Families as First Teachers (FaFT) recently started working with families using the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3A) with an Aboriginal community in Far North Queensland. 3A is a responsive early childhood set of teaching and learning strategies designed to improve the quality and consistency of interactions between adults and children. It has been particularly successful in improving academic achievement of children at risk and with under-resourced families.

Research has suggested that involvement in high-quality early childhood and parenting support programs can alleviate some of the negative impacts of disadvantage on young children and families (Gross et al., 2003). This is the foundation of the FaFT program. Infusing elements of 3A through the FaFT program has given us a new way of working with families. We have called it the Read Play Learn strategy, as its focus is the implementation of 3A’s conversational reading technique. In this strategy, FaFT acts as the host to Read Play Learn. FaFT acknowledges that communities and families are all different and the ability to adapt and recognise the diverse needs of each family is paramount when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. With this in mind, we set out to implement 3A strategies with the community at a grassroots level through Read Play Learn.

The implementation of the 3A approach into the FaFT program relied on support from, and relationships with, families. These relationships are founded on personal qualities such as a non-judgemental and respectful attitude, an encouraging and empowering approach, warmth, empathy and being authentic (Conentropy, 2009.) We started conversations with families about how we could support them and work together to share accountability for children’s learning. We spoke about the learning journey that could occur to assist families to build on their skills to support their own children’s successful transitions to school. According to Yunkaporta (2007) the use of diagrams and visualisations helps to map out sequences in the learning process and supports Aboriginal ways of knowing. Using visual representations, the families suggested that the learning journey was like the river that runs through the community and is of special significance to the local people. At one end was the home where the river starts winding its way towards the school and then out to the ocean.
and show, see. These are. At the reading to their children. The child engages three parts. 3S guides parents and families consisting of three parts. This strategy is employs an easy and memorable strategy and parents. But perhaps the most salient infants through to five- and six-year-olds—it is appropriate for all ages of children—feel confident.

A core component of 3A is conversational reading. This forms the basis of the Read Play Learn strategy. Conversational reading, as the name suggests, is like a conversation around a book or text. There is a ‘serve and return’ structure where the adult says or does something and the child responds. In this way, the turn taking exchange closely mirrors a conversation. The basic ideas underlying conversational reading are that it is appropriate for all ages of children—infants through to five- and six-year-olds—and it can be used by both educators and parents. But perhaps the most salient feature of conversational reading is that it employs an easy and memorable strategy consisting of three parts. This strategy is called 3S which is a memory aid for the three parts. 3S guides parents and families reading to their children. The child engages in one or all of the three levels of response. These are see, show and say. At the see level the child is simply looking and attending to a picture in the book. In the second level of response the child shows, using some form of body language, that they have comprehended what the adult has said. The final say level gives an indication of the child’s expressive language abilities (Sparling, Ramey & Tayler, 2014). All families had their own individual see, show, say chart to refer to when they were engaged in reading with their child.

Working with conversational reading this way allowed families to be individually coached on the strategy. They shared stories about their children’s reading and general learning behaviour and enjoyed the opportunity to have informal, thorough and personalised support.

To ensure families have the resources that they need, we produce and provide reading materials. Working with a variety of reading materials such as catalogues and pamphlets, families could see that other resources could be included using the conversational reading strategy. Books were made each week to take to families. These were straightforward texts with an accompanying game or activity. The game or activity was designed to enrich literacy and numeracy skills. A typical Read Play Learn session would start with a short reading time. Families read the new book with their child and then played the game together.

All families love to see their children succeed. Read Play Learn visits proved to be a time when everyone shared the children’s delight in mastering familiarity with the book. The 3S strategy has been instrumental in supporting families’ positive and productive reading experiences with their children.

The literature on engagement of under-resourced families suggests there are four key features of success. These are: go to where the families are; promote and deliver programs in a non-threatening and non-stigmatising way; empower families; and develop relationships (Brackertz, 2007). While still in the early stages of implementation, Read Play Learn is beginning to have success. As parents and other adult family members are trained in the strategies, and resources required are minimal and generally household items, 3A is not dependant on funding. It is about embedding the teaching and learning strategies into daily routines and practices. High-quality interactions between adults and children are a powerful tool for improving the life trajectories of children.

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References