

Health  
and  
welfare,  
and  
literacy  
and  
numeracy



# INCREDIBLE

AN ACCELERATED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROGRAM IN ALICE SPRINGS IS ACHIEVING INCREDIBLE RESULTS BY PUTTING WELFARE FIRST. AN INCREDULOUS **MICHAEL WINKLER** REPORTS.

Jenni\* asks if I would like to see her write the best word she knows. She takes my pen and carefully prints 'i-n-c-r-e-d-u-l-o-u-s-l-y.' Perfect spelling. Perfect letter formation.

'Incredulous' describes my response when I find out how little formal schooling Jenni has had, and that she has been exposed to severe domestic dysfunction over her 11 years.

Jenni is one of 55 Indigenous children enrolled in the Irrkerlantye Unit of Bradshaw Primary School in Alice Springs. All of the students are resident in town camps or a nearby Aboriginal community. Many have

had traumatic or undesirable experiences, a result of the well-documented social issues of the town camps.

For these children, school is a beacon of hope.

For those who believe that education can change lives and provide an avenue out of poverty, the work of the Irrkerlantye Unit is inspirational. It is dedicated to children's success, based on the conviction that, too often, marginalised students are set up to fail.

Most of the positive change is incremental. Not every student can write the word 'incredulously.' There remain endemic problems in the lives of these students, a reminder that schools can only go so far when working with children who are handicapped by social circumstances. Since opening at Bradshaw Primary School in 2006, however, the Irrkerlantye Unit has achieved tangible – and sometimes startling – gains in numeracy, literacy and behaviour for most students.

The unit is staffed by three teachers, three Indigenous Assistant Teachers, a welfare officer, an Accelerated Literacy Coordinator three days a week, and a number of tutors.

'Accelerated literacy has been brilliant,' teacher Tony Crowe says. 'It has made a huge difference in kids' lives. It is highly structured – kids can miss a week and still come in and know what we are doing. We find that when you get initial success, the students want to come to school, and then you get more success.'

'I've sat in a cinema with kids, and before the movie came on they were reading the ads out loud as the writing rolled across the screen. It was mind-blowing, because 12 months earlier they couldn't read a thing.'

The regimen at the Irrkerlantye Unit runs contrary to the philosophy of many Indigenous educators. It's a local solution to a specific local context. Irrkerlantye Unit coordinator Claire Hermawan explains, 'We run a very specific curriculum, pushing literacy and numeracy. We put welfare first and set children up for success socially so that they can learn to the best of their abilities.'

The school day begins with two buses going out at 7:30am to collect the children. When they get on the bus they are greeted by a teacher or teaching assistant, given a

banana and a cheese stick and issued with a book, which they read for the duration of the ride. Wherever possible the teacher or assistant also makes contact with parents or family members at pick-up, part of building and maintaining relationships.

On arrival at school there's a healthy breakfast. Students who need it are showered, and all change into Bradshaw Primary School uniforms, hats and shoes. These items are all provided and kept in individual lockers in the unit, allowing the Irrkerlantye students to dress like every other child at the school. Given the high rate of ear disease, the teachers administer 'ear spears' and students blow noses before the day's instruction commences. 'Welfare comes first,' Hermawan says.

Another layer of support the Irrkerlantye Unit provides is in taking the children to the dentist or the hospital. Wherever possible this is done by the welfare officer who attends along with a parent or carer; due to shyness or language barriers – the children are predominantly Arrernte speakers – the welfare officer often speaks on their behalf.



*'By using accelerated literacy, we've been able to give every student the belief and involvement to succeed very early in their journey to reading and writing. This initial success has improved attendance and relationships between staff and children.'*

The instructional portion of the day hammers accelerated literacy and numeracy. 'Accelerated literacy works beautifully for our children and we have seen big literacy gains,' Hermawan says. 'It's a brilliant teaching methodology, which over time is making a massive difference in the children's lives. It's a highly explicit and structured program that allows for flexibility in its delivery. Children can miss time from school, yet return to a structure that is welcoming and inclusive.'

