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Standing Tall in Literacy and Numeracy

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Summary

The Standing Tall in Literacy and Numeracy (STLN) strategy at St Joseph's Primary School in Taree, NSW, focused on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. It was initiated to meet the aims of the Closing the Gap commitment for Aboriginal students.

In developing a whole-school approach to improving students' literacy, St Joseph's focused on connecting with and seeking support from the local Aboriginal community.

This led to the development of strategies to support increasing attendance rates among Aboriginal students, raising the profile of literacy in homes, and improving transition processes between preschool/home and school. The school community focused on developing an inclusive supportive culture exploring cultural perspectives, creating partnerships, mentoring, and implementing local cultural awareness training for teaching and non-teaching staff.

Target student group

The target student group was Aboriginal students from Australian Curriculum Foundation year (Kindergarten) to year 6. All students participated in this project, either directly – as a targeted need – or indirectly – as a participant in class using new strategies and resources from the Accelerated Literacy program.

Method

St Joseph's Taree school community is a part of the Catholic Education Commission. It consists of 410 students (including students transitioning from preschool) and the parents of these students. There are 22 teaching staff, five executive staff and 12 non-teaching staff.

The student cohort selected for collecting comparative data about the effectiveness of the project included four Aboriginal and four non-Aboriginal students from each grade. Students were selected randomly, in order to provide the most reliable and accurate results for the two-year period. There were 56 students altogether. If a student left the project, they were not replaced.



A submission was made to the Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR) for grant funding, setting out the key target areas for improvement at St Joseph's. These areas were determined from targeted data collection, local observation and a Dare To Lead (DTL) snapshot conducted by Principals Australia. This snapshot, in particular, determined the extent and direction of the critical targets for the project, and enabled the school to set goals, target specific areas and access resources to address the issues specific to the school community.

An expert advisory committee was set up to determine directions for:

- transition to Australian Curriculum Foundation year
- Literacy and Numeracy improvement
- whole-staff professional development.

Strategies to support the improvement of transitions to Foundation year included an Early Birds program – a transition program from preschool to 'big' school (primary school) that began in Term 3. Students visited the school for increasingly longer periods in a designated classroom with a designated teacher. The teacher was able to gather qualitative information about school readiness, eliminating the 'settling into school' period of starting Foundation.

The transition program builds positive relationships between students and school staff. The focus areas of the Early Birds program include the pre-literacy program, DENS1 numeracy program, TALL talking and listening program, nursery and counting rhymes, craft activities and a social skills program (Skill Streaming).

The buddy program, also designed to support transition, helped students settle into the school on their lunch breaks. Each Foundation student was assigned an older buddy whose role was to provide support in the playground, to make the students feel safe and promote a feeling of belonging.

Initiatives to support the achievement of the Literacy and Numeracy targets included resourcing Literacy Backpacks for Aboriginal families to provide literacy resources in homes and raise the profile of literacy, and the implementation of the Accelerated Literacy program.

Teachers received professional development training in the Accelerated Literacy program. The program is aimed at supporting the development of pedagogy that makes explicit to students the ways of talking, viewing, thinking, reading, writing and spelling that are part of a literate discourse in western culture. This was implemented and resourced in classes to support improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes.



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A project timeline was developed to allocate the greatest priority first. Key indicators of success will be determined from local standardised assessments, as well as NAPLAN results, attendance figures, personalised learning plans and school semester reporting. Parent feedback questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of each year to gather feedback about perceived successes, difficulties and suggestions for the transition program. Teacher's feedback was collected at the beginning and end of the project timeframe, using the Dare To Lead checklist.

Results

The Standing Tall in Literacy and Numeracy strategy timeframe was not long enough to fully evaluate and gather substantive quantitative data on its impact on Aboriginal students' outcomes. The implementation of so many changes – and with staff still in the process of receiving training – means that evidence is still forthcoming. It is anticipated that there will be significant growth in Aboriginal student literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Some early evidence suggests that St Joseph's new approach is having an effect. This evidence can be seen through increased enrolments, improved attendance rates for Aboriginal students, and growth in NAPLAN scores. There is also much evidence from the results of the Foundation year Best Start literacy and numeracy assessment to show that the early transition-to-school program has had an impact on Aboriginal students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

The school community at St Joseph's has experienced enormous benefits from implementing the STLN strategy. It has challenged teaching approaches, the context in which curriculum content is presented, the approach to engaging and motivating Aboriginal students to learn, and it has encouraged the school to connect with the local Aboriginal community.

