their own writing. (R3)

A group of five teachers has worked collaboratively with the research team to implement the scaffolding approach at Wiltja. As the following comment reveals, some members of the group were highly receptive.

I have been teaching Anangu students for about seven years, and have never felt particularly successful in the various schools in which I have taught in terms of literacy outcomes. After looking for some time for an alternative, I was relieved to get involved in the scaffolding approach. Other schemes that I tried, such as phonics, didn't address the needs of fifteen year olds with reading ages of six or seven year olds. Junior primary methodology just wasn't working with these kids. (T4)

One of the main changes to teachers' practice involves a significant change to their questioning technique. Rather than asking students questions that they may not be able to answer, teachers construct their questioning in ways that clarify appropriate responses before answers are sought. The objective is to create a supportive learning environment that will foster greater student participation.

Initially, some teachers were sceptical of this technique, fearing that they would be stifling student creativity and self-directed learning.

A major point of resistance for many experienced teachers, given that it is so personally challenging, is the need to review your whole questioning technique. This was certainly the case for me, as I was concerned that by feeding answers to students I would be inhibiting independent thinking skills. Actually, this has tended to have the opposite effect, because the kids feel so much more confident, and are asking more critical questions. (T1)

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Significant increases in student achievement have been measured. For example, all students have advanced by one or more levels in reading and writing based on the national English Profiles. (For later results see the project summary, p. 69.)

In the Bridging Class at Wiltja the average improvement in reading and writing was 2.5 Profile levels. In Year 8 the average improvement, in English and Science, was also about 2.5 Profile levels. In Years 9 and 10 the average improvement was slightly less, at about 1.9 Profile levels overall since these groups had started with higher levels in the baseline assessments.

At the same time, teachers have noted a range of student learning outcomes that are more difficult to measure, like an increased level of student engagement in their learning. Video and anecdotal evidence reflects much higher levels of student participation — especially in terms of the quality of dialogue between students and teachers as well as students themselves. Another reported outcome was student enthusiasm to select their own texts, something no teacher in the project had experienced previously.

Kids are more prepared to have a go, in terms of volunteering answers. There is no shame involved about making mistakes, and students are more willing and able to help each other along. Previously, these kids were really reluctant to participate. For example, students would pull their jumpers over their heads and suchlike. I have also noticed that words like 'Wiya!' (No!) and 'Lanma!' (Boring!), which were commonly used by students last year are noticeably absent this year. (T1)

The familiarity of students with the texts means that they are becoming more directly involved in the learning process. For example, when we do 'chunking' exercises as part of spelling, or develop writing plans, students are contributing and feeling part of the whole process. This is all part of building their confidence and generating success. (T3)

What factors are critical to ensuring that the process that has been initiated at Wiltja can be maintained and/or expanded in future?

It was clear that input from the external research team was crucial, both during the early planning and implementation stages and for monitoring and refinement. Throughout the project, researchers have provided various teacher support materials in the form of notes and 'scripts' to assist with teaching processes. Video and other materials that will assist in the transfer of the scaffolding approach to settings and contexts beyond Wiltja are in development.

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Of equal importance has been the development of a team approach among a core group of teachers, together with the enthusiastic support of the principal. Teachers made frequent reference to the value they place on being able to work cooperatively on the scaffolding approach, along with the practical and moral support they receive from each other. While this approach appears to have taken root at Wiltja, continued nurturing and support is needed to ensure that it grows and develops further.

There is the issue of critical mass. You need a group to become strong enough to support each other and assist in the training of new members. ... As awareness grows that something good is happening in the Wiltja program, so too is our confidence that the program can work in other settings. (P1)

Teachers spoke at length about the importance of developing skills that are absolutely fundamental to the futures of all Indigenous students.

Teachers need to be much more honest about what they are achieving with their literacy programs. For example, you can run a phonics or some other literacy program, and make a judgement about this on a range indicators such as attendance and behaviour. However, if the kids are not really getting any closer to obtaining the learning outcomes that they really need, then it is not really all that effective.

Our previous lack of success in literacy almost made us want to focus on other aspects with a view to generating student success. For example, to work on technology or practical activities offered greater potential for demonstrating higher levels of student engagement. However, while students might be more engaged, they might not be any closer to gaining the kinds of skills that they really need. (T4)

Third, is the need to maintain a determination and commitment to improve learning outcomes for all Indigenous students. It means developing a consistent approach to the development of literacy skills that are internalised by students as well as staff. The following comment by the school principal summarises this well.

We are maintaining literacy as a core focus, rather than taking on a range of issues. In other words, we are trying to do as well as we can in literacy, and not be distracted by other things. There is a real sense of determination here, with a view to making this approach work. It is certainly not a half-hearted attempt that might be thrown out if it isn't seen to be working. That means persistence, and hanging-in there when there are frustrations and difficulties.

Acknowledgments

Data for this case study was obtained through focus group interviews with the researchers at the University of Canberra and program staff at the Wiltja Annexe.