

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 032

FL 022 892

TITLE Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. Proceedings of the Conference (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia, November 17-18, 1993).

INSTITUTION Australian National Languages and Literacy Inst., Deakin.

REPORT NO ISBN-1-875578-29-3

PUB DATE 94

NOTE 80p.; Some pages may not reproduce well.

PUB TYPE Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS \*Basic Skills; Chemistry; Classroom Techniques; Course Evaluation; Cultural Pluralism; Early Childhood Education; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); Enrichment Activities; Ethnicity; Foreign Countries; \*Heritage Education; Higher Education; \*Indigenous Populations; \*Literacy Education; Mathematics Education; Numeracy; Nursing Education; Program Descriptions; Tutorial Programs

IDENTIFIERS Aboriginal Schools (Australia); \*Australia; \*Australia (Torres Strait)

ABSTRACT

Papers from the conference on the education of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders include: "English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students" (Alison Jarred); "The Aboriginal Identity Course: A Midstream Evaluation" (Simon Vaughan); "Making the Curriculum Your Own: The Senior Girls at Lajamanu School Read Glenyse Ward's 'Wandering Girl'" (Christine Nicholls); "Urban Aboriginal Children Learning To Read" (Noreen Trow); "Recognising Ourselves and Our Heritage" (Sheryl Morgan); "Outline of English Language Acquisition (ELA) for Aboriginal Students" (Sally Slattery); "Ashmont English Enrichment Program" (Sandra Elliott); "Tutorials in Chemistry for Aboriginal Nursing Students" (K. Draisma, R. Gluck, J. Hancock, R. Kanitz, G. Knell, W. Price, G. Sharman, J. Squires); "Inclusivity and Aboriginal Studies" (Stella Emberson); "Workshop: Tuition in Writing" (Stella Emberson); "Mathematics and Language: Teaching with an Aboriginal Perspective" (Mary Knight, Robyn Hurley, Steve Flavel); "English Language Arts Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students" (Rose Cunnington); "The Koorie English Literacy Project [KELP] in Shepparton District, Victoria" (Rosemary McKenry); "Two Sisters Teaching and Writing: A Model for Education" (Gail Dawson, Birritjalawuy Gondarra); and "Kuranda Early Childhood Personal Enrichment Program (KEEP)" (Jenni Buzacott). Some papers contain references. (MSE)

\*\*\*\*\*

\* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
 \* from the original document. \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

Conference  
Proceedings

# Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joseph  
LoBlance

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as  
received from the person or organization  
originating it.  
Minor changes have been made to improve  
reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-  
ment do not necessarily represent official  
OERI position or policy.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

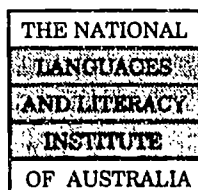
FL072892

THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE  
OF LANGUAGES AND LITERACY  
2/5 CAMPION STREET  
DEAKIN ACT 2600  
Australia

# Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

NLLIA celebrates the International Year  
of the World's Indigenous Peoples

Proceedings of the conference held in Canberra  
on 17-18 November 1993



ISBN 1 875578 29 3

Copyright of the individual papers rests with the authors  
Copyright in this format © 1994 National Languages and  
Literacy Institute of Australia

Published by  
The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia Limited  
Level 2, 6 Campion Street, Deakin ACT 2600

The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) brings together in one organisation most of Australia's leading language and literacy educators, researchers and policy advisers in such fields as English literacy, English as a second language, English usage and style, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, languages other than English, support for interpreting and translating services, and Australian sign language. The NLLIA networks and research centres in universities around Australia facilitate research on linguistics and language and literacy education and provide advice to governments, business organisations and the general community on a full range of language matters.

Conference organiser for the Forum on Exemplary Practice held in Canberra on 17-18 November 1993 was Ms Irlande Alfred, Coordinator of the NLLIA Child Literacy and ESL Research Network.

This book was produced by the NLLIA Document Design and Research Unit, which is based at the Magill campus of the University of South Australia.

Director: Associate Professor Claire Woods  
Unit manager and editorial coordinator: Pam Ronan  
Editorial services and DTP: Solveig Grenfell  
Editor-in-residence in 1994: Beverley Barnes  
Design consultants: Cal Swann, Robert Goodwin

Printed by University of South Australia Printing

## Foreword

The International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples provided an opportunity for reflection on practices in the education of the indigenous peoples of Australia. The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia therefore convened a forum to address the question of commendable practices in teaching indigenous children in mainstream settings.

A process of national consultation to identify and describe programs and activities that could be considered exemplary was the first stage of planning the forum. This selection of 'best practice' was then presented at the forum in November 1993.

Many different issues were addressed during the forum, but there was one unifying theme. Approaches to teaching indigenous students in mainstream contexts needed to be educationally well based and of potential benefit beyond the particular setting in which the teacher or the school and its community had devised the initiative. Specifically the purpose of the forum was

- to respond to interest expressed by teachers in ways of gaining a better understanding of pedagogy that will best meet the need of the indigenous students
- to identify successful programs that could become lighthouses for teachers and administrators
- to celebrate the positive aspects of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and thus acknowledge the serious attempts made by teachers to come to terms with the complexities of teaching to diversity

The forum was successful and exciting. Teachers and researchers spent a very productive time exchanging experiences and sharing knowledge about success and how it comes about. This is in itself not as common as it ought to be, as many debates and conferences about education concern themselves primarily with problems and difficulties.

This collection of papers is an attempt to present teachers' effective classroom pedagogy to a wider group, and thus provide useful information that may encourage discussion and reflection among people who face similar situations and would benefit by comparing and contrasting successful practice in the issues related to teaching the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in mainstream classrooms.

The NLLIA wishes to acknowledge the support of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; the Australian Capital Territory Education Department; and the NLLIA's Document Design and Research Unit for preparing the publication. I wish to acknowledge the initiative and commitment of Ms Irlande Alfred, Coordinator of the NLLIA Child Literacy and ESL Research Network in organising and managing this important forum and this publication.

Joseph Lo Bianco,  
Director,  
National Languages and  
Literacy Institute of Australia

## Contents

English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students <i>Alison Jarred</i>	1
The Aboriginal Identity Course: A Midstream Evaluation <i>Simon Vaughan</i>	9
Making The Curriculum Your Own: The Senior Girls at Lajamanu School Read Glenyse Ward's <i>Wandering Girl</i> <i>Christine Nicholls</i>	15
Urban Aboriginal Children Learning to Read <i>Noreen Trouw</i>	21
Recognising Ourselves and Our Heritage <i>Sheryl Morgan</i>	28
Outline of English Language Acquisition (ELA) for Aboriginal Students <i>Sally Slattery</i>	31
Ashmont English Enrichment Program <i>Sandra Elliott</i>	34
Tutorials in Chemistry for Aboriginal Nursing Students <i>K. Draisma, R. Gluck, J. Hancock, R. Kanitz, G. Knell, W. Price, G. Sharman and J. Squires</i>	36
Inclusivity and Aboriginal Studies <i>Stella Emberson</i>	41
Mathematics and Language: Teaching with an Aboriginal Perspective <i>Mary Knight, Robyn Hurley and Steve Flavel</i>	48
English Language Arts Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students <i>Rose Cunnington</i>	54
The Koorie English Literacy Project (KELP), Shepparton District, Victoria <i>Rosemary McKenry</i>	57
Two Sisters Teaching And Writing: A Model For Education <i>Gail Dawson and Birritjalawuy Gondarra</i>	61
Kuranda Early Childhood Personal Enrichment Program (KEEP) <i>Jenni Buzacott</i>	66

# English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students

Alison Jarred

Ministry of Education, Western Australia

---

## Abstract

The English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students (ELAN) was established in 1991 in selected Western Australian primary schools to help young Aborigines reach the same level of skills as other students in compulsory schooling years. Now running in 32 schools, ELAN is based on the First Steps project, established in 1989, which (through curriculum development, school development and professional development and support) aids the children's development in literacy and numeracy. Each child's progress in reading, writing, spelling and oral language can be mapped as phases along a developmental continuum, and strategies devised to ensure that progress is maintained from year to year across the whole school. The ELAN teacher, appointed from within the school, has professional development in First Steps, Aboriginal learning styles and teaching English as a second language. This person becomes a full- or part-time resource for other teachers to help them meet the specific needs of their Aboriginal students.

---

The English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students (ELAN) is a component of the Aboriginal Education Operational Plan of the Ministry of Education, Western Australia, formulated to address the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. Specifically:

To enable Aboriginal attainment of skills to the same standard as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years.

At present, 32 schools throughout Western Australia are involved in the ELAN program. These schools all have a significant enrolment of Aboriginal students and were chosen on the basis of location (a mixture of metropolitan, country and remote areas) and their commitment to the goals of the First Steps project.

## First Steps

The ELAN program has been successful because it was built on the strengths of an existing project, First Steps, which has been operating in Western Australia since 1989. It was designed to reflect and promote the goals of the First Steps project:

- The First Steps project supports schools as they help their children to make measurable and observable progress in language and mathematics. There is a special focus on children having difficulties with learning.
- First Steps is based on the belief that learning practice has a significant effect on student outcomes and that all children can learn successfully.
- First Steps is also based on the understanding that children experiencing difficulties can be most successfully supported within the context of the classroom.

First Steps recognises that social and cultural contexts are of fundamental importance in designing educational programs. To demonstrate this principle, the First Steps team has carried out extensive research in such areas as the Central Desert and the Kimberley and in second-language centres. Results from research have enabled the team to develop a range of resources to cater for the diverse cultures, languages and abilities of Western Australian children.

First Steps provided the foundation for the ELAN program because its components included

- curriculum development
- school development
- professional development and support

These three components of the First Steps project are described below as an aid to understanding the operation of the ELAN program.

## Curriculum development

First Steps sees the acquisition of literacy and numeracy as an integrated process, although for teaching

*Alison Jarred trained and worked in Queensland as an Early Childhood teacher before moving to Western Australia in 1989. She worked in several metropolitan schools and became involved in the Ministry of Education's First Steps project in 1991. At this time she was working as an Education Support teacher, and it was through her involvement with First Steps that she began using computer touchboards to encourage students who were reluctant writers. In 1991-92 her involvement with the English Language and Numeracy Project for Aboriginal Students led to further development and trialling of resources for computer touchboards (K-7). She now works fulltime with Nadja Roelofs at Fingertip Concepts Pty Ltd, developing further Designer Overlay Packages, and a consultancy business called Hands On Concepts.*



and assessment purposes it is often necessary to focus on particular aspects within the context of the whole.

The content of First Steps is centred on *developmental continua*, which 'map the territory' of children's development in reading, writing, spelling and oral language. They are diagnostic frameworks, which enable teachers to

- assess children's understandings and skills
- monitor children's progress
- report systematically and accurately on children's current understandings and skills
- select strategies that are directly linked to a child's level of skills and understandings, to ensure that satisfactory progress is made and maintained
- provide continuity of teaching and learning throughout a school and from year to year

The developmental continua were constructed as a result of an analysis and synthesis of research relating to literacy development in various parts of the English-speaking world. Descriptions of literacy behaviours exhibited by children as they move towards mature understandings were extracted from the research. During the construction of the continua it was observed that clusters of these indicators tend to occur together; and these clusters were identified as phases of development. Within clusters, some indicators were clearly more important than others and were therefore called key indicators. Key indicators were identified according to the following characteristics:

- every person exhibits them at a specific stage of development
- they indicate the development of a significant understanding or skill
- they can be taught

Thus each developmental continuum consists of a number of phases. Within each phase are a range of indicators (descriptions of children's literacy behaviours), some of which have been designated as key indicators. Key indicators are used to establish the location of each child's development within a phase on a continuum. Each phase can be linked to appropriate teaching emphases and strategies, which can then be applied in a classroom.

The First Steps project also recognises the importance of parents in children's education. To strengthen the links between home and school, materials have been designed for parents to complement the teachers' curriculum materials. As a team, teachers and parents can track literacy development using similar diagnostic frameworks and lists of indicators.

#### *School development*

In the context of their school development plans, after data have been gathered and students' needs identified, schools may adopt literacy or numeracy as a priority for their teaching programs. Schools may then

choose First Steps as the resource that will help them to achieve their goals. The First Steps resource is offered to Western Australian schools whose staff undertake to participate on a whole-school basis, from Kindergarten to Year 7.

After the professional development sessions, the whole school staff take part in what is called a *linking day*. On this day the school adopts a small, clear focus within the general priority of literacy or numeracy. Some schools may choose spelling, for example, while others may choose to focus on teaching different text forms within the general area of writing. The linking day process involves not only refinement and definition of the school focus but also the setting up of a time-line, indicators of success, strategies for support and monitoring, examination of the integration of First Steps across the curriculum and through all year levels, and mechanisms for feedback.

#### *Professional development and support*

It is recognised that professional development alone seldom brings about fundamental change in an established system. Since the inception of First Steps, the linking of participation in professional development with classroom support for teachers has been recognised as of fundamental importance. Support is provided at three levels:

- The central team provide 'train-the-trainee' support for district-based school development officers in the delivery of professional development modules.
- School development officers provide professional development for schools as well as in-class support for classroom teachers.
- A team of 24 collaborative teachers provide direct classroom support on a collegiate basis for two classroom teachers in schools with the largest numbers of children experiencing difficulties (core schools). Collaborative teachers are seconded to the staff of a core school for one semester.

Collaborative teachers receive intensive training not only in content areas but, more importantly, in working with adults and in the facilitation of change. Extremely positive feedback was received from principals and teachers regarding the collaborative teachers' success in bringing about significant change within schools. They were perceived not as experts or as judges, but as allies, friendly and supportive colleagues. This brought about the introduction of a further level of support, which is now seen as crucial.

Focus teachers, appointed from within a school staff, receive the same content training as other participants, except that they participate twice in the content-based professional development sessions. They undertake content training the year before their school participates in First Steps but are encouraged to spend the year experimenting in their own classrooms, trying things out and internalising new features, rather than



helping their peers. In the subsequent year, they then attend professional development with their fellow teachers. This strategy has proved to be extremely helpful, as informed comments made by a 'local' teacher about the use of methodologies with 'local' children carries much weight.

During the year of whole-school participation, focus teachers are offered the same training as collaborative teachers in working with adults and facilitating change. During the linking day the school discusses their role and develops structures that will enable them to offer effective support in classrooms. The following year additional professional development is provided for those who wish to conduct in-school workshops to assist colleagues or for the induction of new teachers.

### ELAN

In 1991 the English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students program was developed to build on the three components of First Steps, yet to specifically address the needs of Aboriginal students. The specific objectives of the ELAN include

- extending teachers' understanding of the literacy and numeracy needs of Aboriginal students
- assisting teachers to assess, monitor and report on the literacy and numeracy understandings and skills of Aboriginal students
- developing and adapting materials and resources that will enhance the development of literacy and numeracy skills and understandings of Aboriginal students

To assist chosen schools to meet these objectives, an English Language and Numeracy Program teacher is appointed from within the school and released from classroom duties on a part-time or full-time basis. It is desirable that the chosen teacher is an experienced classroom practitioner, has completed First Steps professional development and has been at the school for one or more years (and therefore familiar with school resources and community aspects). These teachers receive further training like the collaborative and focus teachers previously described (in First Steps content, working with adults and facilitating change) but are given additional information about Aboriginal learning styles and culture, teaching children for whom English is a second language, and other projects conducted under the Aboriginal Education Operational Plan.

The ELAN teacher is used as a resource to provide support to classroom teachers within the context of the classroom (there are no withdrawal groups) and to conduct informal discussions with small groups of teachers and whole school staffs. The role of the ELAN teacher includes

- supporting teachers with the implementation of the First Steps materials and strategies, with a special focus on assisting Aboriginal students

- developing materials and resources appropriate for Aboriginal students, with a focus on materials to be used in conjunction with computers and membrane keyboards (concept keyboard or icon board)
- collating these materials and resources together with other relevant information and ideas
- recording and reporting on the progress of the program
- working within the framework of the school development plan
- being responsible to the principal
- and liaising with district office and central office

The operation of the ELAN program is best described in terms of how the specific objectives are addressed within the ELAN schools.

### Objective 1

The ELAN program will extend teachers' understandings of the literacy and numeracy needs of Aboriginal students.

An investigation of information relating to Aboriginal learning styles revealed that Aboriginal students' needs may be best met through activities that included

- observation and imitation
- 'having a go' and trial and error
- active participation in meaningful activities
- problem solving based on real life situations
- exploring
- experimenting
- using concrete materials

First Steps' beliefs about teaching children complement these learning styles. When planning to meet the needs of students, teachers have been asked to consider the following conditions under which *all* children learn.

### *Problem solving*

Children are active learners and make sense of their world by building, modifying and expanding upon existing understandings. Development occurs when children are confronted with real life situations that challenge their understandings about the world. Through trial and error, exploring and experimenting, children can refine the strategies they use and modify their understandings to make sense of the situation.

### *Embeddedness*

Children are more able to link new knowledge to existing understandings when they are engaged in activities that are embedded in real life contexts. In coming to terms with written language, children must be given opportunities to interact with print (to read and write) in contexts that make sense to them and have counterparts in the real world, first in role play and then in real situations (making shopping lists, identifying 'stop' signs, etc.).

**Working memory**

The capacity of the working memory (or size of the mental space, as it is sometimes called) may be judged by the number of different things a person can deal with at any one time. Young children can cope with only one or two different factors at once. As they get older they can juggle with up to four or five elements. Once ideas or skills become familiar as a result of practice over a period of time, two things happen.

One is that the learner does not have to think consciously about how to do them and therefore much less space is then taken up in the working memory (for example, spelling a very familiar word).

The other is that several different skills gradually become collapsed into one skill. For example, in learning to print, a child has to (among other things) manipulate the pencil, remember the formation of the letters and consider the order in which the marks have to appear on the page. With practice these individual skills will integrate to become one skill.

Teachers need to take the working memory into account when planning lessons. For example, during a shared book experience, teachers should expect a limit to the number of concepts that children can attend to, as well as a difference between children in what they take from the demonstration. Children may also temporarily lose competence in a familiar skill as they focus on a new one. For example, when a child is absorbed in getting ideas onto paper the quality of handwriting may deteriorate.

**Interaction**

Children need opportunities to interact with adults and other children. In these situations they use talk to plan, explore, question, discuss and direct their activities. In doing so, they try out and modify their ideas. As they use language in social situations they refine their usage and learn more about how language works. By collaborating on a task children learn from one another and are exposed to a range of problem-solving strategies.

**Time**

Children need time to construct understandings through inquiry, exploration and problem solving. In order to consolidate and integrate these understandings, children need time to practise and apply their new skills in a variety of situations. The rate of learning varies from child to child, and some may need a wide range of experiences before they can generalise and transfer their new understandings.

**Objective 2**

The ELAN program will assist teachers to assess, monitor and report on the literacy and numeracy understandings and skills of Aboriginal students.

Language and Literacy Behaviours	
chooses letters on the basis of sound without regard for conventional spelling patterns, e.g. kaj (cage), labl (table), bergla (burglar)	
develops particular spellings for certain sounds often using self-formulated rules, e.g. becaoz (because)	
substitutes incorrect letters for those with similar pronunciation, e.g. oshan (ocean)	
adds an incorrect vowel after a correct vowel or consonant, e.g. heil (hat), derum (drum)	
represents past tense in different ways according to the sounds heard, e.g. stopt (stopped), livd (lived)	
uses the letter 'r' to represent a syllable, e.g. wair (water), moitr (mother)	
confuses short vowel sounds, e.g. pill (pill)	
sometimes omits one letter of a two letter blend or digraph, e.g. log (frog), mik (milk)	
Strategies	
◆ chooses letters on the basis of sound, e.g. vampia (vampire), pepi (people)	
◆ sounds out and represents all the essential sounds in a word, e.g. kltin [kitten], wacht [watched], spider [spider], isgram [icecream]	
still uses some letter name strategies, e.g. awa (away), axelint (excellent)	
usually spells commonly used sight words correctly, e.g. in, has, his, ha my	
uses some known patterns in words, e.g. mathursday (mothers' day), night (night)	
is beginning to use syllabification for spelling longer words. May omit some syllables, e.g. telaton (telephone), butull (beautiful)	
Word Knowledge	
shows increased influence of spelling words encountered in books	
identifies similar sounding words	
is beginning to use simple homonyms/homophones correctly, e.g. them/there, park, nail, trunk	
continues to 'have-a-go' - experimenting with spelling words in different ways	
Affective	
is willing to 'have a go' at representing speech in print form	
sees self positively as a writer - speller	
confidently makes decisions	
is willing to spell on his/her own	
uses word sources confidently	

Figure 1 The phonetic phase of the spelling developmental continuum. (Source: Ministry of Education, Western Australia)

In ELAN schools teachers use developmental continua to 'map' the children's development in reading, writing, spelling and oral language. Teachers have found the developmental continua to be sensitive and accurate diagnostic frameworks for identifying

children's current levels of skills and understandings. Knowing where 'children are at' and knowing what to do about it helps teachers to make decisions about literacy development in their classroom.

For example, when assessing children's spelling ability, teachers look at samples of the child's draft writing that show signposts of development through misspellings. This procedure is seen to provide more relevant information than the results of a general spelling test. Using the data, teachers can identify what their student knows about the English spelling system. Young child's spelling attempts such as 'jimmasticks' and 'jenyouwine' are seen not as errors but as indicators of a child's transition from basic sound-symbol correspondence to 'phonetic' spelling. By building up a profile of the child from the lists of indicators in each phase, teachers can make informed decisions about learning priorities and teaching strategies.

