



Executive summary

Background

This project was undertaken for the Department of Education, Western Australia (the Department) by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The purpose of the project was to evaluate the Aboriginal Literacy Strategy (ALS) with a view to assessing the extent to which it has been successful in improving the English language and literacy outcomes of Aboriginal students in remote community schools.

The ALS was designed as a systematic literacy initiative to assist all Remote Teaching Service (RTS) schools in Western Australia. The Strategy commenced in 2005, and subsequently some non-RTS schools became involved. The Strategy was intended to support schools in reducing the English literacy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Key features of the Strategy include a daily, structured two-hour Literacy Session for all students; and ongoing professional learning and support for teachers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers, Education Assistants, and principals delivered by specialist staff both onsite in schools and at central and district office levels. A two-way approach is adopted, which encourages teachers to pay attention to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Explicit ESL/ESD instruction is an important component of the ALS and is embedded throughout the Literacy Session.

The ALS is in keeping with several recent Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreements to form partnerships between all levels of government to achieve designated outcomes of relevance to Aboriginal people.

In particular, the Strategy fits with the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* aimed at working with Indigenous communities to achieve the target of Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage. Schooling is one of the seven building blocks of this Agreement, which states that

Responsive schooling requires attention to infrastructure, workforce (including teacher and school leader supply and quality), curriculum, student literacy and numeracy achievement and opportunities for parental engagement and school/community partnerships.

The Strategy also fits with the *National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy*. One of the aims of this Agreement is to

accelerate progress towards the ambitious literacy and numeracy target set by COAG to halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.

Importantly, the Strategy fits with the *Classroom First Strategy* which is intended to provide a framework for building a strong public school system where every school is a good school, every teacher an effective teacher, and every student a successful student. The *Classroom First Strategy* directly targets improved instructional practice, and it acknowledges that schools are unique and may benefit from different forms of support and different levels of intervention. The *Classroom First Strategy* aims to ensure there is practical support for teachers that acknowledges the realities of the classroom. For remote ALS schools, this has implications for classrooms staffed by young, inexperienced teachers coming to grips with teaching English literacy to Aboriginal students whose first language is not English. In many RTS schools there is no critical mass of teachers to provide intercollegial support and hence the ongoing support provided by district and central office staff is crucial to the success of the ALS.

The ALS is also in keeping with the Department's *Plan for Public Schools 2008-2011*, particularly in relation to raising standards in literacy. One of the major strategies in relation to Aboriginal students is to "ensure effective whole-school approaches are targeted at closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, including implementing the Aboriginal Literacy Strategy in remote schools and reviewing current systemic approaches to Aboriginal education" (DET 2008, p.7). Objective 4 of the *Plan* (To provide practical support for our teachers and support staff) also provides for supportive working environments that will "ensure access to a range of well trained non-teaching staff to support classroom teachers" (DET 2008, p. 5).

Objectives and approach

Specifically, the purpose of the review was to

- evaluate how initiatives being implemented under the ALS are contributing to achieving the English language and literacy outcomes outlined in the ALS Project Plan;
- evaluate whether there are any factors that currently inhibit the effectiveness of the Strategy implementation, including the daily explicit teaching of English language and literacy skills and understandings; and
- make recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the Strategy in order to achieve the desired English language and literacy outcomes.

The review of the ALS considered five specific issues: explicit teaching of English language and literacy on a daily basis; leadership; staff skills and confidence; student outcomes; and Aboriginal community.

Methodology

The methodology included both qualitative and quantitative evaluation approaches. The major components of the evaluation involved:

- examination of ALS-related documentation provided by the Department;
- an initial meeting with the ALS management team and other Departmental officers;
- the development and implementation of four surveys (one each for teachers, non-Aboriginal Education Assistants [EAs], principals, and district office support personnel);
- focus group interviews with AIEOs;
- site visits to eight schools (two in each of four education districts: – Kimberley, Pilbara, Mid West, and Goldfields);
- interviews with central office and district office staff;

- examination of Department data pertaining to student attendance, student performance on the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA), and staff turnover in schools;
- critical analysis of all quantitative and qualitative data to permit reporting of the extent to which the ALS achieved its aims; and
- the making of recommendations about future policy development and practical action.

Data limitations

Several limitations in the data should be noted. In particular, there were low response rates to the surveys, and Department student achievement data were limited. Given an existing small sample, we were cautious in our interpretation of the data. Survey data were triangulated with interview and observation data from school visits, focus groups data from the AIEOs, and interview data from central office and district office staff.

Key findings

The ALS is based on sound principles of literacy learning and teaching that have emerged from decades of rigorous research. The Strategy has the potential to make an ongoing and significant improvement to the English language and literacy skills of Aboriginal students in remote locations.

