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Conclusions: Some Implications of the Major Findings

The scale of the challenge of NALP, particularly in the NT, must be appreciated. It is an ambitious attempt to bring about change in educational outcomes at the population level by implementing a new method of teaching system-wide (for 700 teachers in 100 schools), with appropriate systemic supports for teaching and management, workforce development strategies, including a dedicated program of specialised PD and systems for reporting outcomes and feedback to participants. It entails a significant effort to reorient capacity at both school and system levels to support a targeted program of literacy teaching intended to tackle the poor literacy outcomes of the NT population, in particular, its Indigenous students.

In evaluating a near jurisdiction-wide program aiming at population-level outcomes (that is, not just at outcomes for a particular group of students or for a particular school, but for the population as a whole) we are led to emphasise at least two important dimensions of the implementation effort: in particular, the capacity to 1) achieve and maintain standards of delivery of the pedagogy in schools according to the requirements of the AL model, and 2) to secure the resources and supports necessary for the sustainability of the program and its effectiveness over time.

With replication to scale, there was a complex transition in roles for many who had been involved in the precursor program to AL, Scaffolding Literacy, as it had been known before 2004. Materials, resources and processes needed to be redesigned and in some cases made explicit for the first time. At the same time the key personnel were required to meet the needs of a rapidly growing cadre of coordinators and school staff needing access to training, resources and materials.

As was evident from the report on the NALP implementation in Chapter 2, NALP was a complex program of capacity-building over time, in which the support systems were being developed to ensure schools could sustain their participation in the program while the PD material was being written and then made available to practitioners – first coordinators then teachers, as the latter were already operating to implement AL

in their schools. From an evaluation point of view, it was not a question of evaluating a system already operating to a given standard with all pieces in place, but rather of attempting to assess the outcomes of implementation as an ongoing process of capacity-building in multiple interacting dimensions: in a department, its management and project development capacity, in its key partners' capacity to deliver the professional resources and, most importantly, in schools and in the cohort of participating teachers.

The evaluation was concerned to assess what thresholds of implementation had been achieved in terms of effective delivery of the AL teaching method by early 2008, that is, whether the achieved levels of PD participation and support had led to a given standard of required teaching practice; and to investigate the learning outcomes in this period against the thresholds of delivery attained.

Questions Arising from Major Findings

The major findings have focused on three main areas: the levels of PD training and support achieved; the effective translation of AL PD into classroom practice; and, finally, the differential learning outcomes of the program across the population of participating students.

Taken together, the analyses of survey, focus groups and observational study suggest that the implementation of AL has been partially successful but that teaching still falls short of required standards of practice. The demand for in-school PD support exceeds supply. High quality centrally provided in-school PD support can help to secure teacher and ALSBC motivation and to provide the practical guidance necessary to achieve quality teaching outcomes in the classroom. However, present levels of in-school PD support are insufficient, so that the goal of transfer of capacity to schools has not been met. AL school-based coordinators are not all able to teach confidently themselves, much less make a significant contribution to effective support for teaching by others. Leadership and management at school level are not yet always of sufficiently high quality to help assure ongoing high standards of program delivery. The problem is particularly pressing in very remote schools which are subject to higher levels of teacher (and principal) turnover, with the effect of reduced levels of experience teaching AL and the implication that higher levels of external support to maintain practice are likely to be needed on an ongoing basis in these schools.

These considerations lead us to ask whether improved school capacity to deliver AL simply requires more hours of externally provided inputs such as in-school PD support by visiting teams. While this conclusion seems unavoidable, it would also appear to be necessary to continue to improve access to all forms of AL training across the schools system in order to extend the pool of AL trained teachers and thus mitigate the effects of teacher turnover as much as possible. Significantly increasing and intensifying existing forms of external support to schools may not be either achievable, given resource constraints, or effective, given deficiencies in school capacity. To improve quality of implementation, it may be necessary to consider variation in school recruitment requirements, so that schools need to meet higher thresholds in capacity to participate before joining the program, thus rendering better

outcomes more likely from a given quantity of centrally provided support. Such changes would imply an adjustment of the mix of incentives and supports provided to schools to participate in the program and also of the quality and range of inputs in terms of training, resources and supports to which schools had access. Consideration should then be given to adjustment of scale of participation of schools in the program, rather than pursuing the target of 100 or more schools as an end in itself. Adjustments to the scale and objectives of further NALP implementation effort would certainly need to occur if the improvements recommended in this report are to be achieved with no significant growth in expenditure on the program.

