Controversial teaching method brings hope and social change to Cape York

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Teacher assistant Maryann Kerindun, with students at the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy's Aurukun campus, says pupils "blossom" under Direct Instruction. Picture: Nicolas Rothwell Source: The Australian

"GET ready!" A hand-clap. The children lean forward in their seats, expectant, alert.

"What colour?" their teacher calls out. "What number?" The replies come back in unison. The mood is focused; the pace swift. New words, facts, concepts are brought in one by one, and reappear all through the lesson and reinforce each other. This is concentrated learning, with a swing and urgency about it.

In a small classroom in Aurukun on the west coast of Cape York, step by step, the everyday wonder of Direct Instruction is unfolding. Here, in the far reaches of far north Queensland, in a remote Aboriginal community, something remarkable is taking place: young boys and girls are at their desks, studying, writing, absorbing every piece of knowledge offered them. It is the dream that has seemed beyond realisation in recent years: a remote-area indigenous school where the students are bound for success. Is the dream at last being fulfilled?

Aurukun is the showpiece campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, key project of the region's great reformer, Noel Pearson: a school run almost entirely on the basis of the Direct Instruction system; a school already much inspected and evaluated, eagerly praised and pre-emptively critiqued. But only now, two years into the venture, is there something of substance to assess: data, initial evidence to go with the impressions that days spent in the classrooms leave in the mind.

First, though, the strange backstory: the tale of how Direct Instruction, "DI", an American teaching method pioneered in Illinois and Oregon, and much used in public schools in US inner cities, came to Cape York. The story is bound up with Pearson's path in life. Mission-born at Hope Vale on the Cape's east coast, gifted, given educational opportunities, he went to boarding schools and to university, became a lawyer, and made his name, while still young, as a native title advocate.

Then he changed priorities. He went back to far north Queensland. His home region was in crisis. The chief causes were plain to him: alcoholic drinking, passive welfare provision and a breakdown in schooling. Pearson devised a comprehensive strategy for social change, and after a long struggle on the battlefield of ideas persuaded governments and senior bureaucrats to back his vision.

Four communities opted in: Hope Vale; the little, range-surrounded town of Coen at the heart of the Cape; Mossman Gorge near Port Douglas; and the large settlement of Aurukun, home and capital of the Wik people. The Cape York welfare reform trial began in mid-2008: its key innovation was the Family Responsibilities Commission, a panel of local leaders with the power to impose income management on community members whose actions are doing harm to those around them.

The trial had many facets. It included measures for financial management and home improvement, but at its core was an even more ambitious reform plan: Pearson's blueprint for a network of top-flight primary schools, and an academy, with high aims and concrete proposals to realise them. From his own experience he knew that education liberates. Get the schooling right, and anything is possible.

What would be the best replacement for the long-established, lacklustre approach? He had investigated teaching models: promising schemes and remedial programs, motivational initiatives from around the world. One stood out: DI, the brainchild of a most unusual professorial pioneer named Siegfried Engelmann.

Pearson recounts his discovery of DI and the development of the Cape York Academy concept in a slim book he published two years ago, titled Radical Hope. It contains a brief afterword in which the very first field reports from the DI classrooms are set down.

They were positive, and even then Pearson was optimistic, with good reason. DI is straightforward, and based on close study of the way a child's mind works. It is a teaching method, as well as a tightly controlled curriculum. Above all, its track record proves its effectiveness. It works wherever it is properly implemented: in the poor suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, where Cape York community leaders saw it in action on a study tour; in the disadvantaged regions of the US Midwest; in native-American schools in Arizona and New Mexico.

Pearson was also confident in the group of educators he had assembled. The first executive principal of the academy, Don Anderson, was one of the most admired figures in Queensland's education system. Anderson had become convinced DI had something to offer, and that the old model had failed, for tangled reasons. He had spent his working life in remote schools: at Lockhart River and Aurukun and Weipa on the Cape, at schools and colleges in the Torres Strait. He knew the trends.

"I had watched a continual decline over years," Anderson says. "A decline both in educational outcomes and in opportunities for indigenous children.

"And now, being involved in the first sustainable, significant recovery in schools performance, I'm more than happy to admit that much of our hard work in the

past was misdirected and ill-conceived, even though we were giving 110 per cent."