This view of spelling development is a far cry from the old 'spelling list' approach, where some children practised words they could already spell while others regularly failed the fortnightly test. As one teacher said after using the developmental continua, 'I will never look at my children's spelling mistakes in the same light again. Not only are my children clever, they are brilliant!' Her enthusiasm was generated by the sample of writing produced by a six-year-old Aboriginal student, shown in Figure 2.

Mistakes in this sample are viewed as being part of the process of learning. The child was able to provide an almost perfect match between letters and sounds. In attempting to capture the spirit of the Christmas story, he was willing to take risks and 'have a go' at interesting words. Throughout the year, the teacher had encouraged his attempts to write, identified spelling rules and letter patterns, and structured lessons to extend developing understandings. The developmental continua helped this teacher monitor her student's progress and report systematically and accurately on his literacy behaviours.

Teachers can use indicators such as the phonetic phase of the spelling developmental continuum (shown in Figure 1) to map children's developing understandings about the English spelling system.

A unique feature of the resource is the continuity of assessment that is provided from year to year. The same continua are designed to be used from Kindergarten through to Year 7 and, if necessary, into secondary school. There are no other assessment techniques that offer such continuity and breadth of evaluation.

### Objective 3

The ELAN program will develop and adapt materials and resources that will enhance the development of literacy and numeracy skills and understandings of Aboriginal students.

Chris  
 A loon loon time.  
 go Mary and  
 Joseph wet to  
 Bethlehem and Mary  
 had to ride on a  
 donkey. But Mary  
 and Joseph was  
 tid. Tha had to ust  
~~ask~~ eveebutee  
 But one lede  
 let Mary and  
 Joseph sleep in a stable  
 Joseph med a woom  
 bed un too beby  
 Jesus was boon un too  
 3 wis men saw a big  
 brit star tha fadid  
 The star

Chris, Year 1

Figure 2 (A long long time ago Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem and Mary had to ride on a donkey. But Mary and Joseph were tired. They had to ask everybody out one lady let Mary and Joseph sleep in a stable. Joseph made a warm bed until baby Jesus was born. Three wise men saw a big bright star. They followed the star.)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

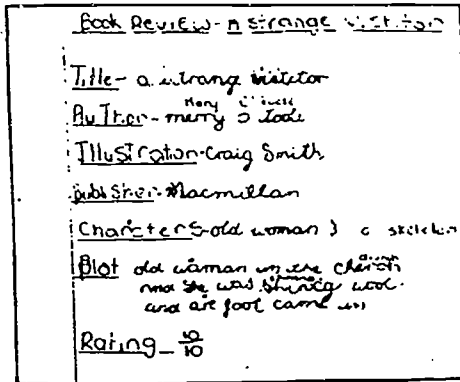


Figure 3 (a) Book review written by Buffy using a pen and paper. Buffy spent 30 minutes completing this task, headings were given, and the task appeared well known. However, Buffy experienced difficulty locating the author and publisher and also retelling the plot.

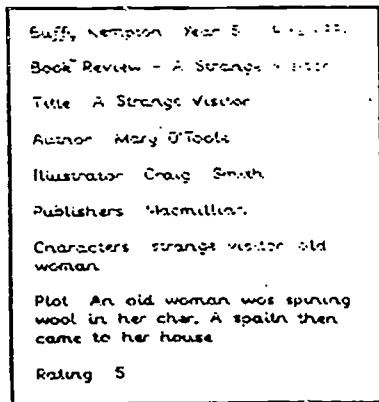


Figure 3 (b) Book review written by Buffy using a computer with a keyboard overlay. She spent 10 minutes completing this task without assistance; she had no difficulty locating the author and publisher; and her plot was written with much greater clarity.

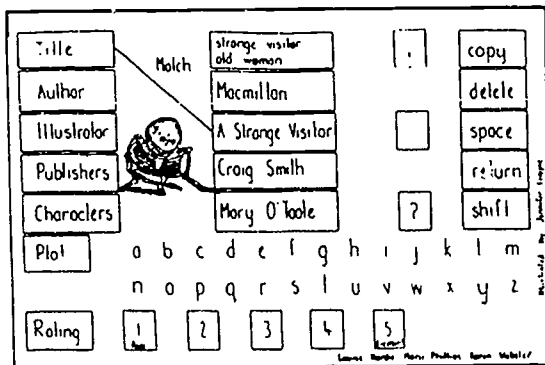


Figure 3 (c) The keyboard overlay used by Buffy and other Year 5 students for reviewing one particular book.

Computer resources

Emphasis has been placed on the development of resources for computers, especially membrane keyboards such as the concept keyboard or icon board (Mikrodaisy). A membrane keyboard has touch-sensitive cells that can be pressed to reveal prerecorded messages. It can either replace the standard computer keyboard or be used in conjunction with it. When an overlay (a sheet of paper) is placed over the keyboard, children can be challenged to write whole words, sentences or phrases at the touch of a finger, enabling them to produce written materials quickly and effectively.

At one ELAN school, Carnarvon Primary School, research was conducted comparing pencil-and-paper activities with the same tasks completed using a computer and keyboard overlay. Year 5 students were asked to complete a book review of *A Strange Visitor* by Mary O'Toole (Macmillan 1987), and examples of one student's work are shown in Figure 3 (a) and (b).

Comparing the plot summary of the two samples, we can appreciate the benefits of reducing the mechanics of the writing task. When using the overlay on a suitably-programmed computer, Buffy had more 'memory space' to focus on the content of her writing and was able to convey her ideas more effectively.

Teachers use word processing software to design their own overlays or adapt existing overlays to meet their students' needs. By having control of the content presented, teachers can ensure that it reflects the context of the classroom and makes the computer an effective tool for extending the students' current understandings.

Figure 4 shows the keyboard overlay used after the children had made damper, when they were asked to write the recipe by sequencing the steps they had followed. Different forms of text can be manipulated or created in this way to help children appreciate how they are constructed.

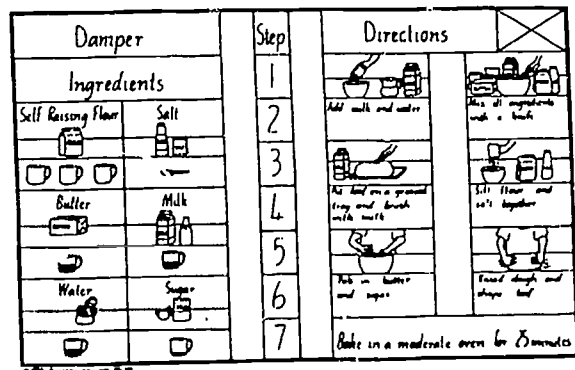


Figure 4 The keyboard overlay on a computer programmed for writing a damper recipe.



*Barrier games*

ELAN teachers have also developed a variety of 'barrier games', which have been very effective in developing and consolidating the students' mathematical knowledge and concepts, while giving them a real context in mathematics to develop descriptive language.

Barrier games are based on giving and receiving instructions. A physical barrier is placed between two players, the speaker and the listener, who are required to interact and use language to complete a task. The person nominated as the speaker arranges a set of materials and then provides information for the listener to reproduce this arrangement. The listener asks questions to clarify any information that is incomplete or unclear. Finally, the barrier is removed, and the players compare their placement of the materials. The speaker learns the importance of giving explicit and complete information to the listener, while the listener learns the importance of monitoring information and using questions to clarify or gain further information. Initial instruction for barrier games requires extensive modelling and specific instruction to develop vocabulary related to size, shape and position.



Figure 5 A barrier game, with the speaker on the left and the listener on the right.

**The success of ELAN**

The English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students has been very successful in meeting its objectives and has provided significant and measurable outcomes at three levels:

- whole school
- classroom
- individual student

*Whole school*

The role of the ELAN program in any school is linked to the school development plan, which is formulated through decisions made by the whole staff to identify and meet the school priorities. The ELAN teacher and

the First Steps materials are resources the school uses to meet the objectives of the identified need (or priority).

Developmental continua provide the school with a means of ongoing monitoring that is consistent and gives continuity to whole-school decisions about the allocation and use of resources, both people and materials. By monitoring children's literacy behaviours in this way from Kindergarten to Year 7, the school can collect valuable information about Aboriginal students' long-term learning.

Computer software packages have been developed to assist teachers and administrators in recording and analysing data. 'Profiler' is a classroom-based program for recording literacy behaviours of individuals or whole classes. The 'STAR' program collates these data across the whole school and is useful for analysing literacy strengths and weaknesses. Information on individual students, classes or special groups (identified by gender or culture) can be presented as graphs, reports and profiles for use by the school.

*Classroom*

Classroom teachers have benefited from the ongoing support provided by the ELAN teacher. Levels of support have included

- professional development for individual teachers
- release time for teachers to use the development continua and develop appropriate materials
- demonstration lessons of new strategies within the context of the classroom program
- assistance with planning (short- and long-term) to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal students

The developmental continua have provided teachers with a 'common language' to describe their students' literacy behaviours. This has facilitated networking among teachers and given them increased opportunities to share ideas and details of strategies that have proved successful. Notes passed on to teachers from year to year are now valued for the specific information they provide about what children can do.

*Individual students*

In schools where the ELAN program and First Steps have been operating since 1991, Aboriginal students have shown significant improvement in literacy. This can be evidenced by their movement along the developmental continua.

**General**

Twice a year all ELAN teachers meet together to share resources they have developed and to discuss successful teaching practices they have used or observed. This collaboration is important to the success of the program, because by providing opportunities for teachers to pool their ideas it ensures that we continue to find better ways of meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

The ELAN program has also been responsible for training Aboriginal Education Workers (allocated to schools having more than 30 Aboriginal students) and Aboriginal Liaison Officers (district-based) in the same First Steps principles and materials so that they may support staff and students more effectively. Part of this training also focuses on working with Aboriginal parents in order to build stronger links between the community and the school. In 1994 ELAN teachers will attend the workshops with their school's Aboriginal Education Worker in order to provide ongoing long-term support.

The ELAN program has been very successful because of its links with First Steps. Collaboration and cooperation between projects is being encouraged in Western Australia, and in 1994 the ELAN program will work with the Aboriginal health project to review, trial, suggest and refine teaching strategies for communicating health ideas in primary schools.

#### **References**

- Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993. *Aboriginal Education Operational Plan 1993-95*. Perth.
- Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993. *First Steps Developmental Continua and Modules*. Perth.

## The Aboriginal Identity Course: A Midstream Evaluation

*Simon Vaughan*  
Calwell High School, Canberra, ACT

---

### Abstract

The Aboriginal Identity course was created as an elective unit for students in Years 9 and 10 at Calwell High School, a new school in Canberra with a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal students. Even in its first year, 1993, the semester-long course run by a team of two teachers was attracting class sizes of 45 students, 12 of whom were Aborigines. Its primary outcome is that students understand and learn from the achievements of Australia's indigenous people. Secondary outcomes include increasing the level of the students' literacy skills and giving them confidence to express their point of view in other classes. Key learning areas in the course reflect the multidisciplinary approach offered by ACT high schools: history, archaeology and anthropology, literature, media studies, sport, technology and environmental studies.

---

The Aboriginal Identity unit was developed in response to strong interest expressed by Aboriginal students and their friends at Calwell High School, in the Tuggeranong Valley to the south of Canberra. The high school is Canberra's newest and has been in operation since 1990.

The unit is offered as an elective course to Years 9 and 10 students as a vertically integrated class as part of the social education program at the school. The semester-long course was run for the first time in 1993, and evaluation of it is, at present, an ongoing process, of which this paper is a small part. The school itself has an active Aboriginal Students Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program running in accordance with ACT Department of Education guidelines, and this course is the latest addition to the social justice efforts of the school.

### Background to the unit

I believe that any curriculum designed to meet the needs of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students should be contextual; that is, it must be designed with the community's demographics—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—at its core.

A two-way school should provide for the skills and knowledge from both cultures to be learned; all involving a source of knowledge, a style of doing things, and learning contexts that authentically match each body of learning. Teachers and students must know in which of the two ways they are engaged in at all times, otherwise too many grey areas and confusions will eventuate and lack of direction and teacher ambivalence will set in. The best conceptual framework I can think of for school organisation and curriculum design to meet all the requirements of a two-way school is culture domain separation within the school. (Harris 1990, page 14)

Stephen Harris based his educational philosophy on his extensive work in Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory, founded on his background in applied linguistics. The approach, as defined by Harris, heavily influenced the design of our course in its initial stages.

This presents problems in ACT high schools because of the nature of the population of the Australian Capital Territory. Local legend has it that the name 'Canberra' meant 'meeting place' in the Ngunawal language, and in many ways this is an accurate description of the current population of the nation's capital. Just as much of the non-Aboriginal population is made up of people who have moved from other parts of Australia to live in Canberra, the same can be said of the Aboriginal population. So, instead of having a social context, you really need to speak of social

*Simon Vaughan graduated from the Australian National University with a field program major in Aboriginal studies, a major in English and a major in prehistory. On completing a graduate diploma of education, he began teaching in 1992 and in the second semester joined Calwell High School, which at the time was completing its curriculum documents. He coauthored the Aboriginal Identity unit and began team-teaching it with Ms Chris Warren in 1993.*



contexts. The two-way school that Harris envisages may not therefore be achievable in the ACT. It would have to be a four- or five-way school to meet the needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Aboriginal Identity unit at Calwell High School is designed as a cross-curriculum, multidisciplinary course of study that follows the lines of the field program offered at the Australian National University. It serves a two-fold purpose in relation to the eight key learning areas offered by every high school in the ACT.

Firstly, the unit allows students to focus the skills that they are acquiring in other fields of study in an Aboriginal context. Secondly, it allows all students and teachers (not only the students enrolled in the unit) access to resources for use in the other curriculum areas. This also allows for a modified domain-style approach, which is at the core of a two-way school described by Harris. (Note that Harris' definition of a domain is a socio-linguistic one, which has connotations of 'content, physical space and the way things are done'. (Harris 1990, page 14).)

After the course had been written I applied successfully for a curriculum development grant, which has greatly assisted both the unit and the school. The materials will eventually become a full resource section in the school library and will be able to be accessed by teachers at the feeder primary schools and interested community members.

#### Outcomes of the course

The Aboriginal Identity course is designed to meet the needs of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in understanding and learning from the achievements of Australia's indigenous peoples. This is the primary outcome of the unit.

The focus of this conference is also one of the most important secondary outcomes for students in the school: increasing the level of their literacy skills. Other secondary outcomes of the course are to empower students to use the skills they are acquiring in technology, music, science, social education, arts, maths and languages in a context that focuses on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Literacy (in the sense of successful use and understanding of the English language) is the most important of the secondary outcomes, because it has been a source of frustration for many students at Calwell High School. Some of the non-Aboriginal students live in socio-economic situations that are not vastly different from those of many Aboriginal students. There is common ground in this and in the level of literacy skills of many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In the spirit of the primary outcome of the course, we have learned a great deal from the way Aboriginal students learn, and we used this knowledge to assist non-Aboriginal students to experience success.

First, Aboriginal children see literacy as a group activity, not as an individualistic one. They refuse to be detached from their peers to cooperate with individualistic Western teaching methodology.

Second, Western literacy presumes that knowledge and ideas can be recorded as objects and stored. This decontextualising and objectifying of information is not acceptable. Christie's third point (1989, page 30) is that Aboriginal society is responsive rather than planned, in the sense that they want to respond to what is going on around them rather than keep strictly to a preset timetable, with Aboriginal teachers being free to use literacy to 'share and explore Aboriginal ways of doing things with pupils' rather than to produce readers and writers. (Harris 1990, page 108)

We have experienced problems in resourcing the unit to an acceptable level in the areas of Aboriginal languages and mathematics. Aboriginal language use has been limited to an intermittent use of written materials that contain Aboriginal words and Aboriginal English. Jack Davis's play *Kullark* is one of these. It has been used in conjunction with the *Women of the Sun* series to give students access to Aboriginal views on the invasion of Australia. I would have liked to have followed this initial unit of work with a unit on the Ngunawal language, but lacked the contact to engage a traditional language user and have only basic knowledge in this area. Nevertheless, I have had the pleasure of Stan Grant's company in a Year 8 class to assist in a unit on Aboriginal people's language, and we expect to extend such a service into the senior course.

Thus far, the successes achieved in the course have revolved around cooperative rather than competitive learning, 'watching—doing—repeating' and then more repetition, and relating the resource materials to personal experience. Sharing the experiences of teachers and students has been the most valuable way of working on literacy skills. This is assisted by the understanding that students sometimes prefer to express themselves in the vernacular, as a valid form of communication. Our expectations are that success will come from working within the level of the students and then raising that level—not setting them a standard that they don't yet understand and expecting them to meet it.

The yardstick by which we measure success is based on the achievements of not only the disaffected students but also those with a high record of academic achievement. Indeed, the materials we use are selected on the basis that they will engage both ends of this spectrum. Most of the works of Aboriginal authors are ideal for the range of ability present in any class, as it can be understood and then responded to at varying levels of understanding.

### **The students**

The students who take the unit have diverse cultural, academic and social backgrounds. In 1993 there were 12 Aboriginal students, who had come from as far afield as Condobolin, Forbes, Newcastle and Jervis Bay. All students in the class are in Years 9 and 10, although the resources of the unit are also available to Years 7 and 8 students.

Around the school the community includes single-parent families, middle-class Canberrans and students supporting themselves in their own homes. As a result there is a great degree of variation among the students' backgrounds in regard to Aboriginal people. One student, in particular, is still coming to terms with the racist comments she hears at home and the material she is exposed to at school. For students like her, it is difficult to practice literacy acquired in class because the environment at home is hostile to the subject.

Other students doing the course (some of whom are Aboriginal) had been very disaffected with school in general and had been given that familiar tag of 'problem students'. It would be foolish to say that the course's flexible curriculum is reaching all disaffected students, but some of them are its notable successes. Frequently, these students have problems when it comes to the level of literacy they are exposed to through family and friends. One student told me that he got his father to help him with an assignment in English but was given worse marks than usual because his father's skills were weaker than his.

The resources used in the unit have been screened and, in some instances, adapted with the assistance of my teaching partner, Chris Warren, to provide useful lessons with achievable goals for all students in the class, regardless of their ability.

It has been disappointing when some students have given up all together and have even harassed their colleagues who are achieving success. For example, one Aboriginal girl was given a barrage of criticism by her friends because of an excellent mid-semester report. This is a reflection of the culture that this new school is gradually overcoming, and eventually achievements of this nature will be recognised more positively by all members of the student body. There are still difficulties in assessment when some of the achievement is not strictly measurable because it is personal growth for individual students in the class. Some of these students have submitted more work in this course than in all their previous school years put together, but even so, it is still not enough to obtain a passing grade for them (a story familiar to teachers!).

### **Strategies**

Flexibility is all-important in the approach we have taken for this unit. The students' written undertakings are varied, ranging from an extensive list of creative

responses, to an essay on an issue that the students see as relevant. These are always started with a group sharing session, so that the ideas become communal and stem from the experience of those in the class. The class is then divided into smaller groups for the more intimate sharing of expression and ideas, in which a repetition of reading, understanding and responding takes place. It is important that models of written work be provided so that the students in the class can see the type of thing being asked of them before they begin the task itself.

There is always a great deal of oral communication and visual stimuli before students undertake a written task. The assessment of the end product must take the process into account so that it can accurately reflect the involvement of the student. At all times it is essential that students are exposed to the written (even if it was initially oral) communication of Aboriginal people; without this, students do not benefit from the highly expressive nature of the Aboriginal communicator.

Flexibility has also helped with the teacher's perennial problem: How do I get through all of this work when the students are off sick, on excursions, at sporting events or just skip a day here and there? It applies as much to this unit as to any other in any school in any public system in the country. Unfortunately the problem cannot be overcome easily, and nearly all teachers develop some form of flexibility to accommodate other (equally as important) learning situations for the students concerned.

Flexibility in assessing students doing the unit is built into an assessment contract, which the students are given at the beginning of the course. They then see what they are in for during the course and can negotiate assistance on various assessment items. The timing of assessment items can also be adjusted, so that we can accommodate all the pursuits of students in the class. A great deal of set-up time is needed, and we therefore introduce the reading early, with music and film where applicable.

### *A unit of work over one term of 10 weeks*

The best example is perhaps our study of Aboriginal deaths in custody. We started the students with a short dance piece by the Bangarra Dance Theatre (part of the ABC's *Seven Deadly Sins* television series) and asked for small groups of students to get together to discuss their initial responses. The video was repeated and the responses written on butcher's paper by the small groups. Then a response was called for on an individual basis. We followed the video with a reading of poetry by Robert Walker and related it to the experience of anyone in the class who had felt something similar. Next we produced a booklet of articles relating to Aboriginal deaths in custody (the booklet produced primarily by teachers but with contribution and some editing by students) and supplemented the reading of

Lastly we got the whole class to talk about what they had understood from the material so far encountered, while we noted their responses on the whiteboard. The teachers then modelled the beginning of an essay for the students to attempt and encouraged them to form small groups to discuss their personal experience of the process of writing an essay. The majority of the students successfully wrote an essay.

