

## The Implementation of the Direct Instruction methodology in Northern Territory Indigenous Community Schools.

### Background:

In 2013, the Northern Territory Department of Education undertook a review into Indigenous Education. One of the recommendations was to adopt a Direct Instruction methodology as is operating in the three Indigenous community schools in North Queensland in the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA).

The decision to implement the Direct Instruction (DI) methodology in Northern Territory remote Indigenous communities, after the Wilson review in 2013, was made in the political context of the time.

The Cape York DI program is depicted as the third 'c' in the Culture, Club and Class program of the Cape York Academy.

*The final program is "class" and consists entirely of [direct instruction](#) in literacy and numeracy. The normal teaching staff teach direct instruction and the program is supported by the Oregon-based National Institute for Direct Instruction. The Americans supply coaches and work weekly with the principal and curriculum coach. Every week students undertake mastery tests and data-driven decisions are made by the team at Coen and in the US.*

### Why be concerned about this decision for the population of students who come to school speaking an Indigenous home language, and who begin to learn English on entry to school?

These students live in remote Indigenous-language-speaking contexts. The Indigenous language of the home is the community lingua franca. Teaching is complex in all contexts, more so in remote Australia with students who speak languages other than English at home and in their broader social contexts and community. Mandating one literacy methodology (not a language learning approach) is therefore not necessarily effective or appropriate.

Aspects of DI may be successful for the students for whom it was designed - those children who require remedial reading strategies. However, those of us involved in teaching EAL/D students have reservations about its implementation as a methodology for students who don't speak English and are learning through English at school.

These students are not remedial readers, they are language learners of English, a language they don't use at home or in the wider community outside school. Neither does coming from ORAL academic home cultures, make them 'remedial' readers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have created the term 'Oral Academic Cultures' rather than use the term 'pre-literate' which is a deficit concept based on the semantics of the prefix.

## Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology – to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

There exists an extensive body of research and best practice in Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) in Australia and elsewhere that is relevant to this learner profile.

The outcomes and appropriateness of the methodology, claimed by DI exponents, need to be critically examined, pedagogically and philosophically, for students learning English.

Before any single ‘quick-fix’ approach is implemented and supported with a significant financial commitment, a panel of experts in the relevant teaching and academic fields should be engaged to do some comprehensive research on the particular Direct Instruction approach, building on that of the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) evaluation<sup>i</sup> in the Cape. The outcomes of Direct Instruction using evidence-based research need to be established before mandating this strategy to the exclusion of all other approaches for a particular population of EAL/D students.

A comprehensive language-teaching pedagogy has the teaching of English phonics and graphophonics as one aspect of learning English. This element of literacy (not language) teaching is but ONE element of a much broader repertoire of skills and knowledge required of language teachers.

This paper questions what the implementation of Direct Instruction DOESN'T do for optimal English-additional-language/dialect teaching. What DI does/can do for students and teachers in EAL/D teaching and learning contexts is insufficient and thus inefficient.

### The following questions need to be answered...

#### Q1. How has ongoing evidence-based academic research been incorporated into the plan to implement DI for Indigenous-Language-Speaking-Students in the NT?

Decisions to implement a pedagogy for a broad population of students learning English, needs to be based on *researched evidence of success* for students with equivalent linguistic and socio-cultural profiles. The evidence needs to be academically supported.

DI methodology as designed for one-on-one or small group instruction of students with learning difficulties/disabilities in reading is unwise. It was not designed for students who are learning English. The broad application of DI, a methodology focussing on one aspect of literacy teaching, is not supported by researched evidence in EAL/D teaching and learning.

The recent Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) evaluation<sup>ii</sup> of DI's implementation in the three schools in CYAAA could not find any evidence<sup>iii</sup> to comment either way on its success/failure in this learning context.

There is no robust evidence in Australia or internationally that this approach, when applied to a whole population of non-English speaking students results in improved outcomes. When students are learning the language of instruction as well, there is less evidence.

In fact, for English-speaking students, “[systematic phonics teaching is largely unrelated to reading comprehension after grade 1](#)” (Cummins, J. 2012)

The use of DI methodologies in the “No Child Left Behind’ Reading First Law in the US was dropped as a broad implementation tool, due to much controversy over its outcomes. In this program, the ‘What

Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology –  
to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

Works Clearing House 2007', listed 129 programs "that [lacked scientific evidence](#) to support their efficacy, including Direct Instruction/DISTAR, Direct Instruction/SRA, Hooked on Phonics....".

