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Elated pupils say it all

If people remember feverishly practising multiplication tables, laboriously spelling out words and parsing sentences out loud, they tend to be adults of a certain age.

For a few decades in Australia these sorts of exercises were regarded as examples of supposedly iniquitous "rote learning". Instead, the preference was to "facilitate" creative self-expression and students learning their own way at their own pace. Notions like the importance of good grammar and correct spelling and the ability to add up were considered old-fashioned and relatively unimportant.

More recently there has been a swing back to the idea that perhaps learning the basics – often by rote – is fundamental to any ability to properly develop and structure more complicated maths and English expression.

But the generation of students who were taught that this didn't matter are now the majority of teachers themselves. Some of them have belatedly taught themselves grammar, if only to be able to better instruct students. Many are just good teachers naturally, no matter what the standard training or curriculum requirements.

Across Australia, though, there tends to be one unhappily reliable statistic in terms of basic numeracy and literacy. Aboriginal kids, especially those in remote communities, fare worst. A horrifyingly high percentage leave primary school without being able to read or write. That's assuming they attended school regularly. The consequences are obvious in the even more damning statistics about rates of indigenous unemployment, alcoholism and incarceration.

Fixing this is far more complicated than getting a good start to learning in primary school or pouring yet more money into the plethora of government programs for the disadvantaged. Nor does it resolve the dilemma of how dysfunctional welfare-dependent Aboriginal communities can ever be healthy in an economic or social sense.

But when a certain approach



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makes a dramatic improvement in results and attitudes of young children it is worth watching as a potential model – particularly when so much money has already been wasted on the more traditional alternatives and the situation is getting worse, rather than better.

This is the main reason why Tony Abbott spent the weekend at Aurukun in western Cape York rather than having a more typical preparation for the start of Parliament tomorrow.

He and a group of senior business leaders flew to the isolated community of 1200 people to show support for Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson and his Australian Academy of Learning. Their practical task was to renovate the Aurukun school library.

The real appeal was that the Aurukun primary school of about 200 students has spent the past 2½ years applying what is known as the direct instruction method of teaching. It is a United States approach that has been operating in some of the more disadvantaged schools in America for a few decades. The key difference is the focus on a highly structured and scripted approach to teaching, including weekly assessments to

ensure no child is falling behind unnoticed. Kids are grouped according to their reading and maths proficiency, rather than by age, and the teacher has a very clear specific method to follow.

Pearson and his colleagues have permission to use direct instruction in three state primary schools in Cape York. Although the director-general in the Queensland Department of Education backs it, many senior bureaucrats do not.

Now the advent of a new Queensland government is providing the opportunity for an even more determined bureaucratic push to bring the Cape York schools back under tighter state control and authority. Funding for the program, which also includes intensive culture and club activities after the normal school day, lasts only until next June.

At an extra \$7.7 million for the three such schools over 3½ years, Pearson's determination to change the dynamic doesn't come cheap. But neither does anything else in Aboriginal affairs these days. And it has the distinct advantage of being effective.

Abbott's presence is designed to make his own support plain, including to the new state Minister for Education.

He is able to chart the progress because he volunteered in 2009 as a truancy officer for a week. He now calls it a school transformed. The rapid difference in literacy and numeracy results is obvious and the attendance rate has climbed from about 40 per cent to more than 70 per cent. But most striking of all is the mood in the classroom – attentive and happy.

The teachers are employed by the department but can ask to be sent to work in these schools. They then receive additional training in the direct instruction method. Their enthusiasm is as evident as the students' sense of achievement.

The kids, barefoot all, wear T-shirts with the slogan: Get ready, work hard, Be good. Abbott should bring some back for his shadow ministers today.

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