#### **Integration with the literacy program**

As already mentioned, the course is designed as a discrete course of study to highlight the achievements of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. It does allow us to focus on the skills the students need for the other seven key learning areas, acting in the role of a specialist or consultant. We are able to separate Aboriginal knowledge and achievements into the category of special and unique, while at the same time showing how this knowledge and achievement benefits us all.

We also infiltrate other teaching areas with resources, and this has led to more students becoming interested in doing the unit, which I hope to extend in future years. It also allows our students to occupy a role as experts or consultants to their colleagues, who at times need their assistance. For some of these students, this is an unusual position to occupy. The Aboriginal students have gained, as they can now confidently express their point of view in other classes because they see how it is valued in the Aboriginal Identity course in which they increased their literacy skills.

#### **Successful?**

It is always difficult to assess how successful you are in your classroom at reaching students and increasing the level of their knowledge and skills. The evidence is usually anecdotal or to be seen in future years.

Two particular stories made me smile over the course of a difficult semester. The first concerns one of our more expressive students, who drafted and typed a letter to the editor of the *Canberra Times* to protest against cuts in the ACT government's budget. I misunderstood her letter and asked if the day-long strike action was really going to distress her so much. Her reply was that that was not the problem—she didn't want her graduation interrupted by industrial action. She was going to be the first in her family to graduate from high school.

The second story, which keeps me smiling, concerns three Aboriginal girls who helped me draft a letter to Archie Roach's management to persuade him to visit the school. As I typed, they leaned over my shoulder criticising my expression and calling me an idiot at every typing error I made. Who is teaching whom, I wonder?

#### **The teaching team**

The colleague with whom I team-teach the unit is Ms Chris Warren, a master teacher. Without her, the course would not have been able to be run in its current context. In her 21 years of teaching, Chris has spent much of her time as a teacher of the English language to students of varying backgrounds in two different school systems. Although her knowledge in the field of Aboriginal education was limited at first, she had a well-established relationship with most of the school's Aboriginal students and assisted by looking at the resources and supplying the experience to use them successfully in the context of this unit.

The course and the school have greatly benefited from the assistance of the ASSPA coordinator, Chris Wylks, and the Aboriginal home liaison officer, Darryl Townie, both of whom were a great help to the teachers and the students.

---

#### **Year 9 and 10 Course**

**Concept area: Society (Group A units)**

#### **The Aboriginal Identity**

Year 9 and 10 elective unit

Duration: 1 semester

#### *Unit description*

The Aboriginal Studies unit provides students with the opportunity to focus on the diversity of culture and experience of Aboriginal people today and in the millennium that has passed. Aboriginal Studies is a field program designed to engage both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. This approach will enrich students with wider appreciation and respect for the beliefs of other peoples.

Key learning areas incorporated in the field program are representative of the multidisciplinary approach.

These areas include history, archaeology and anthropology, literature, media studies, sport, technology and environmental studies. A range of issues will be explored in these key learning areas. These include land rights, racism, racial stereotypes, evolution, cultural difference and perspectives and media representation.

Students will engage in a number of activities such as group discussion and field trips, research and interpretation tasks such as assignments and essays.



#### Unit outcomes

Indications of success in this unit may include

- an understanding of the prehistoric timeframe and development of Aboriginal peoples
- an understanding of the different perspectives of the invasion of Australia by European peoples
- an understanding of both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal lifestyles
- an ability to understand the constructed nature of the cultural perception of Aboriginal peoples by non-Aboriginals
- an ability to participate constructively in group discussions and exercises
- an ability to effectively communicate written ideas
- an awareness and understanding of the concept of *terra nullius*
- an awareness and understanding of the bearing of this concept and its bearings to concepts of modern land rights
- an ability to understand the nature of the cultural perception of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginals
- a definition of Aboriginals
- a general knowledge of the major atrocities committed against Aboriginal people
- the events and processes that led to the current situation for at least two major issues that resulted from the disruption of traditional Aboriginal life caused by development and expansion of European settlement from 1788, eg identity/kinship, health/poverty, housing, education, employment, land, deaths in custody
- an awareness of the rediscovering of Aboriginal identity as evidenced by such movements as the Homelands Movement
- an understanding of Aboriginal spiritualism versus modern religion
- recognise and appreciate the basic goals of Australian Aborigines and other indigenous peoples in their struggle for equity and justice, eg treaties, land (acquisition, rights, royalties, self-management, sacred sites), self-determination, maintenance of language and cultures, education, health, laws and government policy
- contribute to a group performance that demonstrates knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people and cultures
- demonstrate an understanding of kinship and its importance to the Aboriginal identity
- an understanding and appreciation of the different values and attitudes of a society
- an ability to recognise changing attitudes and to evaluate the reasons for those changes
- an ability to synthesise material from throughout the unit when looking at overall issues
- an awareness of the breaking down of subject barriers when studying a particular event
- identification of bias, propaganda and prejudice
- an ability to compare sources in terms of reliability, intent and bias
- an ability to test commonly held views and theories against the available evidence
- an ability to make value judgements about controversial issues
- the presentation of informed and critical views and logical arguments in written and oral form

#### Recommended activities

As this unit is multidisciplinary and a degree of specialist knowledge is an advantage which not everyone may have, the recommended activities section takes the form of a mixture of possible topics/content, and activities which maximise use of the material and enable the outcomes to be met. The list is intended as a guide only and is not prescriptive but does give a teacher not well versed in the subject some ideas of the ways to integrate the subject areas and possible areas of study.

- an assortment of field trips including Lake Mungo (one of the oldest Aboriginal occupation site in Australian prehistory) through to local Aboriginal sites and contemporary institutions (such as AIATSIS)
- number of readings and simulation of Aboriginal oral histories
- an analysis of some Aboriginal literature
- the analysis of media portrayal of Aboriginal people through television, music, film and print
- workshops on producing Aboriginal art with involvement and approval of local Aboriginal people
- organise and maintain a journal of newspaper clippings, and personal reactions to those clippings
- compile a 'before and after' issues file where students are given the topic, write a response off the top of their head and then de-brief some notes after the topic is examined
- guest speakers from Aboriginal groups
- guest speakers from Aboriginal agencies
- development of research and essay writing skills in general
- plan and implement an Aboriginal awareness day, linked in with NAIDOC Week (organised by the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) if the unit is being taught in the same semester
- a visit to the Australian National Gallery to gain or enhance an understanding and appreciation of the unique role of Aboriginal art and its prominence in the art world
- definition of key words and concepts
- excursions to make students aware of bush tucker
- find out how Aborigines reacted to Australia's Bicentennial of European Settlement
- have an open day for Aboriginal parents

**References**

- Christie, M., 1989. 'Literacy, Genocide and the Media',  
*The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 17, No.5, October-  
November.
- Harris, Stephen, 1990. *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling:  
Education and Cultural Survival*. Canberra: Aboriginal  
Studies Press.

## Making The Curriculum Your Own: The Senior Girls at Lajamanu School Read Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl*

Christine Nicholls  
Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA

### Abstract

Books about middle-class English children and their talking toys did not inspire greater literacy in the senior girls' class at Lajamanu School in the Tanami Desert (Northern Territory) but reading Glenyse Ward's autobiographical *Wandering Girl* had a profound effect on them. They identified immediately with the girl, who was roughly the same age as themselves. Several of them had personal knowledge of how, as recently as the 1960s, government authorities took Aboriginal children from their families and put them into 'care', and eventually into a black servant class. By placing *Wandering Girl* on the curriculum, Lajamanu's principal and her colleagues gave the subject matter legitimacy and helped the senior girls to understand recent Aboriginal history.

Recently I read a wonderful book, *Lucy*, by the West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid. It is the first-person account of a nineteen-year-old girl who has left her island in the West Indies to go to the United States as an *au pair*. At first Lucy is enchanted by the seeming perfection of her new employers, Lewis and Mariah, and their four daughters, but little by little she changes her early evaluation of the family and what they stand for. On being shown daffodils in spring for the first time, Lucy's surprising response is anger and an urgent desire to cut them down with a scythe. She recalls having to recite Wordsworth's famous poem as a child in the West Indies.

I said 'Mariah, do you realise that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?'

As soon as I said this, I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes. This woman who hardly knew me loved me, and she wanted me to love this thing—a grove brimming over with daffodils in bloom—that she loved also.

Mariah is chronically unable to see what Lucy can see only too clearly. Her failure to understand Lucy's violent reaction to the daffodils, and her blithe expectation that Lucy will automatically see things in the way that she, Mariah, sees them, is controlling and patronising, as well as a lost cause.

### Our choice of literature

*Lucy* is a novel, not a curriculum document or tract. However, there is a profound message in it for people who teach children belonging to a culture subordinate to their own: Do not expect the children to love what you have loved or to enjoy the books or poems or essays that you enjoyed when you were at school. Non-Aboriginal teachers frequently, in good faith, read their own childhood favourites to Aboriginal children in their classrooms and are disappointed or even angry when the children fail to respond to what evokes powerful memories of their own childhood.

In fact, the study of some Western books or literary works may be a profoundly alienating experience for some Aboriginal children. The material can be interpreted in totally different ways. Yet it is important not to assume that the children will not like the books or that they are incapable of appreciating the literature of another tradition.

Apart from being great fiction, *Lucy* offers us insight into the situation of a child who has received a colonial education that may have been a quality education but did nothing to equip her to understand her own condition.

Christine Nicholls has 20 years of teaching experience at all levels from preschool to tertiary. From 1982 to 1991 she was a teacher and then the principal of Lajamanu School in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory. After this she was appointed Principal Education Officer - Bilingual Education for the Northern Territory Education Department, with responsibility for 21 Aboriginal language programs in 17 different Aboriginal languages. She is now a lecturer in Australian studies at Flinders University of South Australia.

The literature to which we relate the best when we are young is the literature in which we see ourselves represented and reflected, however indirectly. It is a way of expanding our understanding of ourselves and others. Many Aboriginal children and children of other marginalised groups rarely have the experience of self-recognition in the books to which they are exposed (sometimes force-fed) in Australian classrooms. They are either invisible in the literature or, on those rare occasions when they are represented, it is in the form of a stereotype, often a racist one. Examples of this include Mrs Aeneas Gunn's books, especially *We of the Never-Never*. Her books portray Aborigines as living in a state of perpetual childhood, often stupid or lazy, and definitely in need of a firm hand (such as her own) to keep them in line. The curriculum, by and large, continues to be geared to the hypothetical 'mainstream', which is a synonym for white, male and middle-class.

#### Winnie the Pooh

From 1982 to 1991 I worked at Lajamanu School in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory. Lajamanu is home to about 700 Warlpiri people, 200 of whom are children attending the local school. In 1984 I became the principal of the school.

The question of curriculum was an important one at Lajamanu School. Children learned in their own language, Warlpiri, and in English. There was a competent and committed team of Warlpiri people working with a teacher-linguist in the bilingual literacy centre, producing books (fiction and non-fiction) in the Warlpiri language for bilingual studies in all curriculum areas.

Once the Warlpiri side of the school curriculum was on course, I began to address the serious lack of appropriate English reading material for use in the school's upper grades. A trip to the school's storeroom revealed huge piles of mouldy books, literally covered with cobwebs. The books were arranged in class sets marked 'Suitable for Grade 7', 'Suitable for Post-Primary' and so on. There were class sets of *Winnie the Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner* (some long-departed teacher had been a real fan of A.A. Milne), Hugh Lofting's *Dr Dolittle* series and Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, among others. These books were obviously not the most riveting reading material for desert teenagers for whom English is a second language. Stories about a dysfunctional child who is capable of relating only to his toys (notably his talking bear), a barely disguised colonial tract, and a Swedish girl who has all kinds of adventures in the snow, were hardly likely to inspire these young adults to become 'hooked on books'.

Indeed, Warlpiri children found the many English books dramatising the adventures of talking animals particularly silly. Such books are based on Western

constructions of the child, which emphasise the separation of the world of children from the adult world, rather than their integration into it. This separation does not exist in Warlpiri life—except in the school.

In an article entitled 'The Culture of Literacy' (1979) Eric Willmot distinguishes between two kinds of literacy: technical literacy and cultural literacy. He writes that Aboriginal people frequently become technically literate while failing to be 'culturally literate' and that this is linked to the failure of many Aboriginal children to perform well in school. Given that the books stored in the Lajamanu bookroom typify the reading material frequently offered to Aboriginal children, this is hardly surprising.

I therefore wrote a submission to what was called the Disadvantaged Schools Program, and our school was successful in receiving several thousand dollars to buy appropriate novels for the senior students. We used the money to purchase class sets of more suitable reading matter.

#### Providing a meaningful curriculum

Because of the remote location of the school, relief teachers were hard to come by; usually we could get an emergency relief teacher only if someone was on several months' sick leave. As principal of the school it was my responsibility to take the classes of teachers who were away sick, as well as provide relief for the senior teacher in the school.

In 1989 Terri Hughes, the teacher of the senior girls' class, was Lajamanu School's senior teacher. I was required to relieve her of her teaching duties 25 percent of the time, so that she could perform her administrative duties. Terri and I and many of the other teachers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, spent time discussing the tendency of Warlpiri children to 'plateau' in their school performance around adolescence, and the possible reasons for it.

We concluded that the relative absence of challenging and relevant materials and learning units—a failure on the part of teachers and the system to provide a meaningful curriculum for the children—was a significant factor contributing to this unacceptable situation. We therefore decided to embark on a unit of study with the senior girls, choosing Glenyse Ward's novel *Wandering Girl* as the text.

The resistance of Aboriginal children to an unsuitable and colonising education expresses itself not only in flight (for example, misbehaving in classrooms, which is one way of rejecting what is offered) but also in flight. Children demonstrate this by erratic attendance patterns, truancy and sometimes ceasing to attend school altogether because they are unable to see any connection between school and that other world in which the really important parts of their life are conducted.



The senior girls' class was a composite one, with girls ranging in age from 10 or 11, to about 16 or 17. With a couple of exceptions, the girls could read and write well. There was one white child in the class, a bright ten-year-old, whose parents had unfortunately imbued her with white supremacist beliefs. The child therefore made a poor fit with the Warlpiri girls, who were proud and strong and confident in their Warlpiri identity and naturally disdainful of anyone who looked down on them.

#### Glenyse Ward's story

The book we selected for the girls was *Wandering Girl*, Glenyse Ward's powerful autobiographical account of her experiences as a teenager in Western Australia in the 1960s, when she went to work as a domestic servant for white people.

The government policy of that time meant that many Aboriginal children Australia-wide were forcibly removed from their natural parents, with little or no pretext, and sent to live on missions or placed in orphanages or other forms of 'care'. This policy was implemented over a period of about 70 years, and thousands of people were affected by it. Even today most Aboriginal people know someone who was forcibly taken from their family as a direct result of this policy. An extract from the report of the Aborigines Welfare Board of 1911 reads:

...to allow these children to remain on the Reserves to grow up in comparative idleness in the midst of more or less vicious surroundings would be, to say the least, an injustice to the children themselves, and a positive menace to the State.

Glenyse Ward was one such child, removed from her mother when she was little, and taken to live on a Catholic Mission run by German nuns and priests. These people ran the mission with military precision, regimenting almost every aspect of the children's lives. This part of Glenyse Ward's life is covered in her second book, *Unna You Fullas*, an equally good book, also recommended for use in secondary classes, not only for young Aborigines but also for non-Aboriginal students to help fill the gaps in standard history books.

*Wandering Girl* begins where *Unna You Fullas* leaves off, at the point where the sixteen-year-old Glenyse is sent away from the Wandering Mission, which she sees as a safe haven, and goes to work for the nasty (although not unrepresentative) Mrs Bigelow and her husband and sons. Glenyse is taught her place as 'Mrs Bigelow's dark servant' and given inferior food and drink, which she is made to eat and drink from a tin plate and a tin mug while the family have china plates and cups. The young woman has to work every day until she is virtually ready to drop. She must get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, and her first job every day is to sweep the huge driveway leading up to the Bigelow's

property, in total darkness. She accompanies Mrs Bigelow into town to help her do the shopping, but when they return home Glenyse is made to disinfect the car seat on which she had been sitting. Mrs Bigelow constantly drums into her the message that she is useless and inferior. She is exploited unmercifully and is lonely and isolated. As a result of her strange childhood, those years spent in the confined world of the nuns and the priests, she is almost totally ignorant of the ways of the world.

None of this crushes the spirit of the young Glenyse, who eventually manages to triumph over her circumstances by running away from the horrible Bigelows and finding herself a properly paid job as a nursing aide. *Wandering Girl*, despite its shocking subject matter, is ultimately a positive book, because Ward displays such remarkable courage and manages to release herself from the cycle of being perpetual victim.

We began by reading the book with the senior girls, chapter by chapter. Neither Terri nor I could have predicted the electric effect that this subject matter would have on the girls. Not only was the main character Aboriginal but, significantly, she was a girl, and a girl of roughly the same age as the older students. It made use of non-standard English, with which the girls could also identify. For many of the girls, for the first time they could see someone rather like themselves reflected in literature. The book also had this effect because it is a true story and therefore quite unlike the plethora of English children's fiction about talking animals and namby-pamby middle-class white kids with smarmy parents, most of which the Warlpiri children saw as stupid and puerile and towards which they expressed disdain or lack of interest.

Furthermore, many Lajamanu adults had experienced the forcible removal of family members under earlier government policy. Some, but not all, of the girls were aware of this practice, which had continued until the end of the 1960s and in some instances even into the 1970s. The book therefore had unusual force and significance, in terms of reclaiming a history that is usually either denied or simply unknown.

The girls found studying *Wandering Girl* a gripping experience. I do not believe that they had ever engaged with a book in this way before. They were constantly asking 'What happens next?' and wanting to read on during maths or other lessons.

#### Oral history and film

About half-way through reading the novel, we invited Louisa Lawson Napaljarri, a highly respected elderly Warlpiri woman, to come and speak to the girls about the 'welfare days', when the authorities had attempted to remove her child from her. The girls listened intently as Napaljarri told the story of how she heard that the authorities were coming to take away her daughter, on account of the baby's father being European, and

distraught, she hid the baby by wrapping her in a swag and covering her with a blanket. When the welfare people arrived, Napaljarri hoped beyond hope that the baby would not cry and thereby reveal her presence. But the baby remained silent, and the welfare people were foiled in their attempt to place the child in foster care. We had asked Napaljarri to speak about this event because she had outwitted the authorities. (It would have been too painful for a woman whose baby had actually been removed to speak about this subject.) Napaljarri's talk had a profound effect on the girls, who for some time could speak of little else.

Later during the course we screened the documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence*, a remarkable film made by Kooris from the eastern states. This film shows that the historical reasons for Aboriginal people having their own destinies wrenched from their control were closely tied to the processes of colonialism.

*Lousy Little Sixpence* uses historical footage to show many things that tend to be absent from standard history texts: the annexation of Aboriginal land, the abduction of Aboriginal children, the development of a non-Aboriginal political movement against the background of a welfare system, which meant that white authorities controlled almost every aspect of Aboriginal life. The forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their parents under the policy sanctioned and administered by the Aborigines Protection (later Welfare) Board is also dealt with in *Lousy Little Sixpence*. By documenting the oral histories of older Aboriginal people, the film shows Aboriginal families consistently being broken up over the greater part of a century in order to create a black servant class. By seeing and discussing this film, our students were able to perceive Glenyse Ward's predicament in the broader historical context and arrive at an understanding that what happened to Glenyse was not an isolated incident but something that occurred all over Australia.

Many of the activities we set the girls are standard approaches to teaching a novel. For example, questions were asked of some chapters, to which the girls wrote answers. They were also asked to write an essay from the perspective of Glenyse at the end of her first day of work for the Bigelows. Many lively and heated classroom discussions about the novel took place.

What can not be stressed too strongly, however, was the effect that studying this book had on the students. They all found *Wandering Girl* compulsive reading. This contrasted with their responses to previous class texts, which had been lukewarm at best. They found the series of lessons that accompanied reading the book enjoyable and asked to read it again once they had finished it. The girls also began to make important connections, which they had never made in the past. In particular, it gave them an understanding of certain aspects of recent Aboriginal history, which had previously been shrouded by the 'conspiracy of silence' that

surrounds a great deal of Aboriginal history. The subject matter and knowledge acquired also gained legitimacy by its presence, indeed its central place, in the official school curriculum. Education has always been at the cutting edge of the process of colonisation of Aboriginal people, but the time has come for it to take its place at the cutting edge of the decolonisation process.

One example of the profound effect the book had on the girls is an incident that occurred a couple of years later, in mid-1991, when a new principal, a non-Aboriginal man, had taken over Lajamanu School. On some mornings he would get one of the senior girls (never a boy) to sweep the long pathway leading up to the assembly area. One girl likened this to Glenyse's enforced early-morning task of sweeping the Bigelow's driveway and told Terri Hughes, her teacher, that she and the other girls felt being told to sweep the path as a great injustice. 'It's the same thing that happened to Wandering Girl. She was forced to sweep the path every day', Nampijinpa remarked. Such insight into her position in the race and gender order would have been inconceivable before the class read *Wandering Girl*.