Additionally even in this context, DI was not applied to mono-cultural populations of students who did not speak English. It was applied to students of low socio economic status, some of whom were English Language Learners (ELLs) and many of whom spoke a form of/or English to begin with or were at least bilingual, with English being one of the languages. These students also lived in communities where English was spoken in the broader community outside of home and school.

To meet the English language and literacy learning requirements of the Indigenous students in remote NT communities, we need to have a linguistic profile of each community – linguistic and cultural (traditional Indigenous languages, Creoles and Aboriginal Englishes). The national Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) needs to include a detailed breakdown of the number of community languages spoken by students and the languages spoken in the students' community, degree of language/s use and related learning needs in the communities. ACARA needs to include this to ensure quality control of criteria for comparing schools. The category *Indigenous Status/ Indigenous %* does not capture the degree of language use sufficiently to inform classroom pedagogies. As Indigeneity is one of the identifying classifications for school profile, students' English language learner status needs to be included. There is no classification of EAL/D learners accounted for in ICSEA determinations, other than *Language Background Other than English*. This criterion does not indicate EAL/D teaching needs.

At this point in time, none of the NT schools implementing DI match the ICSEA of the CYAAA schools. They each fall below the CYAAA's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage.

*Have the governments involved in the decision-making and the financial commitment considered these issues before mandating DI?*

**Q2. How will the long term learning progress and success of DI be measured (in addition to the short term assessment of immediate discrete skills teaching)?**

The DI promise is to equalise outcomes in Year Three as measured through the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)<sup>2</sup>, with the presumption that these outcomes will continue and/or be better as school learning becomes more complex. Evidence that DI produces this, is not readily available.

The recent release of the NAPLAN data was greeted by some as evidence of the Academy's failure, but Noel Pearson mounted a [vigorous media based defence](#), citing the results from Coen and the Club and Culture activities not picked up in measures such as NAPLAN testing. This may well be true and the benefits of the Club and Culture programs are not being disputed here.

After three years of the DI program in the Cape, there was no data recorded in the NAPLAN results for the three schools in the 2012 testing. Therefore there is no growth/progress measurement of the same students over two testing years (Year 3 – Year 5) available at this time. This will be possible when the 2015 NAPLAN results are published.

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst NAPLAN is neither an appropriate or a just assessment program for students in any of these schools it is the only comparative assessment data available between the schools. NAPLAN results influence political decisions and funding sources and operational decision-making.

Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology –  
to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

Short term measurable outcomes of DI (Year 3 NAPLAN) may look positive, but the research tells us that early achievement in English by EAL/D students is not an indication of continuing language growth. Early demonstrations of additional language proficiency haven't yet proven to be sustainable in other contexts.<sup>iv</sup>

*“When tested at the end of Grade Three after three years of DISTAR (Direct Instruction), the children were reported to be close to national norms on the language (i.e. usage, tense, punctuation etc.) and Maths Sub-tests of the Metropolitan Achievement Test, however, scores on the reading test were considerably lower (thirty-fourth percentile), just slightly above the median district score (thirtieth percentile) in previous years. Becker and Gerston (1982) report total reading percentiles of 31 for the Uvalde group at the end of Grade three, but this declines to the sixteenth percentile by grades five and six. This decline in reading comprehension scores as children advance through the elementary grades is the opposite of what happens in well-implemented bilingual programs where students' percentile scores tend to progressively approach national norms as grade level increases (Krashen and Biber 1988)”*

The progression of learning described above is typical of that of EAL/D learners who are taught as if they are English language speakers on entry to school. Achievement of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)<sup>v</sup> in the additional language can be achieved in the first few years of school, even with scant attention paid to specific EAL/D pedagogies.

*As the language demands of school learning become less literal, more complex and more decontextualized, with a greater amount of specialised vocabulary and complex grammar, students need to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP).<sup>vi</sup>*

Longitudinal research tells us that this takes up to 7 years (and can take more) to become close to age-grade proficiency of English-language peers (Cummins).<sup>vii</sup> Where students have been taught with no acknowledgement of their needs as additional-language-learners i.e. without EAL/D pedagogies and explicit teaching of the English language, these students will still be operating at a BICS level when they sit Years 5 & 7 NAPLAN assessments. Thus their results will be poorer in comparison to Year 3 achievements. We should be looking at equal outcomes for these students in Years 7 and 9, when effective EAL/D teaching approaches are in place.