Without a doubt, the structured, daily Literacy Session was the most positive aspect of the ALS that was reported. The structure that the Strategy provides for the teaching of Standard Australian English (SAE) in the classroom was reported as being of enormous benefit to teachers. Routine and structure were also seen to be very important for the students, especially for students who move across ALS schools. The Literacy Session also affords AIEOs and EAs an important role in planning and implementing literacy activities, although the efficiency with which this is done is variable.

Generally, the school principal was perceived to have a key role as an instructional leader within the school. In schools with frequent principal turnover, this role was diminished and support for the full implementation of the ALS was lessened. The introduction of the leadership component in 2007 reflected the importance of leadership for the ALS, and provided a useful leadership program for principals. In addition, the leadership provided by English Language and Literacy Consultants and central and district office support personnel was perceived to be essential to the ongoing maintenance of an effective ALS. Distributed leadership was also achieved through the influence of other school leaders such as Getting It Right teachers, school literacy coordinators, and other teachers who have attended ALS workshops.

There was considerable variability in teachers' and principals' understanding of the nature of the students' language backgrounds and their capacity to use crucial ESL/ESD pedagogy in assisting students to become literate in SAE. This is a critical component of the Strategy, since the majority of students in ALS schools are speakers of languages(s) or dialect(s) different to the language used as the main medium of instruction – SAE. Such students require continual specialist provision through teaching in order to develop their SAE language and literacy proficiency in a manner consistent with research evidence, rights, and worldwide practice. Since ESL/ESD pedagogy is essential in assisting students for whom SAE is an additional language, and since many teachers have not received training in using ESL/ESD pedagogical methods, ongoing professional learning and support is essential.

Although most teachers and principals could describe a two-way approach to teaching, the evidence suggested that in practice two-way working relationships were quite variable across and within schools, and subject to change with the frequent turnover of teachers and AIEOs. Some AIEOs and teachers referred to their growing capacity to operate in classrooms in a two-way process,



and this they largely attributed to involvement in ALS workshops and support from district office staff when it was available.

Although the daily Literacy Session was overwhelmingly perceived to be the lynch pin of the ALS, its effectiveness was generally perceived to be dependent on the provision of an adequate and appropriate amount of professional learning and ongoing support. Teacher confidence appeared to be related to the amount of professional learning and ongoing support available to them.

Since its inception, the professional learning component of the Strategy has been significantly reduced by the withdrawal of key support staff from central and district offices. This has occurred because the Department was faced with a shortage of teachers in classrooms.

By 2008, districts and schools had increased responsibility for the implementation of the Strategy. However, a general level of support from central office continues. Advice and support from all levels of the education system will continue to be essential for effective operation of the ALS.

The decrease in professional learning opportunities and ongoing support received have already resulted in inadequate preparation of and support for teachers, AIEOs, EAs and principals to implement an appropriate English language and literacy program that will make a difference to Aboriginal students in remote locations.

Improvement in students' English language and literacy competence was most frequently reported as being linked to regular school attendance, family support, and persistent application of the ALS model. Overall, the biggest factor impeding progress was reported as being student absenteeism. High rates of absenteeism were evident in system level attendance data for the years 2006 – 2008. Other factors reported as impeding or making it difficult to demonstrate progress include quality of staff, frequent turnover of staff, the quality of the assessment (e.g., students may have improved in their speaking and listening comprehension skills, but these have not been measured), the reliability of the assessment within an ESL/ESD learning environment, the difficulties relating to the ability to track students, and the lack of data.

In light of the major findings of this evaluation of the ALS, five major areas of action are needed in the immediate future to enhance the English language and literacy skills of Aboriginal students in remote locations. Action is needed to:

- provide coherent, coordinated system-wide support for the ongoing implementation and maintenance of the ALS;
- ensure the continuing recognition of the ESL/ESD language backgrounds of students in remote locations and implement the ALS on sound principles of ESL/ESD teaching and learning;
- provide ongoing professional support to principals, teachers, AIEOs, EAs, and relevant district and central office personnel involved in the ALS;
- reduce the rates of teacher and principal turnover in remote schools; and
- address low rates of student attendance at school.

Recommendations

Twenty-five recommendations are provided for the development of policy and action in relation to the ALS. As is the case with most sets of recommendations, each individual recommendation in the set does not stand in isolation from the others. Each one does provide, however, a focus for attention. All recommendations need to be addressed urgently as part of a national agenda to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage, and specifically the English language and literacy achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Support for the ALS

Recommendation 1

That full support be maintained for the ALS to ensure that Aboriginal students in Remote Teaching Service schools have access to a structured approach to the teaching of Standard Australian English that is based on sound principles of literacy learning and teaching.

Professional learning and teacher support

Recommendation 2

That a program of professional learning focused on the teaching of Standard Australian English language and literacy to ESL/ESD learners, based on and including the key features of the ALS, be provided to all teachers, AIEOs, and EAs in Remote Community Schools yearly, to build their capacity to maximise the impact of daily language and literacy teaching.