#### The curriculum and beyond

The content and structure of curriculum really does matter and can make a demonstrable difference to educational outcomes, as the senior girls' experience with *Wandering Girl* shows. That year, 1989, a great effort was expended throughout the school to make the curriculum meaningful and relevant. (The approach we took to the novel *Wandering Girl* was only one example of that effort.) By the end of 1989 Lajamanu School had the best attendance record for any government-run Aboriginal school in the Northern Territory over the entire school year and had achieved good results in the moderated Aboriginal schools assessment program, exceeding the results of other Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory in tests relating to English literacy.

I would like to stress that the content of the school curriculum is always the result of selection by humans, whether that selection is made by an individual teacher or by a group of Education Department officials. People make choices and decisions about what goes into curricula and also about what is left out. What is left out of the curriculum is just as significant and revealing as what is included.

Teachers are in a position to make at least some of the decisions and choices regarding what constitutes the curriculum in their school. If you are involved in teaching Aboriginal girls, it is within your power to make a real difference in this area.

#### Equity issues

While curriculum is crucially important, it must also be noted that there are more deeply embedded structural impediments to the education of Aboriginal children,

both girls and boys. Mostly, these impediments result from the still-omnipresent institutionalised racism that permeates our society.

An example of this is the recent protest by the residents of Wattle Street, Fullarton, a middle-class Adelaide suburb, against an application by a Pitjantjatjara organisation to purchase a large house in the street, for use as a boarding house for Pitjantjatjara girls from northern South Australia. These girls are continuing their education beyond primary school level (there is simply no high school available to them at home), and the actions of the solid citizens of Wattle Street who have organised as a lobby group to prevent the application from being successful is a denial of the girls' right to an education. It is an equity issue, which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In circumstances like this, the appropriateness (or otherwise) of the curriculum is neutralised. Therefore if we educators are truly to make a difference, we must work on multiple fronts; while we need to be sensitive to the content and structure of the curriculum, we must also work for broader social change, to help break down the still-existing institutionalised racism that threatens the education of Aboriginal children by continually pushing them to the margins. As long as deeper structural impediments remain, exclusive concentration on the nature of the curricula is akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic*. We must also work towards returning to Aboriginal people the control over their own education processes—control that was wrenched from them by the process of colonisation.

Finally, I would like to say something about the prevailing orthodoxy in Aboriginal education, an orthodoxy that has developed from the writings of two white men, Stephen Harris and Michael Christie. While there are differences between the views of these theorists, their work is premised on the belief that there are major differences in the ways in which 'Aboriginals' and 'Whites' learn—differences in their 'learning styles' as well as their 'world views'—and that these differences have implications for classroom teaching in Aboriginal Australia. I believe that this profoundly apolitical view of the reasons why Aboriginal children do not do well in Australian classrooms is misleading, and even dangerous, in so far as it draws us away from a political solution to a political problem created by colonisation. The real issue is the lack of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education.

I would argue that the lack of recognition by these theorists of the differences of class, gender and culture within groups they call 'Whites' and 'Aboriginals', and their treatment of each group as socially and culturally undifferentiated blocs, has done little to further Aboriginal education in Australia. These theorists do not, for example, regard the relationship between 'Whites' and 'Aboriginals' as problematic, except in so

far as they believe that a mismatch of 'learning styles' has led to Aboriginal academic failure. Indeed, for these theorists, equality of educational opportunity seems to be accepted as a given. There is no suggestion, for instance, that part of our schools' failure might arise from or at least be related to unequal social and political relationships—that is, differences in power—within our broader society. Rather, educational failure is attributed to Aboriginal children's inability to handle 'White' styles of learning and 'White' inability to accommodate Aboriginal learning styles in classrooms.

I would argue that this position comes perilously close to blaming the victims. I would further argue that minority-group students are disempowered or disabled in much the same way that their communities are disempowered in interactions with wider social institutions, and that any effective education program for minority-group students must be based on such an understanding.

The failure of these theorists to connect the academic difficulties or failures of Aboriginal children to any broader social or political reality gives cause for concern. Ultimately, the emphasis on 'Aboriginal learning styles' to the exclusion of broader social and political issues serves to maintain the status quo, and has not and will not contribute to improved outcomes in Aboriginal education programs. Any serious contribution to Aboriginal education can not afford to ignore these broader issues.

### Conclusions

I have argued in this paper that curriculum, because it is a conscious selection process or choice made by the teacher or the educational authority, can have a real and positive impact on Aboriginal education. For many Aboriginal children the education they are subjected to is a bit like having a tooth pulled: a big white person says it's for your own good, but you don't quite see it that way yourself. One good reason for making the curriculum more relevant and meaningful is that the children, the clientele, will enjoy their education more, as I've hoped to show in my case study of the Lajamanu senior girls' reading of Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl*. If children enjoy their education more and are able to relate what happens in the classroom to their lives outside of school, there is a greater chance of their succeeding and continuing with it.

It is significant that this book is about a girl, in terms of the girls' reception of this book. Gender is another issue that we, as teachers, can not afford to ignore, if we are sincere in our desire for children to genuinely engage with their education and to succeed in both social and academic terms.

By the same token, attention to curriculum alone is insufficient. Some real structural impediments to Aboriginal educational achievement still exist, and these need to be addressed. Teachers of Aboriginal

children need to develop ways of resisting the social marginalism resulting from institutionalised racism, which continues to run deeply through our society. They should also be wary of theories about the so-called 'problems' of Aboriginal education that fail to take into account the highly political nature of this enterprise.

#### References

- Kincaid, Jamaica, 1991. *Lucy*. New York: Plume Contemporary Fiction, Penguin.
- Read P. *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883-1969*. New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs: Occasional Paper No. 1.
- Ward, Glenyse, 1987. *Wandering Girl*. Broome, WA: Magabala Books.
- Ward Glenyse, 1991. *Unna You Fullas?* Broome, WA: Magabala Books.
- Willmot, E, 1981. 'The culture of literacy', in *Aborigines and Schooling: Essays in Honour of Max Hart*, Bill Menary (ed.). Adelaide: Texts in Humanities.



## Urban Aboriginal Children Learning to Read

Noreen Trouw

Wanguri Primary School, Darwin, NT

---

### Abstract

In preparation for teaching English as a second language to a small number of Year 1 students, the author first identified cultural factors that could act as constraints for urban Aboriginal children learning in a Western culture. She then devised teaching strategies (listed here in a chart) to overcome these constraining factors. The program, which began in 1990, serves eight or nine students in a withdrawal class for four hours per week. Part of each lesson is devoted to teaching the subculture of Western schooling so that the children become familiar with two-way verbal interaction, mainstream classroom behaviour, learning in decontextualised settings and taking responsibility for their own learning.

---

As the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at a primary school in Darwin I became increasingly concerned with the low academic standard of many Aboriginal students. This minority group made up about 13 percent of the school population, and about 60 percent of these were referred to me by their class teacher as needing extra help in the area of language. The children then came to me in a withdrawal group.

### The demands of Western schooling

Most of these students have lived in Darwin all their lives and speak a dialect of English as their first language. Because of this I tended to view the situation not as a problem of 'English as a second language' but one of 'English as a second culture'. I suspected that the children were having difficulty coping with the demands of Western-culture schooling and from that perspective set out to establish a language program to suit the specific needs of urban Aboriginal children.

I focused on early childhood because I believe it is the appropriate starting point to break the pattern of low achievement which could be seen throughout the school. I also based my decision on Clay's comment (1982, page 269) that the 'first two years of instruction are crucial to learning to read, because this is the formative stage of an efficient or inefficient behaviour system'.

I saw as my first task the need to establish a list of cultural factors that could act as constraints for urban Aboriginal children learning in a Western-culture school. My second task was to devise appropriate teaching strategies to overcome these constraining factors. The third task was to implement a program within the framework of the school considering such things as time allocation for ESL, cooperation from the class teacher, availability of materials and resources, and the needs of other ethnic minorities at the school.

These three tasks form the basis of this report, and now, after twelve months of operation, I have evaluated the program to determine which strategies have been successful and in which direction the program should be developed in the future.

### Constraints to learning

A lot of research has investigated the culture of Aborigines living in remote communities, and it seems reasonable to use this research and apply it to the urban Aboriginal situation. It has been shown that there are definite cultural continuities between remote and urban Aborigines in terms of values, ways of relating and ways of using language.

Eades (1985) found there was direct continuity between the types of interpersonal relationships in traditional Aboriginal societies and the southeastern Queensland Aboriginal people today and that there was a great deal of Aboriginality in the culture of this urban group. Malin (1990) describes characteristics of

*Originally trained in primary teaching in Victoria, Noreen Trouw moved to Darwin in the mid-1980s and completed a Graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics at the Northern Territory University. As an ESL teacher she has worked with urban Aboriginal students and other children from non-English-speaking backgrounds in Darwin primary schools.*

the Aboriginal children she studied in Adelaide, and Sansom (1980) has studied the culture of Darwin fringe camp Aborigines; both researches show many parallels to the findings of Harris (1984) in his study of northeast Arnhem Land Aborigines. Enemburu (1989, page 2) believes that 'children brought up within [Aboriginal] families in urban areas are still likely to be affected by child-rearing characteristics of the traditional pattern'.

Research shows significant differences between learning styles of Aboriginal societies and those of industrial culture (Harris 1984, Christie 1985). Traditionally, Aborigines mostly use informal learning strategies, whereas Westerners use some informal learning but rely heavily on formal strategies. Formal learning is the predominant style used in the Western education system. Probably the major difference between these two learning styles is in the use of language. Various researchers have examined Aboriginal ways of using language which act as constraints on its effective use for formal learning in schools. The most important of their findings, in terms of the needs of my urban ESL class, are summarised below:

- Aboriginal orientation to informal learning acts as a constraint on verbal learning in the classroom. Aboriginal learning occurs mainly through participating, observing and imitating, and in Aboriginal contexts there is very little two-way verbal interaction for the conscious purpose of teaching.
- Aboriginal reticence to take risks publicly acts as a constraint on formal learning. School children are expected to take risks by answering questions and reading aloud, whereas Aborigines tend to want to try out new skills privately or in groups.
- Aboriginal independence training renders children less susceptible to classroom teaching techniques. For Aboriginal children an emphasis is placed on being independent, and it is socially acceptable for them to be casual about carrying out adult requests. Such behaviour detracts from the teacher's capacity to teach verbally, as this type of teaching often depends on immediate student responsiveness.
- The contrasting features of questions in Aboriginal and Western classroom societies acts as a constraint to Aboriginal school learning. Successful school learning requires students to participate in asking and answering many school-type questions other than procedural ones which are frequently asked by Aboriginal children. Also, Aboriginal societies tend to view too many questions as an invasion of privacy, and hypothetical questions are rarely used.
- Aboriginal rules of interpersonal communication can act as constraints on classroom learning. A teacher who uses 'strong talk' may cause students to 'tune out'.
- Successful school learning means expressing academically purposeful behaviour. This means that

students must take personal and conscious responsibility for their own learning. In contrast, Aborigines tend to approach school in a ritualistic fashion, where participation by busy work and attendance is sufficient.

- Aboriginal learning is usually contextualised—that is, it takes place in the context to which it relates and the learning is immediately applicable to everyday life. Formal education demands that learning takes place out of the setting of day-to-day life; it is decontextualised.
- Another factor to consider when trying to establish a suitable language program for urban Aboriginal children is that it is possible that the children are coming to school without the preliteracy skills their more Westernised peers may have already acquired, especially from families in which literacy is not seen as an important aspect of family life. Ethnographic studies such as those of Brice Heath (1982) have indicated the significance of early childhood literacy experience to success in conventional educational settings. Willmot (1981) believes that although many urban Aboriginal parents speak and read English they are not, in general, 'culturally literate' (page 16) and would therefore not value literacy as much as parents in most Western homes.
- Finally, it is worth emphasising, as Christie (1985) has shown in terms of issues of language, that Aboriginal children tend to have a distinctive view of what schools are for and how they should operate at school. This view reflects traditional Aboriginal attitudes to learning, knowledge and behaviour. Unfortunately, their view of school is often quite different from what the teacher considers to be the aims and objectives of education. In many cases they do not understand the nature of academically purposeful learning and the subculture of Western schooling.

#### Teaching strategies

After I compiled this list of cultural factors it seemed obvious that if Aboriginal children are to succeed in the Western education system, changes would have to be made to the language programs designed for Euro-Australian children. There appeared to be two major considerations here. The first was to determine how informal learning strategies could be used in the classroom to enable Aboriginal children to develop the language skills expected for their class level. The second was to formulate strategies that would teach the formal learning system of school, so that the students would eventually be able to cope satisfactorily in a mainstream classroom. These two considerations needed to be developed in detail, while at the same time I needed a program that would equally meet the needs of students from other ethnic backgrounds.

To adopt strategies the children were accustomed to, it was necessary to understand the techniques used by Aboriginal parents to teach their children. Harris (1985) believes the strategies of observation and imitation play a major role in Aboriginal learning, so this seemed to be a reasonable starting point in planning a suitable language program. Observation and imitation could be thought of superficially as a simple type of learning, merely copying and limited to passive learning where skills and knowledge are transferred from one person to another. Gray (1987) disagrees with this concept and considers that the method used by Aborigines involves guided interaction between parent and child, which he calls 'natural learning'.

The strategies employed by Aborigines are often referred to by language teachers as 'scaffolding', where the child is given a lot of support in the developmental stages but this support is gradually taken away as the child begins to work independently until no support is needed at all. Gray believes this Aboriginal teaching strategy can be adapted to the classroom. He says that when a child is learning a new skill the teacher will play a major role, but as the child becomes more adept at the skill the student will become the main participant. Gray has described four aspects of the process of 'natural learning':

*Shared experience* At home both the parent and the child bring to the task shared learning experiences. This initially might be just social interaction, which will eventually form the basis for extension of knowledge.

*Modelling* Parents model the skills to be learned so that children can clearly understand the final outcome of their learning experience.

*Negotiation* Parents negotiate and collaborate with the child to clarify meanings. This negotiation allows the parents to adapt to the child's responses and support the child to perform at a level far in excess of what they could do on their own.

*Self-performance* Initially the child's attempts at performing the task may be incomplete, but as the process of modelling and negotiation continues the child will come closer to mastering the skill.

Gray's model and these four aspects of 'natural learning' seemed to be a sound approach for teaching Aboriginal children. It would be necessary for a teacher to be highly flexible and able to adapt to the children's needs. The starting point for learning and the rate of progress would depend on the children's performances, and therefore the teacher would need to become a competent observer. These natural learning strategies have been successfully trialled by Gray at Traeger Park Primary School in Alice Springs, where 'concentrated language encounters' were used to try to formalise (for school use) the features of the first language learning situation between mother and child at home (see Gray 1985, 1987, 1990).

I believed this planned informal approach would help to alleviate many of the other constraints to learning as well. For example, Aboriginal children would not be expected to take risks at performing new tasks until they were confident to do so. Children's verbal responses would not at first be vital to learning, as the teacher would receive necessary feedback by observing their behaviour. The teacher would not dominate the learning situation, so the children would be able to maintain their independence. Finally, if the teacher and children were to approach learning from shared experience, the teacher would need to create a meaningful context from which to extend the children's knowledge; this would lessen the decontextualised nature of school learning.

#### *Preliteracy experience*

One other factor that I needed to consider was the difference in preliteracy experience the Aboriginal children had had in their preschool years as compared with their non-Aboriginal peers. It could not be presumed that the expectations of the Northern Territory core curriculum would be suitable for Aboriginal children starting school. It was therefore necessary to be aware of the literacy development of preschool Anglo-Australian children before assessing the Aboriginal children's relative stage of development and establish a realistic starting point for learning.

The research of Holdaway (1979) was invaluable in understanding literacy learning development. He believes children must develop a 'literacy set' before they can become confident readers and writers. (An outline of the characteristics of a 'literacy set' is shown later.) By observing the children's behaviour in the classroom I would be able to determine which factors of the 'literacy set' still needed to be developed and then create a classroom environment where children could develop these skills naturally.

Fortunately, I found the teaching strategies presented by Holdaway in *Foundations of Literacy* (1979) to be ideally suited to the language program I was planning. He believes that informal learning strategies are also used in Western culture to teach young children many skills, including oral language. He comments that regardless of race, class or educational background of parents, infants succeed in learning language within a natural environment of language use. He shows how children naturally develop a 'literacy set' in homes where there is a literacy-rich environment and where parents use the same strategies of modelling and negotiation as described by Gray (1987). Holdaway also suggests techniques and activities that can be used in the classroom to develop natural language learning, and I have included these in my program. Having established constraints to learning and suitable teaching strategies, I could draw up the following outline.



**Aboriginal prior experiences of learning**

**Adapted classroom teaching strategies**

Informal learning: little two-way interaction for deliberate learning and teaching

Natural learning processes of shared experience, modelling, negotiating and self-performance, which form the basis for all learning in the classroom.

Reticence to take risks publicly

- Children are allowed to not answer questions.
- Children are allowed to help each other with oral and written work.
- Big Books are used for group reading.

Independence training

- Children are allowed reasonable time to respond to instructions and questions.
- Children are encouraged to take initiative in helping with organisation of class activities.

Questioning

- Do not ask too many personal questions.
- Allow time for children to feel comfortable with the teacher and let them initiate discussion about personal information.
- Initiate oral discussions to promote hypothetical questions ('What would happen if ...?').

Interpersonal relationships

- Create a secure, comfortable and casual atmosphere in the classroom.
- Avoid 'strong talk' and public confrontation.
- Accept children's behaviour except when hurtful or disruptive to others.

Contextualised learning

- Encourage role play to create contexts in the classroom by providing dress-up box, materials and equipment for a variety of situations (shopping, doctor, home).
- Allow children to discuss pictures in books before reading.
- Provide jigsaws and games to encourage contextualised thinking.

Preliteracy skills

- Follow 'natural language' methods outlined by Holdaway (1979).
- Use Big Books to help develop reading strategies and conventions of print.
- Get children to read individually to the teacher every lesson in a relaxed atmosphere; they decide which book and when to read.
- Allow children to read their favourite book until they feel confident to attempt a new one.
- Encourage children to read to each other and on their own.
- Provide language games and activities (alphabet jigsaws, picture/word matching puzzles) for the children to enjoy.

Emphasis on academically purposeful behaviour

- Encourage children to make decisions in planning daily lessons.
- Before doing worksheets, encourage children to predict what the activity involves and the purpose of the activity.
- Allow children to choose the books they would like to read to the teacher.
- Avoid ritualistic behaviour by changing the order and types of activities occasionally.
- Encourage 'good' behaviour (sitting nicely, neat work) but stress the importance of learning and improving skills.

**Characteristics of a literacy set**

D. Holdaway, 1979. *Foundations of Literacy*.

*Motivational factors (high expectations of print)*

Enjoys books and stories—appreciates the special rewards of print. Has had extensive, repetitive experience of a wide range of favourite books. Seeks book experiences—asks for stories, goes to books independently. Is curious about all aspects of print, e.g. signs, labels, advertisements. Experiments with producing written language.

*Linguistic factors (familiarity with written dialect in oral form)*

Has built extensive models for the special features of written dialect.

- Syntax—grammatical structures learned through meaningful use, e.g. full forms of contractions such as 'I'm' or 'What's', and structures that imply consequence 'If ... then ...'.
- Vocabulary—words not normally used in conversation e.g. 'however', 'dine', 'ogre'.
- Intonation patterns—appropriate intonations for literary or non-conversational English, e.g. 'Fat, indeed! The very idea of it!'.
- Idioms—special usage contrary to normal grammatical or semantic rules, e.g. same example as for intonation, illustrates that idiom often works with special intonation.

*Operational factors (essential strategies for handling written language)*

Self-monitoring operations: self-correction and confirmation

Predictive operations: ability to 'use the context' to fill particular language slots

Structural operations: ability to follow plot, temporal and causal sequences, logical arrangements, etc.

Non-situational operations: ability to understand language without the help of immediate sensory context.

Imaginative operations: ability to create images which have not been experienced or represented in sensory reality, and apply metaphorical meanings.

*Orthographic factors (knowledge of the conventions of print)*

(Note: Few preschoolers would have grasped more than a few of the orthographic principles.)

Story comes from print, not from pictures.

Directional conventions—a complex progression:

- front of book has spine on left
- story begins where print begins
- left-hand page comes before right-hand
- move from top to bottom of page
- begin left along line to right
- return to next line on left margin

Print components—clear concept of 'words', 'spaces', 'letters'.

Letter-form generalisations—same letter may be written in upper and lower case, and in different print styles.

Punctuation conventions.

Phonetic principle—letters have some relationship to speech sounds.

Consistency principle—same word always has same spelling.

**Formal learning strategies**

Having established a program for adapting informal strategies for use in a classroom situation, I needed to look at the other major consideration for success in Western education. Children would eventually need to adopt formal learning strategies if they were to achieve at school in a mainstream class. They would need to learn to use two-way verbal interaction, learn mainstream classroom behaviour, learn in decontextualised settings and take responsibility for their own learning.

I decided to set aside a part of each lesson so that I could teach the subculture of Western schooling using formal learning strategies, and make explicit to the children the behaviour I expected of them. Initially, this would take up just a few minutes of each lesson, but eventually I hoped that children would be able to operate in this mode for longer periods. This formal lesson would be treated like a role play, and while I would encourage certain behaviour (for example,

answering direct questions, responding to requests immediately, not telling others the answer), I would take no disciplinary action if they did not respond correctly. I incorporated this aspect of the program into the teaching of phonics skills, as it was one of the learning outcomes of the program that lent itself to using formal strategies.