The evaluation findings from multiple viewpoints appeared to converge on the conclusion that PD workshops need further development and review, to improve their effectiveness. Furthermore, for a project of this kind, PD and follow-up support should be subject to formal evaluation, particularly in respect to the translation of AL theory into effective teaching practice and the optimum targeting of PD support. The observational study shows that this kind of evaluation can be rigorously done, possibly within a continuous quality improvement framework, and provide a firm evidence-base for effective AL practice.

However, the evaluation findings also suggest that, even though levels of training may have been insufficient, some areas of the AL methodology itself need further revision and refinement, both to clarify the training and information provided to teachers, and to improve the effectiveness of the pedagogy. One area of special concern is writing and the time allocated to writing activity within the teaching sequence. Second, the skills and strategies required for teaching AL for early childhood and for beginning readers do not appear to be sufficiently clearly enunciated to address key areas of literacy acquisition: phonological awareness, letter/sound correspondence, decoding, word attack skills, and spelling. The lack of use of assessment by teachers around these areas, the confusion of many teachers and coordinators about the AL approach, and the scale of demand to address these areas of teaching for Indigenous very remote students, suggest that further development of AL for early childhood and non-readers should be supported. Review of assessment procedures and adoption of appropriate instruments for the relevant target groups is a necessary element of this process.

The system-level analysis of outcomes from 2005 to 2007 in two large samples of students suggested that AL is achieving significant accelerated gains among a substantial proportion of students who are mainly in major centres (Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine), including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, but predominantly among students with a reading age of 4 years or more. The mean rate of progress was 1.4 reading years per year, with an average of 47.8% of students assessed using ToRCH showing accelerated gains. By contrast, there are far lower levels of success among Indigenous children from linguistically diverse backgrounds, most of whom live in very remote communities (Tennant Creek and remote community CECs). For students assessed using the IL, only 19% of the very remote Indigenous subsample of students recorded accelerated gains. A very large proportion (53%) were assessed as non-readers using the current IL scale. Analysing the association between reading age and outcomes shows that the gap between their reading performance and that of all others in the program is established very early. By about Year 3 these children are over two reading years behind others, growing to a gap of about

three reading years which persists until middle school and beyond, and with much lower proportions showing accelerated progress in response to AL. As shown, these findings describe a major bifurcation in outcomes which needs to be addressed.

While outcomes of AL among a large proportion of students in very remote areas are not encouraging, they also describe an important opportunity, based on the significant capacity-building outcomes achieved to date. We have seen that AL needs further development for teaching in early childhood and beginning readers, in conjunction with improvement in delivery of formal PD and in-school PD support. These are areas of improvement of the pedagogy that appear to be critical to addressing the needs of Indigenous students of diverse linguistic backgrounds in very remote schools.

To capitalise on the knowledge and the program of systematised training and support developed for NALP by DET and CDU to date, a second stage of implementation could take the form of an advanced Stage 2 trial of AL for early childhood learners and very remote schools. In such a response, the AL program and PD would be revised by an expert panel and implemented specifically to address the needs of the target groups currently most educationally disadvantaged and least responsive to the pedagogy. An advanced Stage 2 program would take the form of a trial of a revised program model in a number of very remote schools with appropriate capacity to participate. Existing arrangements would continue for already well-established AL schools, although these would benefit from the review and refurbishment of the approach. Implementation and outcomes would be rigorously evaluated with appropriate controls and assessment tools appropriate to support teaching practice and to measure outcomes for evaluation purposes.

