

From the chalkface

Raising the bar: The Kimberley Schools Project – Introducing direct and explicit instruction into remote community schools

Lorraine Hammond outlines an ambitious project in which she has been involved, working to bring early literacy direct instruction to remote schools in the Kimberley, with staff and students in her professional learning sessions joined by an assortment of parents, community members and camp dogs.

The question of how to raise the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian indigenous students is of perennial concern and a highly contentious issue, particularly when it comes to agreement on how to teach reading.

The 2020 *Closing the Gap* report documents some positive gains: the number of indigenous students at or above national minimum standards in

reading and numeracy has improved over the past decade. The same report, however, laments that “despite these improvements, in 2018 about one in four Indigenous students in Years 5, 7 and 9, and one in five in Year 3, remained below national minimum standards in reading.” (Australian Government, 2020, p. 45). In contrast, the report indicates that only about one in twenty (five percent) of non-indigenous Australians are now below minimum standards. Consequently, we must continue to address this challenge - and

evidence-based practice offers the best way forward.

A well-known voice at the forefront of indigenous education debates, Noel Pearson (2018), has advocated for effective reading instruction for many years:

“If we don’t teach the child to swim, they will drown. We know how to teach swimming. We know how to teach reading. Why are we not preventing Australian children from drowning through illiteracy?”

Like me, Noel Pearson is a pragmatic



Foundation class, Fitzroy Valley District High School

fan of teacher-led approaches to reading instruction like scripted Direct Instruction, also known as 'big DI' such as *Corrective Reading* (Engelmann, Hanner, & Johnson, 2007) and unscripted 'little di' that is also known as Explicit Instruction (EI) (Archer, 2011; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2018). At times, the nomenclature confuses commentators who rally vociferously against the perceived rigidity of scripted lessons, diminished teacher creativity and frequent unison oral responding. What they don't understand is the fundamental premise of teacher-led approaches: underachievement is an adult problem because all children will learn if they are taught correctly.

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In spite of those who oppose teacher-led approaches, mostly on ideological grounds, Direct Instruction (Stockard, Wood, Coughlin, & Khoury, 2018) and Explicit Instruction (Liem & Martin, 2013) are pedagogies that work. Over the years, I have developed a thick skin defending DI and EI as both a researcher and university lecturer and such defence often involves tackling prejudices. In the late 1990s a school principal told me that while he really liked the results achieved by the scripted Direct Instruction that I had supported his predecessor to put in place, he didn't like the approach. I suggested that the program was not actually for him, it was for the children in his school who could not read.

As Barbash (2012) eloquently summarised: "DI is the ugly duckling of education, despised and defamed despite repeated demonstrations that it works. No other educational reform strays further from accepted theory, differs more from accepted practice or draws such brutal slander for its achievements" (p. 38).

Explicit Instruction Programs for Indigenous Students

Aware of the extensive research showing DI's effectiveness in improving academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged and minority children, Noel Pearson's *Good to Great Schools*

Australia received funding from the Australian Government from 2014-2019 to implement scripted Direct Instruction and unscripted Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). The *Flexible Learning for Remote Primary Schools* program was conducted in 34 remote and very remote schools in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory, and I had the opportunity to review some of the curriculum materials created by John Hollingsworth and Dr Silvia Ybarra, authors of *Explicit Direct Instruction* (2009, 2018). This positioned me well for what was coming in 2017: *The Kimberley Schools Project*.

The Kimberley Schools Project

It's often said that you need the right people in the right seats on the bus to achieve educational reform. Since 2008 I have been a Board Member at Challis Community Primary School along with The Hon Alannah MacTiernan MLC, a former WA State then Federal politician, who returned to State government as the Minister for Regional Development in 2017. You may know Challis from the ABC series *Don't Stop the Music*, but as well as providing a music program for many socially disadvantaged students, evidence-based approaches to teach literacy and numeracy including Explicit Instruction (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2018) and Direct Instruction such as *Reading Mastery* (Osborn & Engelmann, 2008) and *Spelling Mastery* (Dixon, Engelmann, Bauer, Steely, & Wells, 2007), are part of the suite of high impact instructional programs in the school.

Over the years, Minister MacTiernan (2014) has publicly championed Explicit and Direct Instruction, explaining that the "empirical evidence of the success of these techniques is becoming harder to ignore" (p.10). It was because of this that she allocated funding for *The Kimberley Schools Project*, a collaboration between the Department of Education, Catholic Education Western Australia, the Association of Independent Schools Western Australia and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/kimberley-schools-project>). As a collaborative initiative, the Project is also supported by the Hon Sue Ellery, MLC WA Minister for Education and Training.