I decided to include a small number of European-Australian children in the language program who would act as role models for the Aboriginal children when learning to use formal strategies. The European children were chosen by the class teacher as being in need of extra language work and would benefit by working in this small group.

**Setting up the language program**

After consultation with the Year 1 class teacher, and the ESL and early childhood advisers, it was decided to

include in the program four Aboriginal children, two Greek children and two Anglo children. The class teacher considered they were all well below standard in the language area, and most were considered to have behaviour problems. I had been working in the classroom with these children during the previous year, so they were quite at ease with me. I commenced the program at the start of Term 2 in 1990 and continued in 1991 with the children in Year 2. Now the group consists of six Aboriginal children and three Anglo children.

I conducted four one-hour lessons per week. For these lessons I withdrew the children to the ESL room, although I continued to spend time in their classroom at other times to assist with different subject areas. Initially, children were given a lot of time for free activities (for example, role play, games and jigsaws) so that I could move around the room and determine the levels at which children were operating in oral and written language. Gradually the activities became more teacher-directed, but each lesson ended with a free activity session.

#### Program evaluation

The program was evaluated after operating for four hours per week over twelve months. I used three methods to assess the children and to evaluate the program. The main one has been my own observations in the classroom. Firstly, in my weekly program I noted any behaviour that I considered to be important. In the beginning, this included comments about strategies the children were using for reading, skills they had acquired, and behaviours that indicated constraints to formal learning. As time progressed I was able to note any changes in these behaviour patterns. Secondly, at various intervals I would assess each child's oral reading using Clay's stages of error correction (shown below). The third method of evaluation was the

feedback I received from the children's class teacher. I considered that the success of the program would be determined by the children's performance in the mainstream classroom.

On the whole, the program has proven to be very successful. The changes of behaviour and performance noted in the weekly program have certainly shown a positive growth. The children are now working more independently and are prepared to take risks with oral reading and written worksheets. They will often get annoyed if someone tries to help them or calls out the answer. They can now work in a formal mode for periods of up to about eight minutes, whereas in the early days they would 'tune out' after two or three minutes. The children have become very talkative in class and are willing to contribute to oral discussions even on personal matters. This is quite a change, considering that two of the Aboriginal boys would not converse privately with me for the first five to six weeks except for an occasional 'Yes/No' answer. All children now take an active role in deciding the daily program and participate in all classroom activities with enthusiasm. This new classroom talkativeness cannot be explained by the children getting to know me, because they had been working with me in their classroom for the previous six to twelve months. While getting to know the teacher is an important factor in classroom learning, in this case the teaching strategies were the major source of change. Furthermore, the children's behaviour changes transferred to their work in the mainstream classroom.

All children have made progress with error-correction strategies. Four of the Aboriginal children have moved from Clay's stage ii to stage v, which indicates that they are well on the way to becoming independent readers. All children except for one recognise single sounds and are very quickly learning how to blend sounds to make three- and four-letter words. The one

#### Clay's stages of error correction

Marie M Clay, *Observing Young Readers*, page 39

##### *Error correction at the preparatory stage*

In the preparatory period locating behaviour (i.e., the child's attempts to find some print to match to the response he was giving) passed through several stages:

- (i) from *page matching*, in which the child repeated a memorized text for the page without locating any detail in the print
- (ii) to *line matching* in which the child repeated a memorized line of print, locating that line as a whole
- (iii) to *locating some words* within a memorized line
- (iv) to *'reading the spaces'* and thus coordinating

visually located word patterns with speech impulses and the spaces between words with vocal juncture.

- (v) This led to a movement-speech mismatch when there were too few or too many spoken impulses for the number of patterns available, or a speech-vision mismatch when a spoken word failed to coincide with its known visual pattern during the coordinating process.

The movement-speech mismatch tended to precede the speech-vision mismatch developmentally. Some quantitative results support this description. (Note that each higher progress group spent less time in the preparatory period than each lower group.)

child who has not progressed at the same rate as the others is very often absent from school. I feel this program is flexible enough to cope with absenteeism, but nonetheless it is difficult to teach children when they are not at school.

Within weeks of the program's commencement the Year 1 class teacher was giving some very positive feedback about the progress she could observe in her classroom. She often seemed quite surprised at what the children could do. The end-of-year school reports tended to indicate that this group of children were still considered to be below average in language areas, but the written comments were far more positive than on previous reports. For example, children were 'becoming confident', 'improving in all areas', 'starting to improve', 'participating in discussions' and 'speaking up in class'.

The Year 2 teacher the children had in the following year, 1991, was equally pleased with their progress. She felt that most of the group were working at a level only 'slightly below' many of the mainstream students, an improvement on being 'well below average' twelve months earlier. She felt that the children were enthusiastic and confident class members and were no longer regarded as having behaviour problems, as tended to be the case in their first two years at school.

#### Future plans for the language program

At this stage I think it is important to ensure that children are learning to cope in the formal classroom situation and are not becoming dependent on learning in a small withdrawal group. It may be necessary for me to spend more time in the classroom using team-teaching strategies rather than continuing to withdraw children for all language lessons.

I feel I have probably neglected the writing component of language in this program. Because of time restrictions it was decided the class teacher would work on this area, but now I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of this decision and see writing as an integral and natural part of a language program. By incorporating a writing component into each lesson, I hope that the children will become as enthusiastic about writing as they are about reading.

Generally, though, I plan to continue the program as it has operated over the past twelve months, being guided by the children's responses and behaviour. Before long they should no longer require 'extra language work' and will be successful learners along with their Anglo peers.

(The original version of this paper was published in Harris, S. and Malin, M. (eds) 1994. *Aboriginal Kids in Urban Classrooms*. Wentworth Falls, NSW: Social Sciences Press.)

#### References

- Christie, M. J. (ed.) 1985. *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education*. Geelong: Deakin University.
- Clay, M. M., 1982. 'Observing young readers', *Selected Papers*. Auckland: Heinemann Educational.
- Coombs, H., Brandl, M. and Snowdon, W., 1983. *A Certain Heritage*. Canberra: Centre for Research and Environmental Studies, Australian National University.
- Eades, D., 1985. 'You gotta know how to talk: information seeking in SE Queensland Aboriginal society', in *Cross Cultural Encounters: Communication and Miscommunication*, J. Pride (ed.). Melbourne: River Seine.
- Enemburu, Irruluma Guruluwini (Brown, A. I.), 1989. *Koori English*. Melbourne: Victorian State Board of Education.
- Gray, B., 1985. 'Teaching oral English', in *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education*, M. J. Christie (ed.). Geelong: Deakin University.
- Gray, B., 1987. *Natural Language Learning in the Classroom* (video), Batchelor Conference 1987, Northern Territory.
- Gray, B., 1990. 'Natural language learning in Aboriginal classrooms: reflections on teaching and learning style for empowerment in English', in *Language: Maintenance, Power and Education in Australian Aboriginal Contexts*, C. Walton and W. Eggington (eds). Darwin: NTU Press.
- Harris, S., 1984. *Culture and Learning: Tradition and Education in NE Arnhem Land*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Harris, S., 1985. *Constraints on Effective Use of Language for Learning in Aboriginal Schools*, paper address to the Working Conference on Language in Education, Armidale.
- Heath, S. B., 1982. 'What no bedtime story means: narrative skills at home and school', *Language and Society*, 11.
- Holdaway, D., 1979. *The Foundations of Literacy*. Gosford, NSW: Ashton Scholastic.
- Malin, M., 1990. 'Why is life so hard for Aboriginal students in urban classrooms?', *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pages 9-29.
- Sansom, B., 1980. *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Willmot, E., 1981. 'The culture of literacy', in *Aborigines and Schooling: Essays in Honour of Max Hart*, B. Menary (ed.). Adelaide: Texts in Humanities.



## Recognising Ourselves and Our Heritage

*Sheryl Morgan*

Margate Primary School, Hobart, Tasmania

---

### Abstract

Recognising that some students thought to be Aboriginal were denying their ethnic heritage, Margate Primary School, near Hobart, Tasmania, has formulated a plan to help them increase their sense of self-worth and become proud to identify themselves as Aboriginal. An Aboriginal Students Support and Parent Awareness committee has been formed; literature with an Aboriginal context has been bought for all classrooms; a homework centre has been set up; the school has celebrated Aboriginal culture during NAIDOC Week; many children have visited Camp Jungai in Victoria; and the children's writings have been edited into school publications with a totally Aboriginal focus. The consequence is that Aboriginal students are now taking on the role of 'experts' in Aboriginal culture—as 'givers of knowledge' to non-Aboriginal people at our sister school on the mainland, and indeed at Margate itself.

---

At the beginning of 1991 Margate Primary School (a state primary school located in a semi-rural area that is rapidly becoming a suburb of Hobart) identified an in-school situation where some Aboriginal members of the school community chose not to acknowledge their ethnic heritage or even to deny it. This denial seemed to be based on fear of racial intolerance and negative discrimination, rather than any lack of interest in their cultural heritage.

As a result, some children thought to be Aboriginal were not able to benefit from funding allocated to provide them with additional tutoring and classroom support, both for their formal education and for their personal sense of self-worth. In fact, several children displayed social and emotional difficulties within the classroom.

To overcome this situation the school formulated a plan in which it was determined that all Aboriginal children be made aware of and be freely able to use every means available to them and the school that might increase their learning and self-worth, thus furthering their long-term educational outcome. It was believed that the best means of success was firstly to achieve the following:

1. For all Aboriginal children and their parents within the school community to feel not just comfortable but proud to identify themselves as Aboriginal.
2. That all non-Aboriginal children identify the Aboriginal culture as being the foundation of their own Australian heritage and value it, choosing to learn about it and from it.

The age range of these students is from 5 years (Kindergarten level) to 12 years (Grade 6 and the final year at this school).

### The teachers

In general, all school staff members voiced their support for the program. Further to this, some staff stated a particular desire to contribute additional effort into implementing strategies to achieve the goals. The latter included the principal, Mr Ken Hunt, a teacher's aide, Mrs Maree Voss, and two teachers, Mrs Cheryl Ware and myself.

Mr Hunt has more than 20 years of experience in education and is committed to giving all children having equal access to educational resources. Mrs Voss has had several years of experience, working under the guidance of the school's Special Education teacher, supporting and tutoring known Aboriginal children who need additional learning help. Mrs Ware has eight years of teaching experience and a personal interest in Aboriginal children.

No staff members are bilingual, although I have a linguistic background in TESOL qualifications. No serious efforts to teach an Aboriginal language have been made within the school, because of the current belief within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community that

*Sheryl Morgan spent two years in the Pacific with Australian Volunteers Abroad and then became a mature-age student in Tasmania. She has been teaching at Margate Primary School for the past five years, especially Grades 1-2. Aware of the special needs of minority groups, she is currently reclaiming the art of storytelling.*

non-Aboriginal peoples not be allowed access to Tasmanian Aboriginal languages, at a time when they themselves are struggling to regain these lost languages.

In order to achieve our goals the following steps were taken. I chose to place emphasis on Aboriginal people being the foundation of the Australian culture within my Grade 1-2 classroom. This was carried out through incorporating the use of Dreamtime stories and other Aboriginal literature in the ongoing whole-year literature program. Examples of such use was to

- ask all children in the class to imagine and write their own Dreamtime stories as well as to read them;
- model 'storytelling' rather than reading, and in so doing emphasise the foundations of Aboriginal culture; this became a particularly powerful means of giving young (and subsequently older) children positive notions of learning from Aboriginal people;
- share experiences and stories with other classes and in school assembly times, in order to heighten awareness across the whole school.

From this small basis initial interest was created, and other situations began to be suggested and developed.

#### School-wide activities

An Aboriginal Students Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committee was formed, and funding from this was used to purchase a wide range of literature with an Aboriginal context. It was considered that the few 'token' books in the school library relegated Aboriginality to a 'theme' perspective. We saw it as imperative that this notion be quickly overcome, and books were provided for inclusion in all classrooms for ongoing and everyday use. The range covered many of the Dreamtime stories currently available, as well as factual stories and information-based texts.

Furthermore, both the introduction of additional literature and the formation of the ASSPA committee provided a talking point among staff and parents, which set the framework for discussion in which many popular beliefs and stereotyping of Aborigines could be effectively yet discreetly deconstructed.

By 1992 sufficient support from the school community allowed for the whole school to focus on Aboriginal culture in conjunction with NAIDOC Day (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee). The fact that Margate Primary School was the only school in the Hartz district to acknowledge this day was a clear indication of how far we had come and how far there still was to go.

With the support of the ASSPA committee, a school trip to Camp Jungai (an Aboriginal camp in Victoria) was arranged. Any child from the school was able to go, the only provision being that pre-Grade 3 children had to be accompanied by a parent. ASSPA monies were used to subsidise airfares for all children travelling. Apart from the obvious learning experiences this

trip would give to all children going, it was also considered that such an event would put non-Aboriginal children into a position of learning from another culture. Even more importantly, it was an opportunity for the Aboriginal children to be the givers of knowledge, the experts, and as such take a leadership role. There can be no doubt that this was extremely successful.

After the camp, some of the children's writings about their experience was formatted into a school publication entitled *Camp Jungai*. This was the first school publication with a totally Aboriginal focus. Furthermore it provided the framework to informally document the Margate Primary School perspective with regard to Aboriginal education which is stated as follows:

Underlying premise: Aboriginal culture belongs to all Australians. With this notion in mind Margate Primary School looks to Aboriginal culture and cultural experiences as a means of self-worth of Koorie children while at the same time providing the opportunity for non-Koorie children to gain a greater understanding and respect for the Koorie culture. In taking this approach it is anticipated that the Margate School community as a whole will benefit from all that Aboriginal culture has to offer.

By early 1993 three other events had been set in place. We had been invited and accepted to be involved in the Sister Schools Scheme. While we anticipated that the school we would be matched with on the mainland would help us to learn more about Aboriginality, we were delighted and surprised to find that the school we were matched with had no Aboriginal children in it and was in fact looking to Margate Primary School for their own learning. The letter writing that has occurred in response to this link has given the Aboriginal children in our school another opportunity to see themselves as making valuable contributions to society as a whole. Obviously this ongoing increase in their self-worth is having a positive effect on their overall classroom learning.

In addition, we had become aware of the federal government-funded Homework Centre plan and successfully made application for a centre to be set up in our school. This program now provides a venue for both formal and informal learning and in particular a basis for demonstrating that learning can be particularly pleasurable. This time is also used for writing to our sister school.

Through the sharing of ideas and thoughts in this homogeneous class situation, we are finding that older children with language learning difficulties have the opportunity to feel confident and successful by listening to younger children read and helping them to write, and are therefore more prepared to voice their own difficulties and ask for help during this time.

Gradually we have increased the focus even further, and in June 1993 a whole school day of total involvement in Aboriginal culture was the culmination of NAIDOC Week celebrations. Aboriginal guests contributed their time to share their expertise with all the children. On a rotational basis children were exposed to both current and traditional skills such as shell necklace making, basket weaving, muttonbird cooking and storytelling, as well as modern sculpture and traditional Aboriginal art using non-traditional colours and techniques.

The outcome of this very special day was that it set a precedent for annual celebrations as well as providing the foundation for ongoing storytelling linking the Aboriginal traditions of the past with the use of print in the present. The words of the children recorded during a Homework Centre storytelling time have been edited and made into another school publication called *Koolyangarra: Starting Our Story*. Through this the children are now aware that the link between the spoken word and documented texts (hence literature) is a powerful tool in establishing and retaining one's identity. The words of the story are evidence in themselves of the success of the initial aims within the school and should be read to appreciate this.

At the start of this program in 1991 there were 10 identified Aboriginal children within the school. At present (despite five children transferring interstate) there are now 28 Aboriginal children identified within the school.

Obviously this is not an endpoint. We are looking forward to the time when the cultural officer from Camp Jungai will make a one-week visit to Margate Primary School to enable all the children to benefit from sharing his knowledge, rather than just those who went to Camp Jungai last year. No doubt this will become another 'story' in the children's tellings.



## Outline of English Language Acquisition (ELA) for Aboriginal Students

*Sally Slattery*

English Language Acquisition Project Officer, Enfield,  
Adelaide, SA

### Abstract

The project, English Language Acquisition (ELA) for Aboriginal Students, has been trialled in several South Australian schools in which 95 percent of the students are Aboriginal. By focusing on the social context in which English is taught, the ELA project enables the students to see meaning and purpose in their learning while they become competent in using standard Australian English. Firstly, students and teacher are involved in negotiating the context or starting point; secondly, students and teacher are active participants in the learning process; and thirdly, the end point is related to the starting point and includes a celebration. If, for example, the students negotiate to study the topic 'Whales', they might also negotiate a trip to the coast to see whales migrating. With the teacher's guidance, they would then do everything that's necessary to get the trip underway. The celebration is the trip itself.

The 'English Language Acquisition for Aboriginal Students' project started in 1990 and has been implemented mainly in South Australian schools where Aborigines are at least 95 percent of the student population (see Figure 1). These schools serviced are geographically dispersed, and the teachers are often professionally isolated.

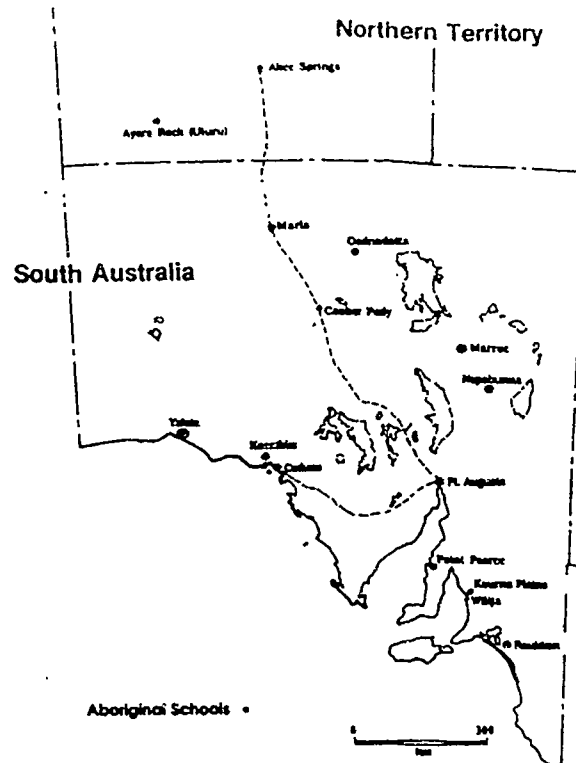


Figure 1

The situation in Aboriginal schools in the past was that teachers entering these schools were typically first or second year out of college. They experimented with differing methodologies and strategies in the first year, found out what worked for their students in the second year, and then usually moved on to other schools. As a consequence, students were exposed to a continued turnover of teachers, which had an impact on the learning outcomes for these students.

### Providing continuity in teaching strategies

The South Australian Aboriginal Education Department has now made it a priority to investigate the teaching strategies and methodologies that support the literacy development of Aboriginal students, so that even if there is a turnover of staff there will be continuity of teaching methodology and process, which will support Aboriginal students to be successful in acquiring literacy.

*Sally Slattery works with teachers 'Aboriginal students—focusing on English language acquisition—at Enfield, Adelaide, in the unit that oversees statewide curriculum development in all aspects of Aboriginal education. Prior to 1993 she taught primary school students at Raukkan School in the southeast of South Australia.*

Aboriginal Education in South Australia employs a full-time project officer whose role is to provide training and development to support the implementation of the English Language Acquisition (ELA) framework in schools in which most of the students are Aboriginal.

There is also a growing interest in the document and the project's framework from schools with a smaller number of Aboriginal students and even from those with only non-Aboriginal students.

### The main goals of ELA

The English Language Acquisition for Aboriginal Students document provides a framework for teaching English language to Aboriginal students who are identified as speakers of English as a second dialect.

It outlines a contextual approach to teaching and learning, with the emphasis on students being able to negotiate social contexts to engage in, especially those that reflect the background knowledge, skills, understanding, language and culture that the student brings to the school.

ELA aims to

- value the code of Aboriginal English that students speak
- assist students to gain competence and confidence in using Australian English
- extend the students' ability to work independently and collaboratively in small groups
- assist students to use resources and obtain information from a wide range of sources
- assist students to develop oracy skills that will enable them to discuss and reflect on all the skills they are developing
- encourage students to take control of recording and assessing their own learning
- support students to become responsible and critical learners

### The students and staff

Students involved in this project are mainly young Aborigines who speak English as a second dialect, attending Aboriginal schools (where 95 percent of the students are Aboriginal). At present it is being implemented in primary schools, although during 1993 teachers of junior secondary, preschool students and non-Aboriginal students also became involved in the project.

Teachers involved in the project range from first-year-out teachers to those who have been teaching for many years. Currently there are three Aboriginal schools in which Aboriginal education workers and teachers are team-teaching this approach to English language.

The response from educators suggests that the framework has implications for all students, across

curriculum and across year levels. Intensive training and support is being provided by the project officer to trial the program in these areas.