Anderson grasped, then, the need for change, and the rationale, but he had to find a crack team to introduce it. And so, in early 2010, as soon as the deal to launch the academy model at the schools in Coen and Aurukun was struck, he placed a call to a handful of dedicated remote-area teachers, including one named Patrick Mallett, an individual with a pronounced taste for challenges. Mallett, today the principal at Aurukun, remembers driving in to the community that February, beneath wet season storm clouds.

"I arrived. Was this it? It was bizarre. There were children wandering about in the school grounds, a crowd of them were playing on the roof in the middle of class time. I'd never seen a campus so disengaged. Dysfunction permeated the whole place, it didn't feel like a school at all. The task seemed Herculean. But day by day, week by week, we began, we made progress. And for the children the penny dropped relatively early on that their teachers were now taking their education and advancement absolutely critically. Once they worked out that they could actually learn to read and write, their self-esteem rocketed."

Those early successes did not come merely from following a tuition model brought in from outside. Great care went into the design of the academy's curriculum, which is now also taught in the large school at Hope Vale.

It has three components: "class", the core DI program, which delivers 20 hours of literacy and numeracy teaching every week; "club", which gives lessons in sports and music; and "culture", a subject-group that includes local languages and traditional and environmental knowledge, and has a syllabus designed by the academy's own team. Club and culture are taught after normal school hours, in optional lessons that extend the school day by 90 minutes: attendance is almost universal.

A process of constant student assessment is at the heart of DI. Each child must learn each lesson, and achieve mastery, in reading, in writing, in the new concepts introduced in class every day. Individual tests are quietly administered to check progress every week. At the week's end, the teachers make a call to their American DI learning colleagues to go through the results. Each student's performance is checked. If a child or group of children lag in any area, they are split from their class and taught in a new group: they will not be left behind.

There are other safety nets. Regular attendance is one obvious key to classroom success, and in remote communities typically it is the chief problem. At Aurukun, a pair of dedicated case managers watch the school gates every morning, then travel round the community to seek out the no-shows. Any child who comes in more than half an hour late goes on a watch list. Three late days in a row triggers a referral of their parents or guardians to the Family Responsibilities Commission. This measure has helped lift attendance to 75 per cent.

Maryann Kerindun, both a traditional owner of land estates near Aurukun and a

long-time teacher assistant at the school, can see the difference. "In the old curriculum, we had problems," she says. "A child could not recognise a letter; a child could not recognise a number. Learning struggled through those times.

"Then the changes began with this new system. They've come a long way. With this new set-up, with this DI in the classroom, you see the children focused, they're blossoming, they're surprising their own families."

The experience has been similar at the Coen campus, which began DI instruction at the same time, early 2010. There, Billy Pratt, a local with three children at the school and one in daycare, about to begin classes, has come to believe in the new system. Pratt is a member of the academy board, and heads a new regional ranger group. He looks back to his own childhood, when he had to rely on outside mentors to make progress.

"One thing we could never figure out was how come a teacher could achieve in the mainstream schools, but not here, in the bush," he says. "Now DI has come in, I think it works because of the method, and the constant testing and measuring. They don't let the students go from grade to grade without picking up anything.

"My children get a much better learning experience than I did. You need to stretch children: I want mine to be engaged, not get bored and rebel. My second, she's two years ahead of what's expected for a child her age. She comes home and wants to teach us; she's embraced it."

DI has its critics: fierce ones, who object to its use of textbooks with American examples, or contend that its scripted lessons reduce teachers to a robotic role, or argue that its field results in the Cape York setting are equivocal.

The view among the teachers is rather different. The pattern now in Aurukun, by no means an easy posting, is for frontline staff to stay much longer than the two-year minimum they initially sign on for. "We've lived it, we see it every day," says the head of the DI team at Aurukun, Naomi Gibb. "If I hadn't experienced this over the last 3 1/2years myself, I'd be sceptical. This whole model is building an intrinsic drive in students."

Other teachers speak admiringly of the determination their students show to get to school. The backdrop of their lives may include sleeplessness and domestic troubles: still they come. They come not for metronomic instruction but because the spark of curiosity has been lit in them.