Recommendation 3

That a program of professional learning focused on ways of supporting teachers be provided yearly to relevant district office support personnel and principals in Remote Community Schools.

Recommendation 4

That English Language and Literacy Consultants (ELLC) positions in district offices be continued and viewed as the lynchpin in continuing professional learning for teachers in ALS schools

Recommendation 5

That the time available for teacher interaction and ongoing staff development be sufficient to allow for both in-school interaction and interactions with teachers in other schools.

Recommendation 6

That opportunities be provided for experienced classroom teachers with experience of working in remote schools to spend time in RCSs as a team to provide in-class support to teachers and AIEOs.

Recommendation 7

That online facilities be developed and promoted to supplement face-to-face professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Recommendation 8

That encouragement and support be provided for the development of district-based professional learning networks, so that teachers can use Internet and phone facilities to share resources and strategies to further develop their capacity. This will require support at the district office level (with attendant staffing implications). School principals (or delegates, such as school-based literacy co-ordinators, Getting It Right specialists) should also be encouraged to take a leadership role in this respect.

Role of AIEOs

Recommendation 9

That the important role of AIEOs in all classroom language and literacy learning be recognised, and an ongoing program of professional learning be provided for all AIEOs.

Recommendation 10

That AIEOs attend all district professional learning activities, participating in common sessions with teachers and in focused sessions as a group of AIEOs in order to build their understanding of literacy teaching.

Recommendation 11

That non-Aboriginal teachers and principals have regular professional learning opportunities to build their capacity to work productively with AIEOs for the purpose of planning, teaching, and monitoring students' progress in the learning of SAE.

Leadership

Recommendation 12

That the leadership component of the ALS be a focus of attention for all principals in ALS schools, as well as for other staff in the school with designated ALS leadership roles.

Recommendation 13

That leadership preparation should be based on increasing leaders' capacity to adopt an instructional leadership approach that is based on their understanding of how to fully implement all components of the structured Literacy Session using a two-way approach and explicit ESL/ESD instruction.

The daily Literacy Session

Recommendation 14

That the daily Literacy Session be mandated in remote Aboriginal schools and that principals, teachers, and AIEOs be provided with appropriate professional support for this to happen.

Recommendation 15

That specific Literacy Session guidelines be developed and support implemented for teachers of K-PP students.

ESL/ESD strategies

Recommendation 16

That a structured and accredited professional learning course in ESL/ESD pedagogy and assessment be delivered to all RTS teachers.

Recommendation 17

That ESL/ESD language and literacy expertise be made available to teachers in the school context, through English language and literacy consultants who work alongside teachers in classrooms to monitor student progress and plan future learning.

Assessment

Recommendation 18

That use of the ESL/ESD Progress Map be mandated for use in all ALS schools, with centrally held records for all students being made accessible to principals and teachers.

Recommendation 19

That use of the ESL/ESD Progress Map by teachers be supported by ongoing support for them by way of the professional learning component of the ALS and in-school support from principals and ELLCs.

Recommendation 20

That central and district office ALS personnel explore how a single tool could be developed for assessment of ESL/ESD Aboriginal students using features of the ESL/ESD Progress Map and Kimberley Literacy Profile, and that the resultant tool be easily usable by teachers.

Student attendance: Engaging the community

Recommendation 21

That the Department organizes a consultative process involving key personnel engaged in promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal people in WA. In particular, attendees should include personnel responsible for increasing the language and literacy levels of Aboriginal students in remote communities. Attendees should include the Minister for Education, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the Director General of Education, the Director of the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, the Director of the Curriculum Directorate, key personnel of the ALS management team, community leaders in the relevant communities, and principals in ALS schools who have held positions in their schools for three years or more.

Recommendation 22

That a coherent policy be developed, as a result of the consultative process, that is aimed at increasing the attendance of Aboriginal students in remote schools. This policy should be supported by adequate funding to be maintained over five years. The effects of the policy should be rigorously evaluated annually.

Recommendation 23

That the consultative process explore ways to increase school and community partnerships for the purpose of increasing student school attendance and engagement with English language and literacy learning. The Department should be responsible for ensuring that district offices and schools are provided with assistance to implement approaches recommended by the consultative process.

Recommendation 24

That as a result of the consultative process and continuing engagement with key personnel, the Department be responsible for developing policy and implementing action to support district offices and schools to increase and maintain student attendance and engagement in schooling.

Teacher and principal turnover

Recommendation 25

That the Department considers ways of attracting high quality principals and teachers, particularly those with knowledge of and expertise in ESL/ESD and two-way pedagogy, for sustained service in remote community schools. The Department should consider current relevant initiatives in other states and territories as well as those implemented internationally in schools.