### Teaching and learning process

For students from an oral background to be successful in learning English language it must be taught in a contextual way so that they can see meaning and purpose in their learning. This can be done by teaching in a social context, as advocated by the ELA document. Teaching in a social context involves

1. Students and teacher negotiating the context or starting point
2. Students and teacher being active participants in the learning negotiation and process
3. The end point relating to the starting point and including a celebration

To clarify further:

1. The context or topic must be one about which the students have some background knowledge or understanding. For example, whales would be an appropriate topic for students who live near the Great Australian Bight but inappropriate for students living in the Flinders Ranges.
2. Students must be active participants in the learning negotiation and process, as this is where the real learning occurs and life skills are acquired. It involves setting students up to do the things that we as teachers would normally do. For example, if students negotiate to go on a trip to see the whales, they would:
  - write/ring the park rangers to get information about the best times and places
  - negotiate the date, the timetable, etc.
  - discuss with the principal all the details of the trip
  - write the consent form for parent/care-givers to sign
  - organise the bus and the driver
  - decide/list what they need to take
  - decide on the menu and organise and cook the food
  - ring the library to borrow books about whales

These are the things that we as teachers would normally do, but there are enormous benefits for students if they learn to do these tasks themselves, with our support.

3. The end point must relate directly back to the starting point and include a celebration so that students see meaning in the activities they engage in. For example, if 'whales' is the starting point, a trip to see the whales would be the end point. All activities (and experiences) that the students negotiate have the end point of going to see the whales. The celebration is the whale trip.

### ELA's success

The process is successful for the English language acquisition of Aboriginal students for several reasons:

- By allowing students to negotiate and have input into the choice of topic or context, what we are doing is valuing the language, knowledge and understanding that children currently have.
- The process then allows us to extend the children's thinking and skills through engagement in a context relevant to them and in activities that they have decided on.
- Setting students up to successfully do the things that we as teachers would normally do is not an *ad hoc* approach to teaching where we simply get students to draft a consent note or telephone to obtain information. The teaching process is very explicit in setting up the students so that they can engage in the activities successfully. The process can be described as a teaching-and-learning cycle (see Figure 2).

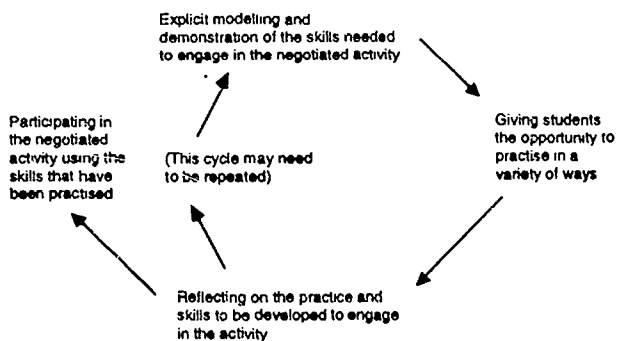


Figure 2 The cycle of teaching and learning

By making use of this teaching-and-learning cycle we set up students for success and empower them in the learning process. Students are encouraged to actively engage in their learning and explicitly discuss the skills and knowledge that they use.

As an example, if students had decided to make a phone call to request information, the teacher would model and demonstrate the phone call, highlighting the differences in speaking for various purposes and audiences. Students would then practise speaking on phone and possibly observe each other so that they can give each other feedback. They would reflect on improvements they may need to make and discuss the skills they used during the phone call (the tone, clear questions, appropriate speech for the audience, etc.) The teacher would then demonstrate again, using a tape recorder so that students have a chance to evaluate the talk.

The negotiated end point must include a celebration because this enables students to share the knowledge,

skills and understandings that they have engaged in to reach the end point. They are encouraged to discuss the skills they have learnt and used throughout the process, rather than simply talking about what they did during the activity.

Students are involved in a process of evaluating their own learning and the processes they have engaged in to help their learning. It is important that students be allowed to do this orally as well as in written form. Too often, when we want students to respond so that we can assess them, we make them do it in a written form; and if the student has difficulty with writing skills we may think that he or she has not been able to understand or do the task successfully. If we allow them to respond orally, they are more likely to be able to demonstrate the skills, knowledge and understanding that we are assessing.

The importance of the end point relating directly back to the starting point is so that students can see tasks completed and can reflect on their own success and learning outcomes.

### Summary

The framework of 'English Language Acquisition for Aboriginal Students'

- values the background knowledge, skills understanding, language and culture that students come to school with
- starts from where the student is at and then works from there
- enables students to collaborate and negotiate in the learning process
- sets students up for success through a process of explicit teaching
- encourages students to reflect on the learning and skills used, not just what they have done
- involves students in making real decisions about the learning process
- ensures that the content is drawn from the learning context, rather than the reverse
- ensures that students see meaning and purpose in their learning
- allows educators to extend children's thinking and skills through engagement in a relevant context—something that they have background knowledge in
- empowers students in their learning
- uses the process of explicit teaching and learning
- links the knowledge, skills, understanding and purpose of tasks back to the starting point (context) and end point (celebration)
- invites community involvement through virtue of the process
- allows students (rather than the teacher) the opportunity to tell parents/care-givers about learning outcomes

## Ashmont English Enrichment Program

*Sandra Elliott*

Ashmont Public School, Wagga Wagga, NSW

---

### Abstract

Ashmont English Enrichment Program was devised to give all students at Ashmont Public School, Wagga Wagga, NSW, equal access to literacy development. Many Aboriginal students come from homes in which the reading of books is not a cultural tradition (the reading of paintings and drawings being more familiar to them), and only a third of the children entering the school have attended a preschool or playgroup. By providing a language-rich environment with appropriate toys, reading materials, excursions and individual tutoring, Ashmont School motivates its students to expand their vocabulary and become confident in using the English language.

---

The main goals of the English Enrichment Program at Ashmont Public School are to:

- give all students, when they begin school, equal access to literacy development through an oral language enrichment program in which every child is encouraged to develop his or her oral language in a variety of social contexts
- improve self-esteem through success at activities
- improve written language skills
- bring in parents and involve them as part of the literacy program because of a perceived need in the community
- develop strategies to move out into the community

The environment for learning should be non-threatening, warm and accepting, encouraging the children to use both their first and second languages (if any). In such an environment, children's trust and confidence will be promoted. Teachers learn to use the environment to encourage and support each child in purposeful writing.

### The students

The children arrive at school from a wide variety of backgrounds. Only about a third of them have any experience of preschool, long day care or playgroups on entering school. Many children have problems at home for a variety of reasons:

- isolation from extended families and/or isolation from other children
- parents with a criminal record
- parents living in short-term defacto relationships (families often with three surnames: mother/partner/child)
- abuse—social, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse
- limited finances for outings, newspapers, books (often just enough money to feed the family)
- developmentally delayed speech
- little stimulation at home
- lack of necessary communicative skills to learn to read and write
- viewing of large amounts of television, largely non-selective
- sometimes parents are illiterate or have had bad experiences of school

The children are generally between four and a half and five and a half years old when they enter school in February. Their first year at school is at Kindergarten level.

### The teachers

As well as the author (see biographical notes above), the program has been guided by Sue Clancy, Geoy Cameron and Cheryl Dutton.

Sue Clancy, our chief inspiration on the program, is a lecturer in education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga

*Sandra Elliott has been teaching young children, mainly K-2, in New South Wales schools since 1975. In 1985-87 she studied for her second Diploma of Education (in Education studies - Literacy) and is now assistant principal of Ashmont Public School in Wagga Wagga. She enjoys writing and implementing innovative programs that cater for the children in her care and holds a strong belief that early intervention in the literacy area brings positive results for both teachers and students.*



Wagga. Her background includes teaching experience at various primary and secondary schools (K-12) and a Masters degree from Armidale.

Geoy Cameron came to Australia in the mid-1970s after graduating from the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA, with a BA in Elementary Education. She has taught K-2 students for almost 20 years at schools in and around Wagga Wagga, NSW.

Cheryl Dutton did a three-year course in primary education at Riverina College of Advanced Education, Wagga Wagga, and since 1979 has taught mainly Years 2-4 in New South Wales schools. She has also worked in British Columbia, Canada, as a substitute teacher (K-7) in 1986.

#### Student assessment

In February/March and again in November the teachers assess each child through a literacy interview, and during the year they collect additional data, which is kept in the child's individual file:

- The child is asked to retell a familiar story, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Cinderella*; and a nursery rhyme such as *Jack and Jill* or *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. Tapes may be used to record this activity.
- Non-text picture book: the child is asked to tell a story using only pictures.
- SAND story, devised by Marie Clay
- Anecdotal records about the child
- Draw a person: during the first two weeks of school, each child is asked to draw a person.
- Profiles: each child keeps a 'best work' envelope containing examples of writing and drawing.

#### Integration in the literacy program

Ashmont English Enrichment is a total literacy program, using stimulation and talk (oral language) as the base for reading and writing. The program caters for all children's social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and is conducted in a comfortable environment where oral language is encouraged.

For experience in spatial design relationships, the children are given familiar materials and learn to succeed with building models. The resources include good-quality toys, and many children actually experience play for the first time.

Using a proforma plan written by the program coordinators, the classroom teacher prepares a week-by-week plan, which includes studies of books and their authors. Excursions to parks, farms, library, art gallery, supermarket, university, etc., help to enrich the children's lives.

#### Involvement of students/caregivers/community

Community involvement: Each week the literacy program has 10 to 15 parents involved as helpers in the classroom, where they assist children to complete activities. Parents are also given a calendar for each

month (to put on the refrigerator) listing activities to complete with their child at home.

Community courses: The community liaison person is involved in running a course entitled 'How to help your child with reading and at home'.

University students: Under an arrangement coordinated by Sue Clancy, university students work one-to-one with children. They help to ensure that the children experience success in the classroom.

Students from Year 6: The school's older students assist in peer tutoring.

Aboriginal Homework Centre: Some students attend the homework centre on Tuesday afternoons for assistance in reading and writing.

Administration: When the program is first implemented, teachers are given constant supervision to reassure them that they are having success.

#### Why has the program been successful?

The program has helped all students to acquire positive learning skills in a positive environment. Reliance, patience, flexibility and realistic goals are essential features of a successful learning environment.

Knowledge of their culture should be obtained for children. For example:

- celebrating Aboriginal Cultural Day each year
- awareness of Aboriginal art/craft, especially in the area of writing
- awareness of the Aboriginal flag and its significance
- giving children concrete materials (for example, Aboriginal puzzles and dark dolls) to experiment with and increase their speed of learning
- allowing all children to move around the room freely, not restricted to seats or particular areas

Reading is a symbolic process, and not an Aboriginal tradition. However, reading paintings and drawings is a tradition for Aboriginals, and we encourage the children to draw their stories.

Many Aboriginal children may not have encountered books or other reading materials in their homes. We therefore provide the children with books and encourage them to read both at school or at home.

A language-rich environment needs to be provided in which Aboriginal children can be assisted to discover the patterns and structures of the English language. Children need a great deal of vocabulary expansion. It increases their confidence to speak and ask questions.

Peer tutoring and homework tutoring also help the children to develop appropriate literacy and social language skills. All children are motivated through a non-threatening, warm and accepting classroom, which encourages them to want to learn (and want to come to school).

The staff are enthusiastic about implementing the program, and the school has been helped by funding from the Disadvantaged Schools Program.



## Tutorials in Chemistry for Aboriginal Nursing Students

*K. Draisma, R. Gluck, J. Hancock, R. Kanitz, G. Knell, W. Price, G. Sharman and J. Squires*  
University of Wollongong, NSW

---

### Abstract

This paper outlines a successful initiative for teaching chemistry to Aboriginal nursing students. It demonstrates the need for early intervention, the nature of support and academic development that students require at university, and the content, forms and processes of tutorial assistance required by many students. The implications for planning tutor assistance demonstrates the need for close examination of processes, which include cooperative effort, appropriate and timely resource allocation, peer group and learning development, and the processes and effects of mainstream teaching.

---

The Aboriginal Education Centre at the University of Wollongong has facilitated a process of academic development and tutorials enabling first-year Aboriginal nursing students to attain and demonstrate the required levels of chemistry knowledge.

Although the support of a campus orientation, a professional literacy tutorial for nursing studies, social support and a mentor process were in place when the Aboriginal students arrived at university, within a week of commencing studies they were nevertheless floundering with chemistry and were considered to be 'at risk'.

In response, an academic development and tutorial process evolved, which resulted in the students achieving Distinction, Credit and High Pass grades. The ingenuity of the tutor and the coordinator of chemistry were crucial in developing the support process. The Aboriginal Education Centre (AEC) and the Learning Development Centre (LDC) also played critical facilitation roles, and the students' tenacity and willingness to take risks was a key factor in the successful transition of these students into tertiary education.

### The situation

Five Aboriginal students entered the Bachelor of Nursing in 1993. One withdrew before week 2 and the other before week 10.

Of the remaining students, two were Enrolled Nurses and entered the degree by means of the Alternative Admissions Program, an equity mechanism for Aboriginal students to enter the University of Wollongong. The third entered via the STAT humanities exam (the exam given to adult mainstream entry students) and was not readily identified as Aboriginal. This student did not participate in the orientation, mentor process or professional literacy tutorial until the Department of Nursing's first-year coordinator directed her to the centre in week 3.

At this time the STAT student was floundering in a range of study areas and ready to abandon her studies. She was putting large amounts of energy into assignments to the point of physical exhaustion and was unable to discriminate within the content of the subjects as to which aspects required key attention. What she had not yet developed were techniques for allocating her time and making decisions to bring work to completion. The only means available to deal with this learning situation was seen by her to be super-human effort.

The AEC mentor recognised that the student's body language, tone of speech and general air of anxiety indicated that she was about to flee the university. Engagement in a late Friday afternoon discussion brought forth statements of 'I should not be here', 'I should never have come to university', 'They should never have let me in', 'I am not up to it', 'I'm dumb', 'I will give it this weekend to make up my mind but I'm

*The authors are: Kim Draisma, head of the Learning Development Centre, University of Wollongong; Russell Gluck, lecturer, Aboriginal Education Centre, University of Wollongong, partner in the National Teaching Development grant project, and mentor; Jan Hancock, lecturer, Faculty of Education, University of Western Sydney-Macarthur, and partner in the National Teaching Development grant project; Roger Kanitz, senior technical officer, Department of Chemistry, University of Wollongong, and tutor; Gail Knell, Aboriginal student, BNurs, University of Wollongong; Will Price, Senior Lecturer, Department of Chemistry, University of Wollongong; Gail Sharman, Aboriginal student, BNurs, University of Wollongong; and Jeanine Squires, Aboriginal student, BNurs, University of Wollongong.*

pretty sure I'm leaving' and 'What is this chemistry, I don't have a clue what they are talking about'. It was a process of *emotional dumping* full on.

The AEC's in-house academic adviser was brought into the discussion and within a very short space of time turned the discussion to 'You are working really hard', 'You are giving it everything you've got', 'You are not alone, other students are having difficulty and have been working with me and in a short time are going really well', 'Will you give me half an hour a day for the next two weeks to work with you'. 'If you decide to go after two weeks we will support your decision'. The student agreed and was introduced to the method of booking tutorial sessions with the academic adviser.

The student proceeded to walk out the door before completing the booking. However, the mentor handed the student a pen and walked her to the tutor booking schedule, where she wrote her name in for the following Monday. The adviser also suggested the student take the weekend off from work and go to visit friends or do something she enjoyed.

#### Agreement between tutor and student

The AEC's academic adviser and the student set up an agreement to work collaboratively for half an hour per day for two weeks and for the student to participate in the chemistry and professional literacy tutorials; at the end of the two weeks if the student wished to quit, the centre agreed to support the decision. She worked with the academic adviser, gained some reorganisational advice, and within two weeks submitted an assignment and obtained a credit. This provided a basis for continuing the study of chemistry.

#### Orientation and mentoring support

The two Alternative Admissions students had attended a five-day pre-orientation program organised by the AEC and the Department of Nursing prior to mainstream orientation week. It was designed to familiarise them with the physical layout of the campus and ensure that they did not feel abandoned. They were introduced to a range of Nursing staff members and commenced a professional literacy tutorial designed to assist them with the literacy demands of the language and writing of the nursing course. They also were provided with hands-on library and computer literacy activities.

An AEC staff member undertook to respond directly to these nursing students' needs and to develop a mentor relationship with them. The professional literacy tutorial, the mentor relationship and the work of the academic adviser nurtured an environment in which the students could ask for help with the confidence that their requests would be responded to in a supportive learning environment.

#### The chemistry tutorial

By the end of week 2, feedback to the mentor indicated that students were struggling with the language, mathematics and teaching style in chemistry lectures and laboratories. Discussion between the mentor and students revealed statements such as 'I can't follow what they are saying or give them what they want because I don't know what they are saying', 'I never was any good at maths', 'They go too quickly in lectures' and 'I don't know how to ask about what I need to know'. Their confidence was low, and they felt unable to approach the teaching staff with their difficulties.

Developing the techniques for organising and understanding information delivered in lectures and data from labs was seen as an imperative. This was needed in order to build knowledge in the appropriate techniques and retrieve information required.

They needed to become literate in chemistry. This entailed fostering an environment that promoted a basis for learning the reasoning involved in the discipline of chemistry and its application. In response to these needs, the Aboriginal Education Centre contacted the head of the Learning Development Centre to arrange assistance for the students in chemistry. A Department of Chemistry demonstrator was recommended, and the AEC organised a place, time and the finances to start a weekly two-hour tutorial session.

Tutoring commenced with students reworking material presented in lectures and laboratories. A good deal of time was spent on basic chemical numerical manipulations and use of calculators. Initially, working through the material followed the patterns presented in lectures and laboratories. However, frustration grew as students confronted and became immersed in the language and methods of chemistry. The tutor began to introduce ways that he approached the study of chemistry. One of the students reported: 'The tutor showed us a short-cut method that he uses in his work, another way of working out a problem, and it made sense. It was so much easier!'

The tutor provided students with time and ingenuity in solving problems, and in this way a language for discussing chemistry was developed. The tutor and students developed a rewarding learning relationship. Positive results in laboratory assignments reinforced to the students that they had the capacity to understand the subject, and this encouraged them to continue. Before these tutorial sessions, although the students had undertaken the required pre-reading for laboratories, their lack of chemical literacy sometimes led to confusion and frustration. Now the students persisted despite these difficulties.

By mid-session exams, all three students were coming to grips with the language and reasoning involved in chemistry and were demonstrating the

ability to build on their knowledge and apply it. This was evident in the continuing discussions about laboratory results, methods and lectures, both among themselves and with the mentor and the tutor. Students were saying 'I was reading the patients' notes at the end of the bed the other day during the practical, and I was able to understand the chemistry in them' and 'That was a really good tutor session last night, we went over the lab work and the lecture and I understood what we did'.

The student's mid-session exam results were borderline passes, which produced a feeling of gloom in the students. Students repeatedly said 'We knew our stuff but we could not understand the questions'. The mentor again sensed an unmet need and a sense of opportunity. It was realised that the students' first experience of multiple-choice questions indicated that they were inexperienced in the language and style of the testing instrument.

Students' post-exam gloom and feedback initiated the development of a new strategy. After a good deal of listening to the students, it became clear to the mentor that the process and language used in multiple-choice questions needed to be explained by further learning and reasoning about exam technique. The exam technique could also be used to trigger discussion about the content of chemistry. Encouraged by the students' tenacity and achievement so far, the staff told them there was a way of overcoming these obstacles and that a meeting was being set up to discuss how it could be done.

The AEC's mentor and the head of the LDC arranged the meeting with the chemistry coordinator and the tutor to discuss the students' progress and to acknowledge the work of the tutor. The subject coordinator and the tutor discussed ways of taking up the issue of multiple-choice exam techniques and the teaching/learning opportunity presented by student feedback.

As a result, a range of multiple-choice questions were developed by the coordinator and the tutor. These were used to assist students to become literate in the testing instrument. Multiple-choice questions were then used in the tutorial as a means for students to build on their knowledge, to practice and to demonstrate application of their knowledge and overall literacy. Thus multiple-choice questions became the vehicle for interpreting the information required, assessing the options available, and selecting and arguing for the best choice based on the knowledge and reasoning they were building.

#### **Peer group support**

The tutorial process also provided a catalyst for the students to establish an informal chemistry study group. Prior to the exam they were seen discussing chemistry, asking each other questions from texts and arguing the reason for the correctness of responses. The students' confidence grew to such a point that on the

morning of the exam, when as a group they were sitting and discussing a question, and the answer to it was unclear, they lifted the phone and clarified the issue with a lecturer.

#### **The role of the mentor**

Students frequently came to the mentor's room and expressed their feelings of frustration. This usually led to discussion of how they were doing, what they had done, the result, what could they do next, and how they could more fruitfully make use of the tutor, lecturer or laboratory demonstrator. Could the mentor remedy what had occurred? There was frequent encouragement by the mentor to go back over a completed laboratory exercise with the tutor, demonstrator or lecturer until the required task was understood and submitted.

A key issue became 'How do I best utilise the tutor to get what I need?' Students discussed and were encouraged to experiment and extend what they considered reasonable demands to make of a tutor, demonstrator or lecturer. Their sense of fairness and courtesy was frequently tested by the tension of wanting to know and not wanting to be 'unfair' by taking up too much of the tutor or lecturer's time.

One story aptly summarises the situation. The student had been pursuing information during a laboratory session but felt the demonstrator withdraw. She came away feeling like a two-year old who continually asks the question Why? Why? Why? However, she could also empathise with the demonstrator, who was unable to clarify the misinterpretations she had drawn from the lab.