There is improvement in the way literacy and numeracy outcomes of Aboriginal students are monitored and used as evidence for further planning. Aboriginal Education Workers collaborate with teachers in the classroom to help students reach benchmarks. They support and facilitate Aboriginal students' learning by providing in-class support.

Involving teaching and learning support staff in the project has led to them becoming more comfortable communicating with Aboriginal people – attending events at the local Mission and hosting parent meetings in their homes when necessary – and forming partnerships with the local Aboriginal community.



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Teachers, through establishing the projects and building professional capacity and cultural competence, now know their Aboriginal students and understand the importance of their identity and family connections. They are now aware of the individual learning needs and strengths of their Aboriginal students and demonstrate this in their planning and teaching strategies with consistently high expectations of Aboriginal students.

St Joseph's is providing individualised learning programs for Aboriginal students. The school has open discussions with Aboriginal parents and community members to establish shared expectations of the teaching and learning focus in the classroom.

Culture and identity are recognised as significant in the mental health and wellbeing of St Joseph's Aboriginal students, staff and community. Leadership opportunities are provided for Aboriginal students, and there are targeted engagement programs in place; the success of these programs can be measured through improved student attendance.

Participation and inclusion of parents of the Aboriginal students has enabled them to recognise the time and effort staff put in to improve outcomes for their students. The parents now show greater willingness to form partnerships with the school, and become more involved in day-to-day school activities and extra-curricular activities.

Aboriginal education is a priority in the school management plan. The school has made close connections with local inter-agency partners that work with the local Aboriginal community.

Lessons learned

Reflections on a range of factors will be considered in the ongoing planning for STLN. These factors included the considerable cost associated with employing appropriate staff to assist with the Early Birds classes, as well as ensuring procedures are in place for the care of 30 preschool students in a school environment. Engaging year 6 'buddies' helped in supporting these students. However, Early Birds students do not wear a uniform, and the pressure on staff on playground duty to ensure the safety and care of these students was considerable.

Liaising between parents and teachers for individual case management put subsequent pressure on staff.



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The willingness of all staff to adopt a whole-school approach to one particular teaching program was an issue that had to be considered. The Accelerated Literacy program was generally well accepted, although many staff were hesitant and unsure about this program. It is envisioned that after further learning throughout 2013, and in-class demonstrations, teaching staff will become more confident in their use of new teaching strategies.

Over 60 per cent of the Aboriginal parent/carer community at St Joseph's work, so finding a suitable means of communication has been challenging. One particularly effective method of communication has been using local Aboriginal radio stations to advertise events at St Joseph's.

Development of staff cultural awareness has taken place during school hours and at after-school staff meetings; however, allocating pupil-free days and releasing staff during school hours with a casual replacement has been disruptive. The cost associated with releasing staff to attend professional development may not be sustainable in the future. Sustainability options for the project will need to be considered so that the knowledge, ideas and approaches to teaching Aboriginal students that have already been adopted will continue.

Next steps

At the completion of the project, St Joseph's will engage the Dare To Lead team to conduct an exit snapshot, which will provide additional evidence of growth at St Joseph's compared to the initial snapshot in February 2011. This exit snapshot will provide St Joseph's with further areas for development, and allow the school to continue to develop a school culture that is inclusive of Aboriginal students, to sustain and continue to improve Literacy and Numeracy outcomes that meet (and exceed) National Minimum Standards, and enable teaching staff to support Aboriginal students to achieve the best possible outcomes.

All Foundation to year 6 classes involved in the implementation of the Accelerated Literacy program will incorporate the pedagogy into the new Australian Curriculum in English in 2014. Ongoing support from professional mentors in Accelerated Literacy will continue in the areas of planning, unit writing, teaching and learning activities and student assessment. Teachers have also been released to observe demonstration lessons in 'best practice' using Accelerated Literacy.