Without attention paid to teaching English-as-an-additional language, the students will hit the 'Grade 4 slump' as identified by Cummins. This is a plateau where learning in and through L2 is not progressed without explicit EAL/D pedagogies in place, especially where teaching is based on a discrete and limited phonics skills-based reading program. The latter does not allow for communicative, cognitive application and growth of the additional language from BICS to CALP. The proposed Direct Instruction methodology provides for repetition and decontextualized reproduction of the scripted aural/oral input by the teacher. English-speaking children come to literacy instruction with the other pieces of the literacy puzzle in place, to make up the larger picture of literacy i.e. comprehension of the broader world through the English vocabulary they encounter and the innate knowledge of English grammar they use as speakers of the language of instruction. The vast majority of English language speakers come to school with enculturated literacy practices in place.

EAL/D learners don't achieve literacy through phonics-based instruction when these broad aspects of literacy outlined above, are not taught. This knowledge about, and application of, other language and literacy skills need to be explicitly taught. They need to be taught after a significant level of spoken English is established to support prediction and comprehension in reading and writing.

### Q3. Where is the place and time in the proposed DI approach to attend to these essential EAL/D components of teaching initial literacy in and through a language foreign to the child?

Assessment for learning across the curriculum, in addition to assessment of the learning of discrete phonics reading skills, should be part of the discussion for EAL/D learners. It is in the application of the new language for learning purposes, in all four modes, that the language is learned for academic purposes.

*“In a [recent major evaluation report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school reform](#) prepared for DEEWR, we found that those schools that were making marked progress on “closing the gap” on conventional measures were using programs that had been selected specifically because of the needs of local students...*

*In each case, these schools prioritized quality classroom instruction and student/teacher cultural relations, teacher capacity and professionalism, and a strong engagement with and knowledge of local communities, cultures and languages..... all the literature tells us that principals must function as instructional leaders with a focus on quality teaching and, to return to Hattie’s point, this focus must set the professional conditions to work together to plan the curriculum, analyse and track student performance.*

*This doesn’t rule out ‘explicit instruction’ or ‘direct instruction’ or an emphasis on basic skills – but these make a difference where they are construed as part of a larger school-level approach and broader teacher repertoire.”<sup>viii</sup>*

While references to Hattie’s work use the words ‘direct instruction’ and ‘explicit instruction’ interchangeably, they are very different. This is addressed later in this article.

### Q4. How does the planned implementation of DI incorporate/allow the teaching of the Australian Curriculum?

The impact of DI instruction on the delivery of the broad Australian Curriculum (AC) needs to be addressed. DI, in the proposed (CYAAA) model, is implemented for four or more hours a day in literacy and numeracy. Students will not have time to be taught the knowledge and skills of the Science, Mathematics, the Arts, Subject English, Technologies, Languages and Humanities and Social Sciences Learning Areas as have other Australian children of the same age. How and when are these students going to have access to English language teaching and learning across the curriculum if DI takes up to 4 hours a day?

Are we prepared to allow this to happen? This is a serious concern as no other ethnically and linguistically identifiable group of students is prevented from learning the content of the AC. Is this a ‘rights’ issue? I believe it is. The curriculum doesn’t wait for students to be ‘ready’. It is expected that teachers will adapt pedagogies to teach age-grade curriculum knowledge to all Australian students. This is the purpose of learning through home language whilst English is learned. If the English language learning requirement is reduced to initial literacy in English, this alone doesn’t equate to English language proficiency. Literacy is extremely challenging to learn in a language the learner doesn’t speak, even with effective pedagogies in place. Where students are from Oral Cultural backgrounds, the need for language AND EAL/D literacy pedagogies is greater.

Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology –  
to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

Intensive English Units for new arrivals (refugee and migrant students) to Australia, do not teach English via Direct Instruction, nor do they ignore the broad curriculum in teaching English to non-English speakers. Similarly, Indigenous students in mainstream classrooms are not, by nature of their race or language, singled out for DI. If DI is not mandated for refugee and migrant students, can we justify its enforcement for Aboriginal children in remote communities as a blanket approach?