After Emeritus Professor Bill Louden AM was recruited to lead the Project, I was asked to design and deliver the

assessment, professional learning and instructional coaching component for the targeted teaching pillar of the program. The other three pillars are early years learning and care; engagement and attendance; and connecting community, school and learning.

Aboriginal children make up more than 60 per cent of the school population in the Kimberley of WA, which is an area as big as Belgium. I thought on completing school that I was sensitive to the significant challenges that living in a remote community has, but my first visit to a participating school told me otherwise. As well as the historical, health, social, and educational disadvantage issues, many children speak English as an additional language and these schools have the lowest rates of school attendance in Western Australia.

Early stages of the Kimberley Schools Project: Demonstration Lessons

At the early stages of the Project I was asked to provide Explicit Instruction demonstration lessons. These character-building experiences took up to 45 minutes with groups of children I had never met before. They always drew an audience of curious staff, parents and community members, and on some occasions camp dogs, who can be found on most remote school grounds and sometimes wander into classrooms. The literacy lessons included phonological awareness, phonics, systematic instruction in the decoding of regular, irregular and nonwords, passage reading and comprehension, spelling and vocabulary. The lessons were delivered in fast paced, highly engaging, explicit instructional routines that required frequent student responses and movement. At the end of one session, the grandmother of one of the children in the class approached me and said she liked what she'd seen – "It's proper teaching."

During the same trip, I met an Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer who told me she'd attended the same school in the late 1990s where she now worked as a teacher assistant. She described the whole word approach to reading predicated on looking at the first letter and guessing that had failed many of her classmates and the

father of her two children. Due to her own persistence, she'd learned how to read and made sure her two boys could read before they started school. Not unsurprisingly, some teachers I met at the start of the project were reluctant to change their instructional practice. They had been faithfully using practices like *Reading Recovery*, multi-cueing and levelled readers for years, often because it was what they learned at university or because it was endorsed by their employer.

Kimberley Schools Project: Ongoing Professional Learning

The targeted teaching pillar of the Kimberley Schools Project is predicated on two principles. The first is 'culture before curriculum', which means the approval and endorsement of school communities was sought before they joined the Project. The second is 'servant leadership', or a 'whatever it takes' approach to support. At the beginning of 2018, I began delivering four days of professional learning and providing instructional coaching to the first ten schools to join the Project. I was assisted by four coaches, who visited schools at least twice per term in addition to me. We never ask teachers to do what we wouldn't do ourselves, so we provide regular demonstration teaching and teaching resources. We are also cognisant that we cannot ask teachers to do more than 10 per cent on top of what they are already having to do. So much of what we do is predicated on building positive relationships with staff and understanding the challenges of working in remote communities.

I have tried tokens, Dojo points, almonds and banana chips to manage behaviour, but this works better.

While the focus of the Project is on achieving early reading success and we work predominantly work with education assistants and teachers of Kindergarten (4 year-old children in WA) to Year 2 students, professional learning and support is also provided for middle and upper primary staff as well as secondary teachers, particularly those who teach students with poor literacy skills. Semi-scripted Let's

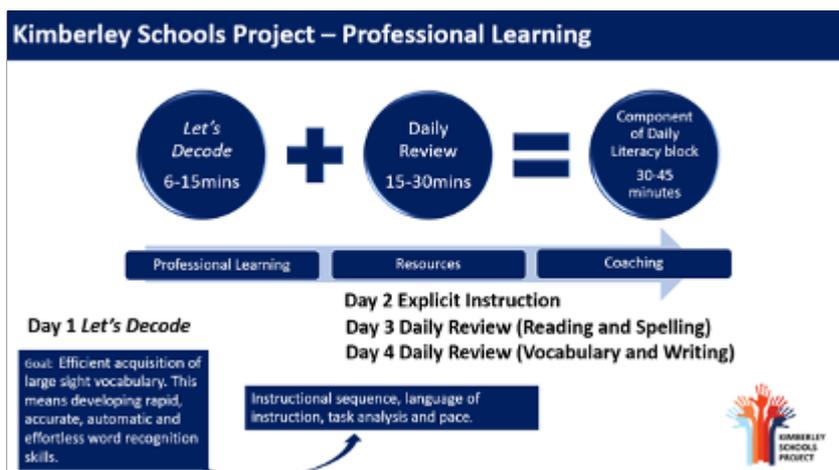


Figure 1. The Kimberley Schools Project Professional Learning

Decode is used alongside fully scripted programs such as *Spelling Mastery*, *Corrective Reading* and *MacqLit* (Macquarie Literacy Program for small group instruction). Our Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers deliver these programs alongside the teachers and often take small groups of students for a second session.