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The Early Birds transition program will be sustained. An application for community funding through the Communities for Children organisation is underway. The decision to continue the transition program is in line with current federal government initiatives to promote early childhood education for four-year-old Aboriginal children. Resources for Early Birds will be sustained by current school funding and the literacy and numeracy resources already purchased.

Ongoing staff professional development in Aboriginal cultural awareness will be conducted predominantly through staff meetings with guest speakers to address specific topics, community concerns and educational issues relating to Aboriginal students. Further staff development will be conducted as offered through the Maitland–Newcastle Catholic Schools Office (CSO), such as Aboriginal Education Forums, a specific area on the CSO website for Aboriginal education topics, issues and resources.

Continued employment of Aboriginal Education Workers will be funded. Their inclusion in all aspects of the school has provided valuable insight into teaching, language differences, community and the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the teaching programs. This inclusion of Aboriginal staff has seen an increase in the confidence levels of Aboriginal students across the school, and an increase in cultural pride. Following is one Aboriginal Education Worker's comment on the Early Birds transition program:

Throughout the term, I observed many things that have made the transition program successful but the main observation that stood out concerned a little participant on the first day. I observed one student on the first day; he seemed very quiet and kept to himself for the most part of the day, very little was said or done by him. He was the same for the next day also. When colouring in, he scribbled uncontrollably all over the page, sometimes that deep and dark you couldn't see what the picture was. He also had no knowledge of how to use scissors, his cutting was jagged, uneven and the paper was shredded to the point of not being able to paste it into his workbook. He also couldn't share toys, he threw tantrums while on the equipment and often ran away yelling. This went on for a few weeks. By the end of the program he had been colouring in between the lines, he began using scissors a lot better and cutting along the lines. He was sharing a lot more and didn't throw any tantrums. He had come a long way since the start of the program and because of the program he had settled and would be ready for and understand the school structure. (Early Birds Aboriginal Education Worker)



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Research base

The school sought advice from our Aboriginal Education Consultant (Louise Campbell from the CSO) as to who would be able to fill the role as an academic advisor to the school. Professional mentors Dr Wendy Hanlen and Michael Donovan assisted the school to develop a united and consistent approach to teaching Aboriginal students. Their research into improving outcomes for Aboriginal students centres on cultural insight for teaching and pedagogical practices to support Aboriginal students.

Dr Hanlen states that teaching literacy to Aboriginal students requires a holistic approach in both teaching and learning.

Her paper *Aboriginal students: cultural insights for teaching literacy* states that a holistic approach:

assists teachers to contextualise their understanding of the cultural world views, home language, protocols, prior knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal students bring to school and the relevance of this information to teaching literacy.

Michael Donovan works in the field of pedagogical practices to support Aboriginal students.

The Accelerated Literacy pedagogy was developed by Dr Brian Gray of the University of Canberra, originally as Scaffolded Literacy, and it then became the National Accelerated Literacy Program. The pedagogy was developed for Aboriginal students in remote, high-transience schools, but is now used in mainstream schools in SA, NT and NSW, as well as in Aboriginal schools in SA, WA and NT.

According to the SA Department for Education and Child Development:

Accelerated Literacy (AL) is a pedagogy which makes explicit to students the ways of talking, viewing, thinking, reading, writing and spelling that are part of a literate discourse in western culture. It strongly supports teachers in offering a balanced literacy program, and provides a common language and framework for teachers and students to support a whole school literacy strategy.

Underpinning theories include Vygotsky's social constructivism, Bruner's scaffolding and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics.



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Further reading and links

Donovan, M 2009, 'Quality teaching and Aboriginal students, a NSW model', *Journal of Australian Indigenous issues*, Monash University, Churchill, Victoria 12 (1–4), 104–115

Government of SA Department for Education and Child Development, Accelerated literacy

Hanlen, W 2010, *Aboriginal students: cultural insights for teaching literacy*, NSW Department of Education and Training, NSW

www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/literacy/assets/pdf/packages/ab_studs_cult.pdf 

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