ACARA has included the EAL/D resource in the Australian Curriculum to support teachers in both 100% EAL/D contexts and in mainstream classrooms, to plan programs to deliver curriculum content in ESL-informed ways. This resource has no place and cannot be utilised to its full potential within a strictly time-managed, teacher-scripted limited literacy methodology.

**Q5. How does the DI approach demonstrate the characteristics of effective EAL/D pedagogies?**

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is the teaching *of, about and through all modes of English explicitly* - listening, speaking, reading and writing - using proven ESL pedagogies that preface early literacy with communicative oracy; and advanced literacy with cognitive academic oracy and literacy in English.

Explicit instruction is not Direct Instruction. Explicit instruction is more comprehensive and deeper than a limited discrete skills-based methodology (in this case, the proposed Direct Instruction methodology), that presumes the students understand and already use the grammar of English and its social and cultural meanings. Indigenous-language-speaking students in remote communities in the NT need to be taught these aspects of English so that they can learn all three aspects of literacy in English (socio-cultural understandings/knowledge, grammar of English, phonemics and grapho-phonics).

Phonemic awareness, phonics and practising using graded readers are part of a much larger picture of language and literacy learning. When aspects of literacy are taught in isolation, to the exclusion of the explicit teaching of the syntax and semantics of English, long term comparable outcomes are jeopardised, as students can't learn to read in a language they don't speak and of which they have no socio-cultural knowledge.

In the NT remote Indigenous learning contexts, ESL pedagogies along with bilingual or biliteracy instruction to facilitate comprehension and broad curriculum delivery, [have long-standing, international and local evidence bases of successful outcomes.](#)

TESOL is not the 'whole language' approach - the target of the historic 'reading wars' between this and methodologies such as DI. TESOL is about teaching ALL aspect of all language modes (listening, speaking, reading and writing) so that students can learn the English required for all learning across the curriculum. This is efficiently achieved [when home language continues to develop to cognitive age-equivalent academic levels](#) alongside effectively implemented EAL/D pedagogies.

Australia has a strong and renowned international profile in its practitioners, linguists and academics<sup>ix</sup> in the research and teaching of English to minority language speakers for example:  
Rothery. J; Mackay. P; Martin. J; Luke. A; Gibbons. P; Christie. F, Christie M, Harris.S, Lo Bianco. J, Halliday.M.

**Q6. How will the implementers of DI ensure that teachers know their learners and have the professional flexibility to adjust teaching to respond to student learning needs?**

**Teaching is a profession, not a craft.** DI, especially when applied for up to 4 hrs a day, reduces teaching to the level of a craft. DI asks teachers to follow a script to teach partial literacy skills and some numeracy skills through English - a language the students do not comprehend as they don't yet speak it. The DI approach does not allow teachers to deliver effective pedagogies to teach English as a language, inclusive of all four modes: listening, speaking, reading and writing for communication, socio-linguistic and academic comprehension and use for deeper learning. As a scripted methodology, teachers are not able to use their knowledge and skills to adapt their teaching to meet the learning needs of students. They cannot use the EAL/D pedagogies or the Australian Curriculum for the majority of time in a school day. This method may suit non-teachers as it requires no application of teaching knowledge. It will make many teachers frustrated. One of the issues in the Reading First Law in the USA was the high turnover of teachers due to the nature of the teaching program.

As a result of that (direct instruction-Testing), we're losing teachers by flocks. I think this year we're looking at 6,000 teachers that have all indicated that within the next two or three years, [they're going to leave the system.](#)

Finland and the Asian countries lead in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that involves 24 countries and 28 million students. These countries implement multilingual education to a linguistically diverse student population, including minority indigenous language speaking peoples. Finland and the Asian countries embrace multilingual instruction in every classroom and invest heavily in teacher professional learning in teaching multilingual students. Scripted lessons in discrete skills, to the exclusion of all other language teaching, and in basic number skills are not prioritised in their education systems. The following table compares the approaches to education between [Finland and the General Western Model.](#)

General Western Model	Finland Education System
<b>Standardisation</b>	- Flexibility and diversity
<b>Strict standards for schools, teachers and students to guarantee the quality of outcomes.</b>	- School-based curriculum development, steering by information and support.
<b>Emphasis on literacy and numeracy</b>	Emphasis on broad knowledge
<b>Basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics and science as prime targets of education reform.</b>	Equal value to all aspects of individual growth and learning: personality, morality, creativity, knowledge and skills.
<b>- Consequential accountability</b>	Trust through professionalism
<b>- Evaluation by inspection.</b>	A culture of trust in teachers' and headmasters' professionalism in judging what is best for students and in reporting of progress.