DI lessons, as witnessed in the classrooms of the Cape, are a striking affair. A sense of excitement is present, and also a mood of harmonious forward momentum. Coen's teaching principal, Craig Jordan, argues that "DI has taken the focus off what you teach, and on to how you teach". The executive principal now overseeing the entire three-campus academy, Cindy Hales, is convinced this aspect of the method is central to its effectiveness. "Just because DI's scripted doesn't mean there's no life or heart," she says. "It's a kind of persuasive acting,

a drama that makes learning live in the minds of children. People think it's easy and rote just because it's written down - but the hardest part is the transition to a learning life in the classroom: it's hard, good work."

This strong sense of purpose fills the schools. Motivation and positive reinforcement are taken seriously: the entrance hallways are festooned with examples of standout work. The ultra-Pearsonian credo of the academy - "Get Ready. Work Hard. Be Good" - is displayed everywhere, as are lists of benchmarks and goals. "Terrific work-books in Miss Grace's classroom," proclaims one notice, and there they are, photocopied and affixed, examples for emulation - long cascading sentence sequences in neat copperplate handwriting.

In class, the messages are much the same. Courtesy mingles with high expectations. "Boys and girls, you did that exercise so well: now, what are the things we do to be respectful? Teaching, listening, not talking. Good, good, Elspeth, I can see you're reading; and you too, Wilfred, with your finger, tracking." They are the atmospherics of the well-run schoolroom, completely normal and, in the context of a remote community, very rarely seen.

How to measure the vast collective effort engaged in by the academy's designers and staff, and by the children and families whose support lies at the project's heart? How to catch the alchemy that has brought hope and self-belief to communities long used to the lash of media stereotyping and negative publicity? What table of statistics records that? But testing and evaluation are constant features of the education landscape, and the academy, as an institution that inevitably serves to highlight the shortcomings of the status quo in remote community schooling, has been subject to intense scrutiny.

Much is riding on its performance. Experts from the bureaucracy are watching; critics of Pearson and his broader social intervention programs as well. Both Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott are supporters of the scheme. The Prime Minister was instrumental in persuading the then state premier, Anna Bligh, to provide the initial three-year tranche of funding, $7.72 million - still the only large support the academy has received. The Opposition Leader led a team of corporate high-fliers on his "bricks and mortar" library-building working bee at Aurukun a year ago.

Hence the keen interest paid to the latest round of results in the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy, for the three academy schools when they appeared last September; hence the disquiet when some of the figures from Aurukun showed a mild decline in performance in some subject areas. Less attention was paid to the spectacular test results from Coen, which had been a school with high attendance rates even before the switch to the academy template: it was the best-performing indigenous-area school in Queensland, with all students achieving scores "at or above national minimum standards" in 10 out of the 15 test categories.

For Aurukun, the starting point had been very different: in early 2010, almost all the students were reading at kindergarten levels, or below, and attendance levels

were abysmal. In such small campuses, NAPLAN's sampling may record little beyond the variations in the performance of individual pupils in different years.

There are other measures that track the gradual progress of the students at the Cape York schools, rather than seeking to judge their capabilities in a single snap test: both the routine internal monitoring and the Queensland Education Department reviews are favourable, while a forthcoming Australian Council for Educational Research report is expected also to highlight the state of progress in clear fashion.

The academy has always seen its project as a long-term remedial venture: its prospectus warns that it "does not expect significant gains in NAPLAN results until 2013-14, allowing children, especially older children, at least three full years to catch up to grade level". Consistent with this, the best performances at all its schools are among the youngest students, with the least pronounced educational shortfall to overcome.

Given Pearson's profile and the high stakes attached to the overall Cape York Welfare Reform scheme, cool assessment of the DI curriculum's long-term potential seems all the more important. For the academy is part of an experiment with both educational and political resonances. The Cape York Institute's linked projects are aimed to recast the economy of a remote region, invigorate a society trapped by passive welfare systems and inject a note of hope into its young generation through concerted learning programs.

The link between education and welfare reform is a bond. The schools rely on the parental discipline the Family Responsibilities Commission helps impose: and the academy aims to send its students away to boarding facilities at the secondary level, before they return to take up jobs in a revitalised local economy.

