I came across the Literacy Learning Partnerships project through doing some research in literacy strategies for my classroom. After reading through the information on the ALEA website, I thought this would be perfect for me and applied. Living and teaching remotely you do not get a lot of opportunities to discuss best literacy practices within a wider education community context.

I am a teacher at Borroloola School which is located in the township of Borroloola, 850 km southeast of Darwin. The population is approximately 1000. There are four main Aboriginal clans: Garrawa, Mara, Yanyula and Gurandji. Borroloola School provides education to students from preschool to Senior Secondary. At the time of this project the enrolment stood at approximately 250 students.

In 2011, I had a Year 4/5 class of 30, with the average attendance being 25. The students came from families with links to Queensland, Barkley Region, Katherine Region, the Kimberly, the Centre and Darwin. So although I had a class of 30 with reasonably high attendance, the students were transient. By the middle of term 2, I had 10 students from the class that originally began the year. Due to the transient nature of the students, overcrowding in housing is a given, with often 15 or more people staying in a three-bedroom house. The students are from diverse language groups which include Mara, Garrawa, Yanyuwa, Kriol and Aboriginal English, with the majority speaking a dialect of Aboriginal English. The challenge for me, in this project, was to enable my students to reach Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) outcomes within English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) background, while still managing to engage the students in learning as they were coping with transience and over-crowded living conditions.

To start the project I gathered together and examined literacy-based data that had been collected over the last year. I wanted data and evidence of learning to reflect the design of my project so that it could have real life applications for my learning as a teacher and thus also improve the students’ learning. Data collected included NAPLAN results of current Year 4s, PM reading results and annotated samples collected for reading and writing. I noticed the NAPLAN writing scores were particularly poor. A majority of students had copied the prompt sheet. I thought that this might be a lack of confidence in the students’ own ability to write. I had also noticed this in their writing during class and pieces they had written for evidence of learning samples. As I observed their writing habits and examined their pieces of writing, I noticed that the lack of confidence stemmed from their inability to come up with an idea of what to write about. They were extremely unsure of the writing process and they were scared to make a mistake; they thought that it had to be perfect straight away. Even students who I thought could write seemed to lack confidence to put pen to paper or they tended to stay within their personal comfort zones, not willing to take risks or show their
individual creativity. This thinking developed into the focus of my project.

I discussed this with Maree, my mentor, and it was decided that my focus should be on writing and getting the students to become more independent with their writing. She suggested that I should focus on particular strategies and teaching methodologies that could apply to the specific students in my class. We refined this focus into a research question: ‘What strategies should I focus on to get the students to be more independent in their writing?’

In response to reading a Practical Primary article (Bean, 2010, pp. 4–7) about adapting a Burke Reading interview to writing, I thought I too should interview the students about their writing. I used the same set of questions and adjusted the language to be suitable for EAL/D students. I conducted the interviews in a place where the students would be comfortable and felt safe to express their opinions. I also decided to interview the whole class. Through conducting these interviews I discovered that the majority of students thought that you learnt to write by copying sentences off the board and they wanted to get neater. I did the same interview at the end of the year to see if their perceptions about writing had changed.

I was excited about how I could encourage my students to write. I decided on a few teaching strategies and methods that could be built in to my literacy program. The strategies I chose were the notebook method, posing linking questions and modelled writing. The notebook method was used to develop skills of thinking like a writer. The purpose of posing linking questions was to develop imagination about texts read in class and to encourage the students to imagine how scenarios presented might look in their world of Borroloola. It also brought attention to how the same story can be presented in different ways: for example oral stories, movies and written text. I used modelled writing to demonstrate how a piece of writing doesn’t just happen, it is a process.

The notebook method (Fletcher, http://www.ralphfletcher.com.html) is a process of getting the students to think like a writer: this means carrying a notebook around with you and taking notes about everyday situations that could inspire you in your writing. I thought I could do this by setting homework for the students which involved them writing about things that were relevant to them and their families. I made sure the students had the right equipment at home to be able to do this. Where overcrowding is an issue, they may not have paper, pens and space to be able to write. I decided to make up writing take-home packs for the students. This included bags, pencils, coloured pencils, pens, glue, sharpeners and a notebook. They were taken home each night and a different topic for inspiration was set to give them ideas to write about at home. Topics included funny family stories, a favourite place or a sacred object.