**Q7. How will the implementation of the Cape York (American) version of DI enable teachers to demonstrate specialist skills in teaching EAL/D students? How will it support Assistant Teachers in a teaching career pathway?**

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACT) has developed an [Elaboration of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership \(AITSL\) Teacher Standards](#), to expand on teacher skills for those working with EAL/D learners. This Elaboration identifies the broad range of teacher skills and knowledge required to support the learning of EAL/D students. Teaching through DI will not allow teachers to demonstrate the full range of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) [Teacher Standards](#), let alone the EAL/D elaboration.

The NT has Assistant Teacher (AT) Standards based around the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and its associated career pathways. Implementing DI will not allow ATs to be mentored into demonstrating the range of actions, skills and knowledge in these standards, thus potentially locking them out of the AQF pathways through their daily work.

**Q7. How will the implementers of DI provide the broad range of professional learning programs (a requirement of teacher registration) to meet the needs of teachers in the NT's remote Indigenous communities?**

In the past, the NT, along with the rest of Australia has been instrumental in developing, implementing and contributing to targeted EAL/D programs to meet teachers' professional learning needs for teaching students who speak English as an additional language.

These include:

- Graduate certificate pathways through Charles Darwin University
- Master of Education pathways through Charles Darwin University
- Professional Development programs with uptake in England and NZ (ESL for Indigenous Learners)
- Professional development programs provided throughout Australia: part of the requirements for ongoing Teacher Registration.

Some of these are no longer available to teachers.

Limiting teacher professional development to one approach only, will significantly limit the development of the broad range of skills and deep knowledge required to teach EAL/D children living in contexts where the language of instruction (LOI) is a foreign language.

**Q8. Can this approach demonstrate how it is inclusive of and will develop the teaching knowledge of local indigenous staff?**

We need specialist ESL/EAL/D teachers in these contexts who work alongside local home language-speaking staff (Assistant Teachers who can choose to become qualified teachers through a training program).

The local school staff are the constant teaching presence in our remote Indigenous communities. If DI involves teachers working to a script without local input, what role do Indigenous Assistant Teachers' skills, language and knowledge and community ownership play?



Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology –  
to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

In conclusion, in proposing to implement this one-dimensional diminished pedagogy, there is very limited if any, evidence that a broadly applied methodology developed for small group tuition for students who speak English, but have reading difficulties, is wise, let alone effective in our remote Indigenous language speaking communities.

As a result, before another group of students spends some years suspended in their learning journeys, it is strongly recommended that the governments involved in this decision-making process, establish a panel of experts in the relevant teaching and academic fields to do some comprehensive research on DI.

Its successes and failures with similar groups of students need to be established before mandating it across a population of Australian students for whom it was not designed.

Using Direct Instruction - a systematic phonics methodology –  
to teach initial literacy to English-Additional-Language /Dialect (EAL/D) learners

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<sup>i</sup> Evaluation of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy Initiative  
[http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=indigenous\\_education](http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=indigenous_education)

<sup>ii</sup> [It is too early and the data is too incomplete](#) to draw any firm conclusions about the success or failure of the CYAAA or the efficacy generally of Pearson’s approach to Indigenous education.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/education/drop-in-cape-york-school-days/story-fn59nlz9-1226720506246>

<sup>iv</sup> Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. (2011, September 19). Issues A-Z: No Child Left Behind. *Education Week*. Retrieved Month Day, Year from  
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<sup>v</sup> Cummins, J <https://vimeo.com/56112120>

<sup>vi</sup> **Cummins, Jim (2001a) Educational Research in Bilingual Education.**  
<http://ww1.iteachilearn.com>

<sup>viii</sup> Alan Luke <http://www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/861>  
<http://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?tag=direct-instruction>

<sup>ix</sup> See research and works of the following examples (to name some) of Australia’s expertise in the linguistics field and in teaching all students including EAL/D Indigenous students

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