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## Seeking different results: the Accelerated Literacy program

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## Summary

It's been said that destiny is a matter of choice, not a matter of chance. Mayfield East Public School decided to leave nothing to chance. Driven by the need to improve students' reading skills and levels, this school embarked on a journey of pedagogical change. Previous interventions had made little difference to students' outcomes. After research, the school leadership team decided that Accelerated Literacy was the best fit for improving student outcomes and professional competencies. The prime focus for the whole school was on reading.

The school set out on a professional-learning program supported by a facilitator experienced in the theory and practice of Accelerated Literacy. The whole school community was involved in the introduction of the strategy. The facilitator continued as a source of professional support after the initial training program. Data collected since the strategy was implemented indicates substantial improvements in reading levels and skills, especially for the cohort of boys.

## Target student group

Mayfield East is on traditional Awabakal land, located in the centre of industrial Newcastle in the Hunter/Central Coast region, servicing a diverse socio-economic community. The school population of over 200 students is highly mobile. Thirty per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds or Aboriginal-Torres Strait Islander families. The program targeted all students, from Foundation to year 6.

## Method

### A Need for change

Mayfield East Public School was established in 1858. It is in regional NSW, north-east of Newcastle. The school has strong local support and nurtures a sense of belonging and involvement as part of its ethos. A diverse range of learning and cultural experiences are offered to students, with staff and the community working closely together. However, the school had been identified as being at-risk, with substantial long-term deficits in students' reading results.



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The NAPLAN data showed that Mayfield had a high proportion of students in Bands 1 and 2. Despite using ‘best practice’ and having more than adequate resources, many students were not achieving expected outcomes in literacy. In classes across each level, teachers focused on ‘regulatory language’ to manage student behaviour, rather than using the language of explicit teaching and learning. Numerous interventions had been tried with minimal effect.

The school leadership team was asked to choose a program to enhance and improve reading skills and levels for its students. In consultation with staff and community, the leadership team evaluated the programs offered under the Smarter Schools National Partnerships program, and decided that Accelerated Literacy was the best fit for improving student outcomes and professional competencies. The school adopted the idea that long-term change is more effective when linked to increasing professional staff competencies, so they set out to change teachers’ pedagogical practices in order to improve students’ literacy levels.

### Accelerated literacy

The whole-school change in pedagogical practice offered by Accelerated Literacy was important. 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; narrative text in the first instance, as the tradition of ‘telling stories’ crosses all cultures.

The Accelerated Literacy pedagogy does not require the purchase of 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 Accelerated Literacy 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.

'[Accelerated Literacy] enables me to express my innermost feelings in ways I can't believe.' (Student)

## Professional learning

A facilitator was employed to deliver the Accelerated Literacy pedagogy and initial training to staff over a series of days. This was followed by the facilitator working with teachers in their classrooms over the next few terms. This ongoing professional support was invaluable, allowing staff to align their new pedagogical skills and classroom practice with the NSW K–6 English syllabus and the Quality Teaching Framework, ensuring improved student outcomes.

The strategy also focused on creating an understanding in the school community of the changes being undertaken. This was done through a series of workshops that were held at varying times of day and evening (and with varying formats) to maximise parents' participation.



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## Results

The Accelerated Literacy program empowered teachers as the agents of change. Changing classroom practice by identifying and focusing on what teachers do has the greatest effect on student learning, and moves the mindset from *what students can't do* to *what students CAN do*. Data collected since the strategy was implemented in 2009 indicate substantial improvements in both reading levels and skills, especially for the cohort of boys. Parents' feedback indicates that students are engaged with the techniques used in the program and are taking home their new learning to share with their families.

Teachers observed increased levels of student engagement with lesson processes, content and concepts, leading to improved on-task behaviour during literacy sessions. Students have clear lesson goals and overall text goals to support them in regulating their learning. Students want to know the purpose of the learning experiences and how those experiences contribute to the overall focus of the study text. Students are more confident in engaging in class discussions about their literacy learning.

'I love reading NOW! I get it.' (Student)

### Not 'just another plan ...'

Not all teachers came on board straight away. The strategy required teachers to teach their students in new and challenging ways. At least one teacher was a reluctant participant in the training sessions and saw the program as 'just another plan that would come and go'.

The transformation began when the hesitant teacher allowed the facilitator to work in their classroom. This process was repeated over the term and into the next. Before this, offers of assistance had always been declined. As the students began engaging with the process, some interest was shown by this teacher and over a period of two terms, they slowly began to engage with the new pedagogy. The students' engagement in literacy sessions was changing too, and their new-found enthusiasm for learning motivated the teacher to continue the journey. This teacher now encourages others to engage with the new pedagogy; the previously disillusioned classroom practitioner is now happy to demonstrate new skills to others, declaring Accelerated Literacy the best professional learning they have ever undertaken. The students are positive, engaged and learning, and the teacher has gained a new lease of life.

'Reading in [Accelerated Literacy] lets my mind imagine what is happening.'  
(Student)



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## Lessons learned

An important factor in the success of this strategy is how the school recognised and acknowledged the challenges that came with whole-school change. Active leadership is an essential ingredient of whole-school change. The principal and the leadership team were proactive in reviewing and refining strategies to help teachers implement the pedagogy in their classrooms.

Teachers and the community need to be included in decision making. They need to acknowledge the issues confronting themselves and the students, and accept the challenge to change. Mindsets need to be changed from 'what kids can't do'. This initiative requires a commitment to change from teachers and the community. The changes were embedded into the school structure through school policy, budgeting and timetabling. Ensuring that all members of the wider school community were included was also vital. Being able to maintain a critical mass of teachers who are skilled and committed to the change process is another important factor. This may be difficult to achieve in areas of high staff mobility.

Teachers need ongoing professional learning so that they can implement the changes. This professional learning can come from external facilitators or from in-school mentors. The facilitator who worked with Mayfield East Public School had worked extensively across the Hunter/Central Coast region, and was able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the initiative in a wide number of schools. In New South Wales, Accelerated Literacy has been delivered across all regions in both public and private sectors.

It is important that success is celebrated. Acknowledgement of achievements via newsletters, blogs or noticeboards will help sustain the change.

## Research base

The Accelerated Literacy 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, the NT and NSW, as well as in Aboriginal schools in SA, WA and the 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 National Accelerated Literacy Program in the [Northern Territory 2004–08](#)  shows the variety of schools where Accelerated Literacy has been implemented.

## Further reading and links

Commonwealth of Australia, *NALP Announcements*, National Accelerated Literacy Program .

NSW Department of Education and Training, [Quality Teaching](#) .

Parslow, P 2009, [Vygotsky, ZPD, scaffolding, connectivism and personal learning network](#) .

Robinson, G, Rivalland, J, Tyler, W, Lea, T, Bartlett, C, Morrison, P, Cooper, J, Emmett, S, Dunn, B 2009, *The national accelerated literacy program in the Northern Territory, 2004–2008, implementation and outcomes: final evaluation report, vol 1*, School for Social and Policy Research, Institute of Advanced Studies, Charles Darwin University, Darwin.

South Australian Accelerated Literacy Program 2010, [Information for Schools 2011](#) .

## Contacts

For more information about Mayfield East Public School go to the strategy implemented at [Mayfield East Public School](#)  or email: [mayfielde-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:mayfielde-p.school@det.nsw.edu.au) .