There is, though, one telling difference between the welfare reform initiative and the academy, and it explains their relative effectiveness: the multiple welfare reforms are opt-in, and secure limited participation; the schools are the sole providers of primary education where they operate.

The wash-up? Increasingly, those close to the academy believe they have found a wondrous weapon in the fight to strengthen remote indigenous communities: a tool to reverse the pernicious effects produced by two generations of poor learning.

Patrick Mallett, surveying his quiet, well-ordered school grounds at Aurukun, says: "When you have the right curriculum, the right approach and the right structures, you get the community on board, and it happens. I came very quickly to realise that DI was a miracle that had dropped out of the sky, and the people here were the best I'd ever worked with. We've stumbled on the solution to what has been perplexing the rest of Australia."

In the communities, a sense is dawning that the schools can develop into instruments for large-scale social change. At Coen, teacher aide Majella Peter is

studying for an education degree at Deakin University and watching the classroom progress of her daughter, now in Year Three. "For me, as a parent, seeing DI opened my eyes: it actually works in lifting literacy and numeracy, and young mothers in this community know it's working."

Peter wants to be a lifelong educator, teach for a decade at the school, become principal there and then open an adult learning centre. "That would be my personal goal: I see my relations living on Centrelink and I feel for them; they can't go forward because they don't have much education, and I feel that could be part of the reason they don't have their life straight - and maybe in time, maybe, if they're responsible, they can straighten their career paths and look to the future."

At Aurukun, Maryann Kerindun has also seen things she never thought she would. "What blows me away is having my grandchild coming home and saying to me, 'Let's read together'. That's the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me, to be able to see that with my own eyes." A further vision shimmers into view, and seems more than a dream: "I want to see a qualified nurse from this community working at the clinic, a qualified CEO, a teacher, a mechanic, a doctor, and a self-managed community, and I know now it can happen. I want to see our future generations run the school."

With early word of the changed atmospherics in the academy schools beginning to spread, education bureaucrats, indigenous leaders and policy thinkers from across the country have begun to take note, and make visits, pilgrimages to the Cape: delegations have come from the Kimberley, northeast Arnhem Land and the Pitjantjatjara region.

The then chief executive of the Northern Territory's Education Department, Gary Barnes, a Queensland veteran recently placed at the helm of the entire Territory public service, brought his key indigenous policy advisers on an inspection tour in 2011 but this keen interest has yet to translate into action, and it is hard to picture regions lacking the leadership of Cape York adopting the academy model, backed as it is by the overarching, regulating mechanism of welfare reform.

DI, though, has evident potential as a teaching method of proven adaptability, and Pearson and his advisers have put forward a proposal to set up an Australian Institute for Direct Instruction, in partnership with Engelmann's Institute in Oregon. The story is at its beginning: the academy hopes, in due course, to extend its operations to between six and eight schools in the Cape, to achieve economies of scale.

If the promise of a new approach to remote-area learning is in the air, and the progress of DI on the Cape is a fascinating case study for southern experts, it means much more elsewhere. Aurukun and Coen are not just possible examples for other communities, intriguing options; they are hope, new pathways made visible. For everyone aware of the bleak lives being given form today in half-empty classrooms the length and breadth of remote indigenous Australia, the

question of schooling models has a sharp edge.

Even those who were at first sceptical on the ground have swung about, as if the longing to believe there could be a light of promise has at last vanquished the ingrained expectation of failure, eclipse, and another new program to replace the one before.

Here is one of the most prominent woman leaders of Aurukun, the redoubtable Maree Kalkeeyorta - sister of the strong-minded Gladys Tybingoompa, who danced on the pavement of the High Court in Canberra on the day the Wik won their native title case almost two decades ago.

"I didn't like these changes at first, but I see things now. My sister wanted our children to learn, and I too. English, and our own Wik language way as well. We want the two. Our own way, and the way of outside Australia.

"I think life will improve now for the next generation. Look at them! They laugh, and smile, they love their school, you can see the happy faces. As long as it takes them, they'll follow their path now; they have a path. Every individual child has a pathway to go down, but it's going to start off in this schoolground first."