'By using accelerated literacy, we've been able to give every student the belief and involvement to succeed very early in their journey to reading and writing. This initial success has improved attendance and relationships between staff and children. It has also ensured an extremely safe environment where students have made huge improvements and developments in their academic lives.'

Recent data show that between 2007 and 2008 the students in the Irrkerlantye Unit made the second-greatest gains of any school using the accelerated literacy program in the Northern Territory. Looking at the impersonal bar graphs of the senior students' literacy growth, it's possible to imagine the immense impact of skill acquisition.

Looking at students beginning with negligible or no measurable literacy in the year between testing from 2007 to 2008, two students climbed 11 levels on the PM Benchmark literacy scale, two students climbed 17 levels and two students climbed 23 levels. It should be noted that other students starting at the same low level didn't improve as dramatically, but one student moved from level two to level 26, another from level 11 to 32, and another from level 17 to 32. Behind every one of those statistical improvements is a personal triumph – and the possibility of an improved future.

The latter part of the day for students in the Irrkerlantye Unit of Bradshaw Primary School often includes music, dance, swimming, sport or art. Morning tea and lunch are provided, including hot meals twice a week. There are after-school activities on

most days, including basketball, football, Deadly Treadlies, which involves bikes, and a girls program run by the Smith Family.

'The teaching is full on, taught with passion and vigour,' Hermawan says. 'Teaching is explicit, structure essential. When we began there was a lot of violence in the classroom and playground, and language was really bad. Behaviours were often extreme, attendance was irregular. Students hadn't developed appropriate responses. We needed to "school" them, teach them about how school worked.'

Part of the challenge was to acclimatise students to a regular school environment. Hermawan has a background in student behaviour modification, and she and her colleagues have worked consistently to create an environment where positive behaviours are encouraged and expected. There are only three rules in the Irrkerlantye Unit: you must do what you're told when you're told; keep your hands and feet to yourself; and only say nice things.

'When the unit started, the aim was to mainstream the students as soon as possible; however, we need to set kids up so they can succeed in the mainstream,' says Tony Crowe. 'We've had kids come to us from the mainstream rather than moving a lot across to the mainstream. That has now become a longer-term aim. We hope that in five years it will develop through the programs, and a number of kids will be mainstreamed.'

'The parents clearly want their kids to get an education. They don't know how to do it within the existing system. We have to go down the track of educating parents about schools, how they work and how they can participate in them.'

A recent event held at Telegraph Station attracted more than 60 carers and family members, an encouraging sign that efforts to connect more closely with the town camp communities are starting to have an impact. As Crowe emphasises, it's a slow process, but he maintains that the potential benefits are large. 'With this sort of work we hope to see less stress in the longer term, with kids growing into adults who have choices

about work and family. Connecting with the Alice Springs community is one of the most important things we need to do.'

Hermawan works long hours to build affiliations with local organisations outside the school including the Wallabies Basketball Club, the Bulldogs Football Club, Tangetyere Council, Deadly Treadlies, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, the Smith Family, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and the Safe Families program run through Tangetyere Council.

This type of teaching role is not for everyone. It requires energy, dedication and a willingness to persist in the face of considerable difficulty. Crowe came to the

job after a background in Catholic secondary teaching and he has thought carefully about what he does and why he does it. 'I've decided that I'll do what I can for these kids now, rather than worrying about what lies ahead,' he says.

'The reality is we're doing a good job now. We love the kids. When you see a kid read for the first time or engage in class activities, that is what keeps you going. Many of these kids present with extreme behaviours, and we're getting them to attend school and learn. You could work 24 hours a day for these kids; I have to work out what can be done. Then when I go home to my own family at night, at least I know I've done what I can do.'

Hermawan says that her colleague manages his own wellbeing more skillfully than she does. 'Tony is a good role model in that regard,' she says. 'We all have personal stresses, but people in this unit support each other. It's not an easy job, but we want to keep going. In the end it's about resilience and persistence.' **T**

*\*Not her real name.*

*Michael Winkler is the Communications Officer for Dare to Lead. Photo courtesy of Dare to Lead.*

**LINKS:** For more information on Dare to Lead, visit [www.daretolead.edu.au](http://www.daretolead.edu.au)