Time was a critical factor. Students frequently stated that the lecturer and the laboratory demonstrators went too quickly in class. The tutorial and follow-up sessions provided the vital time—time to sit with the problem, turn it to a situation and seek a remedy in a position of safety.

#### **Funding the tutorial**

The Aboriginal Education Centre attempted to utilise the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) to establish a group chemistry tutorial, although the bureaucratic nightmare of ATAS resulted in the centre financing the commencement of the project. If we had waited for ATAS to furnish the funds, the students would have discontinued their course. Four weeks elapsed before ATAS funds were able to be tapped to continue tutorials.

We found that the evolution of the group tutorial process yielded a high return for small cost. The AEC contributed \$312. The AEC's mentor and in-house tutor, the head of the LDC, the coordinator of chemistry and the tutor all contributed their time. ATAS contributed \$624.

### The return

Three students attained and demonstrated the appropriate literacy for exam technique and chemistry. They were also able to apply their knowledge to literacy demands in other subjects. A tutor process was developed that was applicable to other group situations. A successful peer support and study group evolved and was extended by its members into other subjects. Above all, three Aboriginal students have chosen to remain in tertiary education.

### Quality control through cooperative effort

The relationship between the AEC's mentor, the academic adviser, the head of the LDC, the tutor and the coordinator of chemistry ensured flexibility, responsiveness and quality control focused on student-centred learning.

### Potential impact on mainstream teaching

The learning situations described here, which were responded to by the AEC and the LDC, are symptomatic of teaching issues that are experienced by most students. The chemistry lecturer's cooperative participation in successful student-centred tutor development allowed the LDC and AEC to act as a catalyst for enrichment and change of overall teaching processes.

Lecturers were enthused and are now assisting in the development of a nursing preparation program for Aboriginal people as a cooperative effort of the AEC, the LDC and the chemistry, biology and physics staff. It is argued that they will also incorporate the positive experience into their mainstream teaching, and thus professional development was a welcome outcome.

### Implications for effective expenditure of ATAS funds

As a result of this experience we can see that a successful tutor initiative can be achieved with significant cost savings to the Department of Employment, Education and Training, and the Aboriginal Education Centre. This could be done by linking and coordinating ATAS funds with on-site resources by contracting the AEC to conduct the ATAS scheme on campus. It would necessitate the allocation of total tutor funds to AEC, as well as a percentage of the ATAS administration costs.

This would enable the AEC to develop a proactive, quality tutor system in partnership with students' needs and the LDC. A pool of on-campus academic tutors could be utilised with advice from lecturers of the respective disciplines so that the students' tutorial needs are effectively catered for.

The current administration of ATAS results in large hidden costs. An AEC staff member currently expends a minimum of two days a week assisting students, tutors and DEET's ATAS field officer.

The frustration level of students, tutors and staff who are touched by the ATAS scheme's administration has to be seen to be believed. The scheme is frequently

unable to respond quickly enough for many tutor sessions to be proactive. Quality control, academic coordination and tutorial supervision is lacking. Large quantities of funds are expended, and students do not necessarily receive the tutors they deserve.

The current ATAS tutor selection practice is also fraught with pitfalls. The AEC has intervened in some situations that were not in the best interests of the tutor or students. The following selection of undesirable situations has occurred but could be avoided:

- tutors with a passion for their subject and not an ounce of empathy or understanding of students' specific needs
- students' manipulation of tutors to complete their work
- tutors who have limited understanding of teaching/learning processes knowing only what they were taught or one teaching strategy
- the student who is consistently late for tutorial sessions
- the student who cannot articulate a purpose/goal for each session

### Conclusion

Experience gained during the development and conduct of the tutor system has shown that students entering university through equity programs are often inexperienced in understanding the language of disciplines they have chosen. In order to facilitate the students' successful completion of their courses, it is necessary to address these problem areas through an academic development program that promotes the students' academic learning. The Aboriginal Education Centre believes that an appropriate response is to facilitate students' acquisition of compatible learning techniques.

The tutor system needs to be considered an integral part of processes and practices that foster the students' development of

- abilities and skills necessary to question, clarify, predict, anticipate, draw hypotheses, self-test, reflect, make connections and organise
- positive attitudes towards learning that involve risk taking, searching for meaning when directions are unclear, accepting short-term lack of clarity and direction in order to seek additional information—that is, accepting intellectual unrest as part of the learning process
- processes of collaborative learning, team-learning, sharing, interacting and cooperating for mutual benefit and building a positive independent learning environment
- processes of making meaning from modelling and demonstrations through constructing analogies and using metaphors that link to their own experience—that is, going from the known to the unknown



Ensuring the academic success of Aboriginal students who are admitted to university under equity programs involves factors that are in essence qualitative or unmeasurable.

One of the most essential ingredients is the establishment and coordination of infrastructure. The personnel involved within this infrastructure require clear understandings about learning and the capacitation of this learning in specific disciplines and their academic contexts. These understandings have ingredients of empathy, active listening, compassion and sensitivity to cultural nuances, especially in respect to communication and interaction.

Our research to date, funded by a Committee for Advancement of University Teaching grant, has demonstrated the benefits to be obtained from a comprehensive program that addresses all the various organisation patterns, practices and processes of academic development.

This program has involved the establishment of dialogue between the personnel of individual faculties, the Learning Development Centre, the Aboriginal Education Centre, students and tutors. The research still being undertaken has not clearly indicated what the characteristics of successful coordination are. However, it is appropriate to highlight that the research is revealing the many constraints that operate against successfully supporting the academic learning of Aboriginal students.

In order to overcome these constraints and obtain the maximum benefit from academic development, it is paramount that a comprehensive academic learning development program be adopted.

To be effective, this program needs to be introduced from the commencement of the student's academic year; it needs to begin with the student orientation program. If this academic development program is introduced, we envisage that learning skills will be consolidated and the learning that results will be durable and therefore reduce the need for such a high level of support in the students' subsequent years.



*Stella Emberson*

Thebarton Senior College, Adelaide, South Australia

---

### Abstract

To be equal participants in a future Australian society, students will need to be able to use oral and written language powerfully in a range of situations. To acquire these skills they need explicit tuition and modelling in some basic types of factual text. In this paper Stella Emberson provides useful examples of classroom practice in which students are encouraged to extend their knowledge and learning strategies during the research and writing processes. Emberson has also provided her notes for a workshop on tuition in writing, which are published here as an appendix.

---

A major aspect of social justice in schools is the provision of equitable educational outcomes for all students. If students are to be empowered to have control over the processes and circumstances that shape their lives, they need to be able to develop the language skills and broad competencies identified in recent federal reports, such as the Finn Report and the Mayer Report.

### Key competencies

The Finn Report argued that there were six essential areas of competence that young people needed to be able to function satisfactorily. Three of these areas were

- language and communication
- cultural understanding
- personal and interpersonal characteristics

The Finn Report stated: 'There is an increasing realisation internationally that the most successful forms of work organisation are those which encourage people to be multi-skilled, creative and adaptable'.

The Mayer committee was set up to develop the key areas identified in the Finn Report. It emphasised the necessity to prepare young people for the workplace and adult life. This report proposed seven key competencies. Four of these areas are

- collecting, analysing and organising information
- communicating ideas and information
- planning and organising activities
- working with others and in teams

Aboriginal Studies is an excellent vehicle for developing the skills of collaborative learning and the language skills of analysis, exposition and discussion. It is a subject that can develop the skills, knowledge and understandings necessary for students to achieve the key competencies mentioned above. An education system that gives students the literacy tools and knowledge to achieve empowerment in their adult and working lives is a just one.

### Content-oriented versus context-oriented learning

Western education has typically been content orientated. Students learn facts and knowledge, usually from printed matter, and reproduce it in essays, reports and exams. In contrast, indigenous education was and is contextual, the learning taking place in a real life situation. The abstract knowledge about society and environment, about how places are linked together and linked with people, was made real by the songs and dances belonging to those places.

Classroom learning has in the past been isolated from the tangible world, and the demands of the teachers have therefore been incomprehensible to many Aboriginal students. Schools have been run on the implicit rules established by the dominant culture.

Schools and the education system in general are now examining the beliefs, values and knowledge that have been deemed important and are prepared to make

*Stella Emberson is currently teaching at Thebarton Senior College in Adelaide. An ESL teacher (BA in Aboriginal Studies, GradDipTESOL), she provides support for teachers of Australian Studies in inclusive methodologies and practices so that they develop an interactive classroom in which teachers help students to draw on their background knowledge.*

education expectations explicit. The Attainment Levels are one avenue by which teachers, parents, the community and students will have explicit statements about curriculum, knowledge and processes. While National Profiles are helping to redefine valued knowledge, social justice is a major thread running through the content of the Attainment Levels. For example,

... can recognise/describe issues related to inequitable participation in Australian society. (Society and Environment curriculum)

Existing constructions of meaning are being challenged, and the pedagogical focus is now on cooperative and collaborative learning. It is through this focus that we will bridge the gap between the imported content-orientated style of learning and the indigenous contextual style of learning.

#### Inclusivity

Inclusivity refers to not only inclusivity of content but also inclusivity of ideology and teaching methodologies and practices. Exemplary teaching practice involves all students participating fully in the learning situation, because they are provided with equal access to instruction, resources and the teacher's time. In order to learn new knowledge and skills the student must reflect on what he/she already knows and be able to incorporate the new into his/her current cognitive schema. Reflecting on the new knowledge, new skills, new concepts, then enhances the student's cognitive development. It is therefore important that our teaching methodologies are inclusive by relating the new to the student's current knowledge and experience. What students bring to the classroom in the way of life experiences, their knowledge, skills and ideas, must be valued and incorporated into the everyday curriculum and learning process.

Before beginning a unit or topic in Aboriginal Studies, it is advisable for the teacher to contact the Area Aboriginal Education Team not only for resources but also to validate the program. Local Aboriginal culture and history should be part of the program, and students should be encouraged to participate in deciding on the content and processes of the program. A just program will have Aboriginal input and ideally will involve the local Aboriginal community. But because the resources and energy of the local community are finite, the teacher must often rely on his/her own skills and resources to deliver a program that is inclusive in both content and methodologies.

#### Getting into printed text

Getting students to read printed text with understanding is often difficult because their minds are not in focus with the topic or subject material. There are three stages to make this more successful and to develop their literacy skills.

The first is to establish a context for the piece of text. This can be done by inviting discussion of a picture, cartoon, headline, title or even a graph of statistics relating to the text. Overhead transparencies are an excellent teaching aid for this. The context is also made more relevant by relating the material to the students' own knowledge, background and experiences. Photographs from books such as *Survival in our Own Land*, edited by Christobel Mattingley and Ken Hampton, and headlines about national and local issues reported in the press make excellent materials for developing the idea of context.

The next stage is to set up expectations about the text. Students in pairs can list words they think will be found in the text. These words can be listed on a board, the teacher adding words of importance that may have been missed.

When understandings about the words have been shared, the final stage is to predict what questions will be answered by the text or what information will be in the text.

In summary, the process is to

- establish a context for the text
- set up expectations about the text
- provide a purpose for reading the text

#### From research to writing

Any writing task involves a similar series of steps before the final version is produced. Students often believe they cannot write because they have never been through the collaborative stages of preparing and learning to compose written text. Students need to realise that we write for different purposes and for different audiences. The purpose, the audience and the writer's relationship with the audience will determine the structure and language of the piece of writing and the tone or style used.

Although the range and diversity of written texts are vast, it is of value to introduce students to some basic types of written text. These are often referred to as genres, and there are numerous resources detailing the schematic structure and language features of each genre. A letter to the editor of a newspaper, for example, is most often written as an exposition in which the author puts forward a point of view in a persuasive manner. To enable students to write such a letter, it is important first to build up background knowledge of the issue. Recent issues such as the handing back of control of the Tjilbruke Springs at Tulukudank (Kingston Park, Adelaide) to Kurna people or the proposal to build a bridge to Hindmarsh Island (at the mouth of the Murray River) in Ngaffindjeri country are the sorts of issues that students can tackle. These are also excellent for developing into discussions where arguments for and against are presented.

Building up background knowledge involves learning the history of the area, viewing photographs,

interviewing Aboriginal caretakers of the lands and examining the printed media. Pairs of students are given a newspaper article to examine and from which to make notes. Each pair of students is given a different article, as later they will share the information that they have. Because the task is shared it is made easier. The teacher can further support the students with a proforma sheet of relevant questions, such as: who are the people involved?, what are their opinions? When the pairs of students are confident that they can summarise their articles, they change partners, and with their new partners they verbally exchange summaries of their newspaper articles. The students continue to change partners until all students have heard summaries of all the articles. In larger classes students can work in groups of four so that no student is left to summarise an article alone. This learning methodology of sharing the responsibility of reading and summarising newspaper articles is not only pleasurable but saves the student the onerous task of reading every article.

At this stage the teacher gives the students the schematic structure of an exposition and shows the students some examples of this type of text. Suitable models can be found in newspapers in letters to the editor, and in articles in *Land Rights News* or *Koorie Mail*. An exposition text comprises a thesis (made up of a position statement) and a preview of the issue, the arguments (made up of point and elaboration) and the reiteration or restatement of the thesis.

After modelling the type of text required in the writing task, the teacher collects points for the issue (or argument) from the students and puts them on the board or overhead transparencies. Expositions can be developed later as discussions.

The next stage of the writing process is the joint construction of a letter to the editor. The content material has been collected and displayed on the board, and the teacher clarifies that the students understand the purpose and audience (unknown public) for the text. Then using an overhead projector and transparency the teacher begins the letter using the students' suggestions and input. As students gain confidence in writing, some of them will be able to go straight to the independent stage of writing, thus allowing the teacher to support other small groups of students with their language and literacy development.

This explicit teaching of the writing process enables students to be successful in the task, thus building up their confidence and self-esteem. In this particular task, students are given access to the public forum we know as 'letter to the editor'.

Another writing task is the biographical report. This can be very successful if it is approached in a collaborative way. For example, students can work in a group of four when writing a report on an Aboriginal identity. One student collects information on the political

climate of the decade in which the person was born. Another student collects social information of the decade. A third student collects the biographical detail of the identity—that is, family relationships and social situation. A fourth student collates the information, and together the group analyses how politics, society and social situation have shaped this person and his or her work. Together the students compose the outline of their report, then independently they write a first draft. These drafts can be shared later and suggestions made for editing and redrafting. A collaborative approach like this prepares students for independent report writing.

The final stage of the writing process is the relevant assessment and feedback from the teacher and possibly feedback from peers. The teacher needs to respond to ideas and organisation of a piece of writing first, before marking for language accuracy. Real life writing goes through the process of editing and proofreading, and students must not be made to think that they cannot write just because their first drafts are not fully correct. In summary, the process is

- build up background knowledge
- make sure the purpose and the audience are understood
- examine models of the type of text required
- joint construction of text
- independent construction of text
- relevant assessment and feedback

#### Group work and oral literacy

One area of literacy that is often forgotten is oral literacy. This can be enjoyably developed through group work, which in turn develops a sharing of learning styles and thus extends students' knowledge and learning strategies. Many Aboriginal Studies materials can be adapted for group activities such as information gap tasks, problem-solving tasks and sequencing activities. For example, using Oodgeroo Noonuccal's book *Father Sky Mother Earth*, the first part of the story is told. Then each student is given a different picture from the second half of the story and, without showing their pictures to other students, they describe them and arrange themselves in sequence on a circle of chairs. Only when they believe they have the right sequence are the students allowed to share their pictures. This activity focuses the students' attention on the message the author is trying to give, and it develops their ability to tell a story.

A problem-solving task could be developed around a theme of Aboriginal artists and their work. Some students are given a picture each of different Aboriginal artists' work, and an equal number of students are given cards on which are written a description of one of these works. The students with the photocopied pictures describe their pictures in turn, while the other students listen and deduce to which picture their

description belongs. The students with the descriptions are able to ask questions of those with pictures but do not read out their descriptions until they have made a decision as to who is their 'partner'. This activity develops decision-making language and skills and also familiarises students with knowledge about the Aboriginal art world. A valuable resource is Jennifer Isaac's book *Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings and Prints*.

An information gap task involves each student in the group holding part of the information required to complete a task. Students share the information so that they can complete the task. For example, a team game can be devised where one student has a sheet of paper on which items are listed only by their first name and the first letter of the Adnyamathana name. The rest of the team has a copy of *Artefacts of the Flinders Ranges* by Dorothy Tunbridge. This book is set out like a picture dictionary. As the team leader calls out the item and the first letter of the Adnyamathana name, the other students take turns to find the item in the book. This type of activity can be adapted to use the local language(s) and helps to develop in students an understanding of the richness and variety in Aboriginal languages.

The examples given are from various aspects of Aboriginal Studies, but all can be adapted to fit local Aboriginal knowledge and issues.

In conclusion an inclusive classroom is one in which the emphasis is on student-centred learning where there is explicit teaching of skills and the tasks are collaborative and fun.

## Workshop: Tuition in Writing

*Stella Emberson*

Some teachers have expressed the opinion that students should be allowed to be creative and experiment with their language, but I feel that free choice is no choice without knowledge and skills. Students and many adults are not able to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, and this needs to be taught. Twenty or thirty years ago extensive literacy skills were rarely needed, but this is no longer true. With the reduction in the number of manual jobs, future employment and thus empowerment will be through technical and literacy skills. To be equal participants in a future Australian society, students will need to be able to use oral and written language powerfully in a range of situations. To do this they need explicit tuition and modelling in some basic types of factual text—for example, exposition, discussion, informational report and procedure. Traditional indigenous education follows the same pattern of learn the basics, the rules, the patterns, then be creative. That approach was necessary for survival, and I believe time for explicit teaching and modelling and time for collaborative and extended writing are essential for 'survival' in the twenty-first century. When students have control over basic text types and understand audience and purpose, they can be creative.

Analysis of text into

- function (purpose and audience)
- schematic structure (organisation of text)
- language features

gives students tools for comparing how language is used to achieve specific purposes in the dominant culture. This approach to writing also extends cognitive development and organisation of knowledge and information. Genres evolve in different cultures for specific purposes, and this analysis also gives students tools for cross-cultural understandings.

Teaching writing through Aboriginal Studies is an essential part of our curriculum in South Australia, and the following notes from the SACE Aboriginal Studies document should be helpful to secondary teachers who are teaching Aboriginal Studies and/or Aboriginal students. (Acknowledgement is also made of LLIMY materials.) The last section is a checklist for students to keep in their writing folios.



**Teacher planning questions**

- Am I clear on my purpose?
- Does the task match my assessment plan rationale?
- Is the wording of the question clear?
- How complex is the question?
- Are there enough resources?
- How long will the piece of writing be?
- What are my criteria for assessment?
- Have I set enough time for this to be completed?
- How does this relate to my formative work?
- For this form/piece of writing, do my students know
  - the features—structures and organisation
  - the audience
  - the language features—the specific vocabulary, the kinds of words, the level of keynotes

**Guidelines for providing feedback to writing**

- Inform students about what you will respond to, how you will do it and why.
- Respond in terms of criteria.
- Respond to ideas and organisation before responding to language and conventions.
- Comment on at least one positive feature of a student's writing.
- Be selective in pointing out errors and look for patterns.
- Advise the student how to improve.

**Supporting the writers**

*Task setting:*

- Make it appropriate to student group.
- Consider the wording carefully.
- Specify the criteria.

**Prevent problems**

- Set up task carefully.
- Give clear criteria
  - content
  - structure
  - language
- Make sure the task is understood.
- Ensure planning occurs.
- Ensure drafting occurs.
- Respond in terms of the criteria.

**Respond/intervene**

(at planning/drafting/editing stages)

- ideas
- organisation
- language
- conventions

**Strategies to support students as writers**

- clear criteria for success
- clear sense of purpose and audience
- know consequences
- access to models of writing
- access to demonstrations
- guidance during writing
- access to guides
- provision of time
- immediate feedback

Writing processes	Strategies	Writing processes	Strategies
Understanding the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain to students</li> <li>• criteria</li> <li>• appropriate form/genre</li> <li>• appropriate structure</li> <li>• purpose</li> <li>• appropriate length</li> <li>• time available</li> </ul> <p>Explain key terms in topic (discuss/compare/analyse)</p>	Drafting/writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• language help (word lists/glossaries)</li> <li>• check progress/direction/structure</li> <li>• referring to criteria</li> <li>• conferencing</li> <li>• providing ideas for direction</li> </ul>
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brainstorm</li> <li>• flowchart</li> <li>• concept map</li> <li>• presentation template</li> <li>• personal plan</li> <li>• note-taking</li> <li>• retrieval chart</li> </ul>	Editing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discuss relevant language conventions</li> <li>• reading aloud</li> <li>• self-editing checks</li> <li>• access to computers</li> <li>• checking</li> </ul>
		Presenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assessment</li> <li>• feedback</li> </ul>

### **Student checklist for a piece of writing**

These are questions you can ask yourself about a piece of writing:

#### *General (before you begin writing)*

- Do I understand the purpose for this writing?
- Do I know what form it is to be presented in?
- What are the features of this form of writing?
- Have I seen examples of this kind of writing?
- Who is the audience for this piece of writing?
- Do I know the criteria by which this piece will be judged? (Your teacher should be able to give you this information).
- Have I made a plan?
- Have I allowed time to drift and get feedback on my draft?