Each morning we would have some time to share, talk, write about and develop our stories. The students started enthusiastically with this project, taking the packs home and then bringing them back in order for them to work on their pieces of writing. As the year went on, students in the class changed and enthusiasm faded. The packs were forgotten and weren’t brought back or were taken by brothers, sisters and family members. To combat this I had another pack at school for the students in the class which was kept in their trays. We did some writing every morning in our idea books and this was helpful for those students who did not do some at home the night before. The students began writing more and more, having a go and not worrying about the initial writing phase.

To develop imagination and to show that writing is just another way of communicating, the same as oral histories and movies, I constantly posed the question: How would this look like if ... to the students. For example: how would this traditional culture story look like if it was a movie?, How would this written story look like if it was in Borroloola? How would
this play look if it was a comic strip? As the students became used to thinking about texts as relating to their own experiences; and expanding their idea of texts to include all types of communication, their own writing and ideas continued to expand. At the start of the year the students did not know what to write about, but by the end of the year they were taking examples of their everyday life and making them into stories. They were coming up to me after the weekend and telling me about things that happened and asking if they could write a story about it.

An integral part of this project was modelled writing (Turbill & Bean, p. 7, in 2006 in Bean, 2010). Every week I did a piece of writing based upon an inspirational idea that I had posed with the students. Every day I would model one part of the writing process on the smart board by writing and typing with a wireless keyboard. The strategies I modelled were brainstorming ideas, planning using a graphic organiser, writing a draft, editing and then publishing. The students would be watching me as I went through this process. I would think out aloud while doing this. Each week the process was saved and printed out and put up as a wall story. This was to show the students how the writing process happened in my head and could happen in theirs also. As time went on the students became more confident in giving all parts of the writing process a go. This was evident by the end of the year because it wasn’t like pulling teeth to get pen to paper anymore. I set a writing task and the majority of students had a go.

Before I knew it the year was almost over and I started to do the final interviews. The final interviews indicated that the students’ understanding of writing had changed. They no longer felt that writing just happened; they had to work on it and the best writers’ kept working on it. One child at the start of the year told me that teachers have helped him to write by writing it down for him so that he could copy. At the end of the year he stated that the teacher gives instructions for him to be a better writer and lets him practise. I do not have the same students this year at Borroloola, however the teacher that has them stated that they have more personal confidence in their writing and she wanted to know how I achieved this. I shared with her how these outcomes were achieved. They are more than willing to have a go, pick up a pencil and not worry about it being perfect to start with. My learning and the students’ learning is just getting started and we still have some unfinished goals. However, I realise that this is the beauty of teaching and learning. As teachers; we are always trying new strategies to improve our students learning and in so doing we are also improving our teaching practices.

I discovered while writing and reflecting on this action research project that I have learnt a great deal about my own teaching practices and how these are developing into the art of teaching. The action learning project has helped me critically reflect on how to engage students in literacy practices while using an evidence base. My mentor has been a great help by being my soundboard, helping me to refine the project and pointing me in the direction of relevant strategies and educational research. Several colleagues have helped me to edit and refine my writing, allowing me to communicate in a precise manner.

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**References**

Danielle Schmidt
I have been teaching for four years, after studying a postgraduate Bachelor of Education Degree at Flinders’ University. Most of these years have been at the remote school of Borroloola. I am currently teaching a Year 2/3 class. I am passionate about students engaging in learning and the rights of students to be given the opportunity to learn in an environment where they can become independent learners. My involvement in the Literacy Learning Partnerships has enabled me to follow my passions in learning.

Adapted Writing Interview (Based on the Burke Reading Interview)

Name: ________________________________ Grade _________ Date: __________________

1. When you are writing and you have trouble, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?
2. Do you think that I am a good writer? Who is a good writer that you know?
3. What makes him/her a good writer?
4. Do you think that s/he was trouble when they are writing?
   5. If YES: When s/he has trouble writing, what do you think s/he would do about it?
   If NO: If s/he if did have trouble when writing what do you think s/he would do about it?
6. If you knew that someone was having trouble writing would you help them?
7. What would a teacher do to help that person?
8. How did you learn to write? What did (they/you) do to help you learn?
9. What would you like to do better as a writer?
10. Do you think that you are a good writer?

Danielle Schmidt is a recipient of the ALEA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mentoring Program Grant. The program aims to recognise and support up to two early career teachers each year as they investigate literacy education in their teaching context, with particular focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and to establish professional partnerships with mentors to plan, implement and reflect upon an action learning project situated in the early career teachers’ current teaching context. The ALEA website provides further information.