Policy Logic: Responding to Differential Outcomes

From the standpoint of policy logic, we believe that at least three critical questions arise in response to findings of this report. Given current evidence about learning outcomes, should the program continue to be implemented at a population level? Can NALP achieve substantially improved implementation outcomes without significantly adding to implementation costs? Can the program be made sustainable at high standards of delivery?

1. What are the implications of differential outcomes achieved to date?
 - a) the AL approach and implementation strategy need to address what has been described as the bifurcation of learning outcomes if it is to be retained as a population-level literacy teaching program
 - b) the next stage of any further implementation of AL in the NT should specifically target the needs of Indigenous and very remote students and students with low assessed reading age
 - c) the opportunity to reorientate the program to achieve these aims can be based on the systemic capacity and standardisation of resources and supports built to date

2. What are the implications of the demand to achieve higher thresholds of implementation success without substantial additional cost? The following broad strategies to improve outcomes are indicated:
 - a) determine appropriate scale of implementation, balancing extension versus quality
 - b) select for a higher degree of school capacity to deliver and participate
 - c) respond to regional differences in capacity to participate with appropriate levels of support
 - d) improve efficiency and effectiveness of AL PD and support through review, redevelopment and evaluation
 - e) maintain evaluation to support continuous improvement, ensure program fidelity and provide evidence about effectiveness
 - f) develop research-specific additions to funding and capacity within the program, especially relating to the trial of a redesigned program for early childhood, remote Indigenous and beginning readers
3. How can the conditions of effectiveness and sustainability be met?
 - a) focus on building school-level capacity and commitment
 - b) develop system of continuous quality improvement, monitoring of effective translation of PD into practice and feedback to practitioners

Implementation for Effectiveness and Sustainability

NALP is a program with relatively high implementation thresholds both in terms of the changes to practice it requires, and in terms of the development of systems of management, professional support and resources needed to maintain it. For a program of this kind to be effective and to *remain* effective over time, attention must be paid both to the quality and comprehensiveness of implementation, especially of PD and training, and to the maintenance of program integrity and fidelity to required standards of delivery.

In the transition from pilot to full-scale implementation, the AL program was opened up to a much wider range of practitioners than was the case for the precursor program. As we have seen from the survey results, teachers are not immediately convinced of the program's effectiveness, and probably require higher levels of training and support than they have received to date before they will positively rate the program, much less become adequate exponents of the teaching method.

NALP has also opened up to a wider range of student participants in terms of age, linguistic, cultural and geographical background than was the case within the pilot

program, so that challenges have arisen that mitigate the effectiveness of program implementation and its effectiveness in terms of outcomes: this is particularly the case with the large group of non-readers who are most heavily concentrated in very remote regions. However, as appropriate strategies are adopted to strengthen the methodology and to rigorously evaluate its implementation, it should be possible to improve or at least help sustain the program's effectiveness for those contexts, ages and subpopulations which currently present the program with the greatest challenge. The kinds of evidence generated in the precursor program or in the first stages of the NALP implementation are not adequate to deal with these issues. Demonstration of effectiveness and improvement of the evidence base for NALP are now important issues for continuing practitioner and policy support for the program and thus, for its sustainability.

The limitations of the research design for this evaluation – specifically the absence of benchmark data and the inability to establish control or comparison groups to compare AL outcomes with outcomes of teaching as usual – were largely a product of the scale and scope of the implementation program itself and the timing of the evaluation design process. This meant that such elements of design had to give way to the more urgent priorities of system- and capacity-building. However, this evaluation has made significant progress.

First, the analysis of students' learning outcomes, identification of differential rates of progress and important contextual determinants make it now possible to identify the need for better designed research to contribute to the improved effectiveness of NALP for particular contexts, settings and subpopulations. Second, through the rigorous development of a method for observing teaching practice and measuring its adherence to the requirements of the AL method, it is now possible to consider how systems of evaluation and feedback might be employed to more directly support program integrity, monitor outcomes and provide feedback on progress to participants. This capacity can also be used to more rigorously evaluate the outcomes of any further refinements of the AL method.

Major recommendations are presented in the Executive Summary of this report.