The first day of professional learning is *Let's Decode*, an approach to phonological awareness and systematic decoding instruction based on *Direct Instruction Reading* (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990). The formats (mini-lessons) take no more than six minutes (4 year olds) to 15 minutes (for 7 year olds) daily and those attending have the opportunity to practice directly with children. The goal of *Let's Decode* is the acquisition of a large sight vocabulary – that is, supporting children to becoming accurate and automatic at reading words by engaging them in repeated practice of taught phonics skills, and also requiring reading behaviours that facilitate the orthographic mapping process.

I developed a low variation curriculum for teachers to follow that includes a scope and sequence and daily lessons for the first four years of reading instruction – essentially a more fine-grained breakdown of the Australian Curriculum. This reduces the time required for teacher preparation and also results in a consistent approach, which means that children who move regularly between Kimberley schools can keep up with their peers. One of the earliest signs of success was a six year old who moved from Looma to Bidyadanga and announced, "I know this" when the teacher began the lesson.

Daily Review activities take no longer than 90 minutes and involve singing, props, and hoops to step out sounds, as

well as mini-white boards for formative assessment. This keeps students engaged as they are responding regularly and moving around on the mat. An experienced teacher observed that after introducing the Daily Review she was managing behaviour through instruction. "I have tried tokens, Dojo points, almonds and banana chips to manage behaviour, but this works better. They are too busy getting ready to respond to be off-task."

As part of the next phase in Professional Learning, a day on Explicit Instruction follows about one term after the introduction of *Let's Decode*. During this time teachers from all year levels attend and learn about the lesson design and delivery components of this high impact instructional strategy. The use of TAPPLE and Engagement Norms from Hollingsworth and Ybarra (2018), which are strategies to increase student engagement, are combined with Rosenshine's (2012) principles of effective instruction and Daily Review.

The remaining two days of Professional Learning are delivered across the remainder of the year and are about explicitly teaching students reading and spelling, then writing and vocabulary. A strong focus is placed on Daily Review, a fast-paced review of previously learned materials that provides multiple opportunities for practice (Rosenshine, 2012). For example, to promote automaticity in reading and spelling words, students revise precursor skills such as phonological awareness, short/long vowels, letter-sound knowledge, decoding and encoding words. Those who query EI and DI call this 'drill and kill', however in the Project it is giving children the multiple exposures they need to build the visual word form area and read words automatically (Dehaene, et al., 2010).

Evaluation

There is ongoing evaluation within, and of, the Project. Schools are asked to undertake *PAT-R* testing and the *South Australian Spelling Test*. Twice per term, K-2 teachers conduct one-minute assessments from *DIBELS 8* such as phoneme segmentation or nonword reading, depending on the age of the students. *DIBELS* assessments closely parallel what is taught in Let's Decode, and this enables teachers to see when students are responding to instruction, and to question, if they have been attending regularly, why they are not making gains. Finally, coaches from the project assess students on measures of phoneme awareness, phonic knowledge, timed non and real word reading from the *Macquarie Online Test Interface* (MOTIf; www.motif.org.au) and the *Test of Word Reading Efficiency* (TOWRE).

The data documenting the efficacy of the Kimberley Schools Project has yet to be published, but there are promising signs that students are making gains. The Kimberley School Project team look forward to the contribution that the publication of the data will make to the debate on raising the bar for the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian indigenous children.

Three years later, 23 Kimberley Schools have now opted-in to be part of the Project, and the number of coaches has doubled to eight. Staff who have been part of the Kimberley Schools Project are highly sought after, and this has raised the profile of teaching in remote communities.

Educational reform is a marathon, not a sprint. The American economist Eric Hanushek quantifies the impact of teachers, and their instruction, on student outcomes.

“Having a good teacher as opposed to an average teacher for three to four years in a row would, by available estimates, close the income achievement gap. Closing the black-white achievement gap, which is a little larger than the average income gap, would take good teachers three and a half to five years in a row” (Hanushek, 2014, p. 85).

The job of aligning teachers' practice with the reading science will clearly take some time, but it's a worthy endeavor. When I hear criticisms about the appropriateness of systematic phonics instruction and teacher-led instruction for indigenous children, or any children

for that matter, I always wonder: What viable alternatives do those who say that have in mind?

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