Implementing 3α in communities across the Northern Territory to support the early learning of Aboriginal children

Background
The Northern Territory Department of Education (the department) commenced its journey with the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3α) in 2010. 3α is an Australian adaptation (Page et al., 2019) of the Abecedarian Project and is an evidence-based early learning approach which has been shown to improve the short and long-term academic, language, social-emotional and health outcomes of vulnerable young children (Ramey et al., 2012). The adapted approach is now implemented in communities throughout the NT as an integral part of the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program.

FaFT is an evidence-based early childhood program that aims to improve education, health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children from birth to the year before they commence full-time schooling. It is an early childhood flagship program providing high quality early learning experiences for children while building the capacity of parents to positively affect their children’s learning through parent support.

The FaFT program has built a strong sense of trust among communities across the NT. Its strength-based philosophy places a strong emphasis on first language and culture as the basis for supporting families to make meaningful connections to current and new knowledge relating to early learning and child development. Local Aboriginal staff members are key to the success of this approach and receive significant professional development and support alongside qualified education staff.

Search for evidence-based approach – why 3α?
In 2010, FaFT underwent an external program evaluation by Menzies School of Health. This report highlighted the need for an evidenced-based, high quality pedagogical approach to be implemented within the program, one which focused on school readiness specifically. It was also essential that whatever approach was implemented, it could seamlessly align with the FaFT philosophy focusing on place and strength-based delivery. At the same time that FaFT was searching for a more holistic approach, Professor Joseph Sparling was presenting at the 2010 SNAICC conference, which was attended by some department policy officers. The strength of the evidence presented, and the variety of contexts in which the Abecedarian Approach had been implemented, warranted further investigation into how it might be positioned within the context of the NT and FaFT programs in particular.

The inclusion of 3α in FaFT programs supports each child’s unique development by providing educators with strategies to build parents’ confidence in their role as their children’s first teachers and to continue to extend learning at home. The strategies used are not dependent on high levels of parental literacy, and can easily be delivered in first language.

The structured, but fun, adult-child interactions of 3α help parents in the FaFT program build productive and positive relationships through an early childhood learning experience. Parents learn about their children’s development, and become skilled in facilitating educational activities for them. This then creates parent empowerment, a core goal at FaFT.

FaFT leadership team members were fortunate to have worked closely with Professor Sparling in the early stages of implementation of 3α to ensure fidelity was maintained while allowing flexibility of delivery to align with unique child, family and community contexts.

Implementation of 3α in the NT
The department carried out a considered, deliberate and systematic initial implementation of 3α to ensure each element was embedded with a high level of fidelity. Conversational Reading was the first element to be introduced into programs with Territory wide training and workshops delivered to introduce and develop expertise in this element over the course of a year. This supported engagement with the strategies by educators and families and informed communities and relevant stakeholders of the inclusion of new practices to support the needs of children and families. This systematic initial implementation process also allowed key stakeholders the time needed to build a sense of confidence and trust in the approach.

Over the first year of implementation, programs engaged in cycles of continual improvement utilising training, supported delivery, supervised practice and coaching and feedback to refine their practice and enhance implementation. To support fidelity of implementation, FaFT staff filmed their 3α practices and documented an area to focus on in professional learning teams with content experts.
As implementation was unfolding, it became apparent training and resources supporting understanding of the 3a elements required further contextualisation. In partnership with Professor Sparling, the department invested in the adaptation of the original 200 LearningGames® to reflect the NT context for the educators and families engaging with the strategies. In consultation with the department’s Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group, 15 remote communities generated a series of culturally appropriate pictures of families engaging in the LearningGames®, with Professor Sparling ensuring the integrity and learning intention of each original game was maintained.

Further to the customisation of the LearningGames® resources were created including animations for the 3N strategy (Notice, Nudge, Narrate), Conversational Reading and LearningGames® and video footage of families implementing the strategies were incorporated into training packages to support understanding.

**Stakeholder engagement and support**

Critical to the success of the initial implementation was the engagement of families, educators and school leadership, community elders and other key stakeholders. Consultation with the Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group not only ensured the cultural appropriateness of the approach but supported uptake by stakeholders.

The gradual and considered implementation of the approach, customisation of resources and significant investment into local Indigenous educators accessing contextualised ongoing training and coaching contributed to the successful engagement with the strategies. This led to the emergence of 3a advocates across all layers of the system. The championing of 3a from families and community, 3a practitioners, support staff, managers, principals and policy makers combined with the strong research base and support from the Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group, influenced key decision makers to continue to invest in the approach.

The implementation of 3a continues to grow from strength to strength within the FaFT program. Outcomes from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project *Building a Bridge into preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities* indicate that although there is still much work to be done, significant achievements have already been made.

**Acknowledgements**

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- Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we would like to acknowledge the educators, children, families and community members across the NT who have contributed their cultural knowledge and wisdom throughout the implementation 3a in the NT.

**References**