#### *Ideas and organisation*

- Are my main ideas easy to understand?
- Is the purpose of the writing clear throughout?
- Are the sentences in logical order?
- Are the paragraphs logically ordered?
- Is there enough/too much information?

#### *Language*

- Have I used the correct terms for this topic?
- Is my style of writing suitable for this topic? (e.g. formal/informal)
- Are my sentences complete?
- Are my verb tenses consistent?
- Have I used my own words?

#### *Conventions*

- Have I checked my spelling? (key words for this topic/common words)
- Have I used capital letters in the appropriate places?
- Have I indicated where paragraphs begin?
- Have I used punctuation appropriately? (question marks, speech marks, fullstops, commas)
- Have I used quotation marks to show where I have used the words of other people?

(The panel of people who assess your writing for the Writing-based Literacy Assessment will ask themselves these questions about your writing.)

## Mathematics and Language: Teaching with an Aboriginal Perspective

Mary Knight, Robyn Hurley and Steve Flavel  
Driver High School, Palmerston, NT

---

### Abstract

This program to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with mathematics in Years 8 to 10 at Driver High School, south of Darwin, began in 1992. A class of no more than 20 of these students is taught the same maths units as the mainstream classes, by maths teachers rotating on a semester basis but with an ESL teacher as the constant throughout the year. Students may nominate themselves or be nominated by their usual maths teacher to join the class. Studying maths in this enclave situation, the students have a learning environment that values their cultural background and uses strategies appropriate for them. Having acquired confidence and better grades, they return to their mainstream maths class, where support for them should be ongoing because each teacher acquires experience during at least one semester teaching maths to this special class.

---

*Mary Knight trained as a primary school teacher in Victoria in the early 1960s and taught in that state until 1977, when she moved to the Northern Territory. She upgraded her qualifications to Bachelor of Education at NTU while working with adult Aboriginal students at Batchelor College, where she designed and (for seven years) ran the Access Course at Batchelor. She then began working with Aboriginal students in urban primary and secondary schools and currently occupies the ESL position at Driver High School in Palmerston, where approximately 30 percent of the student body is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.*

*Robyn Hurley (DipA, DipSci, DipT, BEd) has lived in the Northern Territory for 17 years. She gained her teaching qualifications while lecturing part-time at the Darwin Community College in mathematics and science with the Aboriginal Task Force (now known as the Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Studies, NTU). She then taught mathematics at Driver High School for five years and is currently working on a project with the Curriculum and Assessment Division, writing mathematics curriculum support materials for Aboriginal students.*

*Steve Flavel has been teaching in the Northern Territory for eight years. In 1992, when he was teacher in charge of mathematics at Driver High School, the faculty team engaged in a process of in-house professional development with the aim of improving the delivery of mathematics to all students at the school. He is currently on full-time study leave, studying for his masters by research at Swinburne Institute of Technology.*

Driver High School is an urban high school situated 20 kilometres from Darwin, in the Northern Territory. Twenty-seven percent of the 420 students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Many, if not all of the families of these students want their children to have educational outcomes similar to those in the non-Aboriginal population. Results show, however, that very few Aborigines experience success in mathematics. In the three years before the program began, no Aborigines at Driver High School had passed Year 10 Level 1 Mathematics.

### Addressing the problem

At the commencement of 1992, a new maths senior and an ESL teacher were appointed to the school, knowing that ideas to help address this untenable situation needed to be explored.

The problem of underachieving Aborigines in urban high schools is apparent throughout the Northern Territory. In addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, the context within which Aboriginal students learn must be supported so that effective learning can take place. The maths senior and the ESL teacher had found no suitable program that attempted to address the problem.

At Driver the need to assess the mathematics units that were offered and the way in which they were delivered by teachers became a starting point for change. In order to explore teaching methodologies and relevant learning experiences for students, it was proposed that an all-Aboriginal class be set up. The class was formed early in 1992 with a consensus of support from the maths teachers. During the year another maths teacher returned from leave and also became involved in the program. All of these teachers recognised that Aboriginal students had the potential for achieving success but that certain behaviours interfered with their attaining successful outcomes. The philosophy that underpinned this notion was responsible for grouping the Aboriginal students in an enclave situation.

Units of work taught in the class in 1992 were  
122 Shortening the odds  
123 Walking the line  
107 Algebra is fun  
109 Geometric patterns

While the learning outcomes were the same as those listed in the curriculum overview in the school's handbook, the teaching methodologies and mathematical experiences differed from those offered in similar units in mainstream classes. Underlying the philosophy for mounting this maths program were the beliefs that learning is maximised when

- students start from the known, in terms of their mathematical knowledge and context
- students experience success and mastery of all essential mathematical skills

- students are encouraged to develop the language skills to express mathematical concepts
- students are recognised as having different learning styles
- students are allowed to reflect on their learning in a supportive and non-threatening environment
- students are encouraged to communicate their mathematical understandings through discussion, peer interaction and written experience
- the cultural and personal world of the student is valued
- the wholeness of mathematics is recognised instead of treating mathematics as discrete mathematics topics

#### Target group

In the socio-cultural context of the community, Aboriginal students are generally not encouraged to initiate learning or actively seek knowledge. Many of our Driver students display passive learning behaviours in the classroom, characterised by lengthy preparations for work (without anything being completed), detailed illustrating, and large parts of lesson times spent in social interaction, looking for equipment and generally being 'off task' most of the time. This attitude may continue through high school unless it is addressed at some stage of the student's schooling by the use of appropriate strategies. The maths program therefore attempts to implement these strategies.

The learning behaviours described were characteristic of students who were nominated by their teachers or who nominated themselves to work in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander class in 1992.

Students ranged from Year 8 to Year 10. At the end of each term, particular students who were regarded as showing confidence and increased achievement were placed back in a mainstream class, thereby making places for others to enter the all-Aboriginal class. Overall, class numbers remained at about 20 students.

#### Staffing

The Aboriginal and TI class was staffed with one maths faculty teacher and the ESL support teacher. The maths teacher was responsible for programming, teaching and assessment, while the ESL support teacher provided tutorial assistance to students, pastoral care, joint responsibility for classroom management, and attention to administrative matters. The maths teachers rotated classes each semester, but the ESL teacher retained the same role in the class throughout the year, thereby providing a stable influence for the students.

#### ESL model

It was clear to those responsible for the Aboriginal maths program that the implicit task was to change perceptions and attitudes about teaching and learning among both students and teachers. One of the ways we

endeavoured to do this was through the ESL model that was already instituted in the faculty. While the students 'cycled' through the class according to their needs, the maths teachers also rotated every semester. The ESL teacher remained the constant factor. This meant that inservicing in Aboriginal education was available to teachers within the context of their own classroom, and the climate of the classroom was monitored by the ESL teacher for continuity. This is probably the most effective ESL model of operation at Driver.

The model has brought about a change in perceptions but does not restrict ESL support to students, as happens in tutorial-type models. The teachers are inserviced in appropriate methodology in an active and positive way. Ultimately, the benefits for ESL learners will depend less on the ESL teacher being constantly at hand.

#### Methodology

Underlying decisions about methodology are the beliefs about how Aboriginal students learn. Figure 1 shows the components of the methodology in the Driver program.

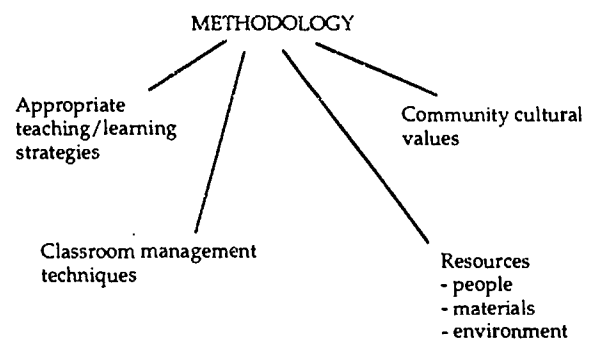


Figure 1 Components of the methodology in the Driver High School maths program for selected Aboriginal students in Years 8 to 10

The program reflects the recognition and support of community cultural values. In other words, the sociocultural characteristics that Aboriginal students bring with them to the classroom are recognised and, where possible, used to bring about positive learning behaviours. The other components of the methodology—the teaching/learning strategies, the classroom management style and the resources—spring from this fundamental principle. The answer to the question 'How does the Driver maths program support Aboriginal learners?' is that

- we are aware of behaviours learned during the socialisation process
- we recognise that these may conflict with school expectations

- we create an environment that first supports, then utilises these behaviours
- in a low-risk setting, we give access to the 'culture of school' and to learning

The methodology used in teaching these maths units therefore takes into account the following factors, which provide optimum learning conditions for Aboriginal students:

- a learning environment that responds to students in a personal way, enhancing their self-esteem and social identity
- a learning environment that values the cultural background of students and the knowledge they bring to the classroom
- a program that provides real-life learning activities and realistic experiences
- the use of teaching/learning strategies that are appropriate and effective with Aboriginal learners, thereby incorporating Aboriginal learning styles in classroom processes
- the use of relevant and appropriate resources and the use of classroom management techniques that are appropriate and employ a range of strategies for diffusing potential conflict
- the development of positive relationships among students and staff

#### The teaching/learning model

We now refer to the Driver High School Maths Faculty handbook for the teaching/learning model that underpins the teaching of mathematics at the school. Sensitivity to the range of language needs of all students, including those from cultural backgrounds other than mainstream, is a particular feature of the model.

#### *Mathematics is socially constructed*

Mathematics is both an individual constructive activity and a communal social practice. We construct mathematical knowledge by actively engaging in social discourse and personal reflection. Western mathematical knowledge has been socially constructed over several thousand years. To share in this knowledge the student must personally construct meanings that are shared by the wider mathematical community. It is particularly important that students from non-English-speaking backgrounds have equal access to this knowledge. This learning model attempts to improve the quality of these constructions.

#### *Focus questions and problem posing*

A focus question is asked or a problem posed at the beginning of the learning sequence. Focus questions assist in giving meaning and direction to the mathematics under study. During the learning sequence, problem posing is encouraged. Students and teachers

usually develop focus questions during their reflection time and during mathematical discourse.

#### *Learning experiences and learning sequences*

Learning experiences occur when students

- gather data
- postulate and test conjectures
- make connections
- generalise
- develop procedures

A learning sequence is a learning experience or a set of linked learning experiences. Ideally, learning sequences encourage students to

- apply their gained mathematical procedures to similar problems in different contexts
- extend and hone their mathematical skills (in meaningful contexts)
- make mathematical connections
- apply key learning strategies and reflect on learning
- develop a positive attitude towards attaining mathematical knowledge

Situations are constructed that allow students to construct their own meaning on the one hand, through personal exploration and interaction with concrete materials, and, on the other hand, through technology and dialogue with their peers and teacher.

#### *As a teacher, model the process of mathematical inquiry*

As a teacher, explore some mathematics, reflect on your learning and make generalisations. Make explicit to the student what is going on when you do mathematics.

#### *Act as a mentor*

Encourage reflection and higher-order questioning through questioning and modelling: 'What have you tried?', 'Can you tell me what the problem is?', 'Are there cases that do not work?' and 'How do you know?'

#### *Communication and language*

Support an environment that values and supports the students' own language as they come to use mathematical terminology accurately. Encourage students to adopt learning strategies that encourage personal reflection (journal writing), small group discussion and class discussion. This allows students to negotiate their own learning with that of the class and the wider mathematical community.

Develop questioning techniques that encourage students to rethink misconceptions. For example, 'Can you think of any unusual cases?'. Extend their generalisations, 'Does it work for other numbers?', and encourage them to make mathematical connections, 'Where have you seen a similar formula?'

Build common mathematical understandings that are expressed in a language that can be understood by the wider mathematical community.



*Applications and skills maintenance*

Regularly practise important skills through problem solving, mathematical modelling, mental calculations, application questions, problem posing and investigations. Ideally, skills are refined through their use in a wide variety of applications and problems that relate to the students constructs and interests.

**Assessment**

Work requirements and assessment are the same as those in the Maths Faculty handbook, a copy of which is reproduced below. It must, once again, be pointed out that the work requirements and assessment procedures in the Aboriginal maths class are no different from those of any other junior classes.

**Evaluation of the program**

Final maths grades for each student engaging in the Aboriginal maths program in semester 1, 1992, were collected before the program commenced, and a second set of grades was collected after the semester. The two sets of results for the same students were then compared to see if an improvement had occurred as a result of the program.

A tally of the grades is shown below. The grades are ranked from A to E (A = high achievement, E = fail), and the frequency indicates the number of students achieving those grades. A total of 21 students had participated in the program at that time.

Grade	Before engaging in the program Frequency	After engagement in the program Frequency
A	0	3
B	2	4
C	9	8
D	3	4
E	7	2

For the purposes of statistical analysis the letter grades were given numerical values where A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, D = 4 and E = 5. Higher achievement is represented by a lower numerical value. On this basis, the mean (or average) score before program engagement was 3.7, and after engagement the mean score was 2.9. This means there was a shift to higher achievement after engaging in the program.

More specifically, three students achieved A grades where there had been none before intervention, and at the other end of the scale the number of E grades received by students was reduced from seven to two.

As well as improvements in academic grades, there were other changes in behaviours. The application of the philosophical beliefs through appropriate methodology was successful in assisting some students to effect change by taking responsibility for their own learning and physical behaviour in the classroom.

**Extract from the Driver High School Maths Faculty handbook**

*Work Requirements*

As part of the assessment requirements in the table below it is expected that you will

- respond in writing to all focus questions and pose your own focus questions
- work effectively as a group member acting as a scribe, spokesperson and facilitator at least once during this unit
- attain fluency in prescribed skills and learning strategies by completing and understanding set classroom and homework tasks
- communicate your mathematical knowledge through problem posing, writing and group discussion
- reflect on your learning through the Impact Sheet

Assessment Item	Weight	Date due
Workbook (with focus questions)	20%	Fortnightly
Assignments 1 and 2	10%	Week 3
Test 1	10%	Week 6
Extended Mathematical Task	20%	Week 6
Assignment 3	10%	Week 7
Term Test	20%	Week 8
Assignment 4	10%	Week 10

Indeed, other subject teachers reported that some of these students modified their behaviour in class. It appeared that the experience of success in a non-threatening and supportive environment had been successful in triggering a range of positive changes in attitude to school and to learning.

**Case studies**

Two case studies are presented here.

*Case 1*

Freda came into Driver High School from one of the feeder primary schools at Year 8 level, aged 12 years 11 months. She presented as a potentially bright student but with unexpected bouts of disruptive behaviour, which affected the demeanour of her peer group and her own achievement levels. Although she actively sought knowledge at times, she also required working conditions that maintained the degree of autonomy which was allowed outside school. Freda was the youngest child in the family. Her non-Aboriginal mother and Aboriginal father had placed much emphasis on education, and two of Freda's siblings had reached Year 12 in high school. As the youngest, Freda was allowed more leniency, and it was clear to teachers at Driver that to achieve academic success, she would require the support offered in the Aboriginal maths

class. The primary school report at the end of the previous year stated that she attained high achievement at year level in all areas of maths. Her effort was recorded as commendable.

During Term 1 in the Aboriginal maths class, Freda worked her way to becoming the top student in terms of achievement levels. Her behaviour modified, and she undertook tasks with energy and creativity.

Term 1 grade: A

As part of the on-going assessment process in the class, Freda was selected to go into a Level 1 mainstream maths class at the end of Term 1. There was one Aboriginal child in that class. The decision was hers to make, and although she was reluctant to leave her peer group, she made the move. After a few days in the new class, she was having some regrets. She complained that she 'can't understand the teacher' and 'she [the teacher] doesn't explain things enough'. When advised to ask her new teacher for help, her reaction was adamant: 'No, that's shame to do that!' Over the following few weeks the Aboriginal maths staff continued to encourage her to stay and meet the challenge that was being presented to her. Finally, the new teacher was able to report a breakthrough. Another student had requested help, and as the teacher passed Freda on his return from that task, Freda quietly caught his attention and also requested help. Since then, Freda has presented as a more active learner, her behaviour has modified to meet expectations of that class, and she is maintaining achievement at Level 1 maths. (It should perhaps be pointed out that the new teacher had previously been inserviced through the maths/ESL model and was therefore sensitive to Freda's needs.)

Term 2 grade: B

Term 3 grade: B

#### Case 2

Derwent was a 14-year-old Year 9 student, who started at Driver High School at the commencement of 1992. He lived with his father in one of the local caravan parks and was responsible for keeping house while his father went to work. He was a pleasant and cooperative student, keen on sport, and friendly with a number of his peers. Derwent was identified by his mainstream maths teacher during Term 1 with the description that 'he looked totally phased by what's going on and hasn't got a clue'. He joined the Aboriginal maths class mid-term in Term 1. No previous progress reports had been filed at Driver.

Derwent spent Terms 1 and 2 in that class. During this time he was able to take every advantage offered by the holistic approach to the cultural, social and academic support of Aboriginal learners. He became a role model to other students. He initiated learning activities and theories in peer group situations. He was

able to articulate responses to focus questions clearly. Assessment grades indicated this.

Term 1 grade: B

Term 2 grade: B

Derwent was subsequently selected to enter a Level 1 maths class in Term 3 on the basis of his confidence and competence in maths. The teacher of that class had not been inserviced in Aboriginal teaching/learning methodology, and support was given by the ESL teacher on an irregular basis only.

Term 3 grade: E

Term 4 grade: D

Support for Derwent has not been maintained during his tenth year because of the teaching staff's priorities in other areas, and his work habits and learning involvement have suffered considerably.

Year 10, Term 1 grade: E

Term 2 grade: E

Term 3 grade: D

These case studies reveal the continuing need for social, cultural and academic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Both Freda and Derwent entered the class showing signs of high learning potential that was not being realised in mainstream classes. As they progressed in the Aboriginal maths class, they became more active learners and performed at a level well above the class average. In Freda's case the level of performance was maintained by her when she left the class because the support was ongoing. In Derwent's case this was not done, and the student floundered.

#### Useful strategies for a successful learning environment

##### *Professional development*

Successful and ongoing implementation of the learning model in an Aboriginal context depends on the professional development of teachers involved or likely to be involved in the program. The adopted model, which underpins professional development, is seen as an essential component of classroom practice when working with Aboriginal students. Common understandings that underpin the philosophy of the model are made explicit, and learning about Aboriginal education takes place through workshops, meetings and informal discussion. Reinforcing positive goals is an integral part of the process.

##### *In the classroom*

A more effective classroom practice is the result of an awareness of cultural differences and a knowledge of strategies that support Aboriginal learners, combined with classroom experience and the support of the ESL teacher.

An integral part of the program is to cycle not only students through the program on a 'needs' basis but also the maths teachers. The purpose of cycling teachers through the program each term is to enable each of them to gain experience in working with Aboriginal students. The students are given the opportunity to work with a variety of maths teachers throughout the year so that they develop their own strategies for coping with different teachers. The ESL teacher remains a stable component throughout the program so as to minimise the impact of change.

One teacher who taught the class for a term reflected on the experience and made the following observations about the needs of Aboriginal students and the strategies that worked with the group:

- the need for mostly informal classroom interaction. The traditional style of teacher out the front and students listening did not work.
- the need for teaching styles that include the whole group. It was observed that it was very easy for part of the group to 'drift off' and not be involved.
- the need for interesting and relevant activities. Things that are personally relevant such as height/weight investigations.
- the need to give regular encouragement and reward for being on task and working well in class
- the need for regular feedback on assessment progress. This was done by displaying a grades/mark sheet of progress on the wall.

#### *The school community*

The school community comprises students, parents and teachers. Students in the Aboriginal class need to understand that their class is a pathway, an option that caters for them on a 'needs' basis as a means of attaining successful outcomes. This does not mean that the course is watered down in any way, as the outcomes are the same for all students. Aboriginal students are given a choice and may transfer across to other classes on a needs basis. The notion of an Aboriginal class as implemented at Driver is to equip the students so that they can successfully manage in classes outside the enclave situation.

Teachers in all faculties need to be made aware of the successful outcomes as a result of a supportive environment for Aboriginal students. The ESL teacher is the main resource for consultation in classroom management and works with the teacher and students in maintaining a positive environment.

#### *Parent involvement*

Informing parents through ASSPA meetings about the program and giving them the opportunity to meet the teachers is a way of communicating to parents the need for their support in their children's education. Where possible they are involved in the program through

students taking folders of work home and being encouraged with homework. Involvement in the homework centre is another way of getting parents interested in their children's education. There is little doubt that the aspirations of Aboriginal parents are that their children succeed in high school, and programs such as the one at Driver High School empower students to cope in mainstream classes as a precursor to attaining the same educational outcomes in Year 10 as non-Aboriginal students.

#### **Recommendations**

Increasing the Aboriginal presence in the school through Commonwealth Aboriginal Education Policy funding is now occurring at Driver. Students are shown that education is valued by their community through these role models, and the school values resource people who are able to articulate the Aboriginal viewpoint in the school context. Aboriginal staff are a contact point for reticent parents, and the communication gaps that exist between school and community are being addressed. The positive impact on student behaviours is evident already, and the extension of these positions in schools is vital.

Some strategies that worked were suggested by various teachers. Many more strategies could be added to the list by any innovative and concerned teacher of Aboriginal students. Sharing of ideas and successes (or otherwise) contribute to a dynamic, interactive style of professional development, which has been instrumental in the success of the program. While professional development of the whole school staff remains a challenge, it is understood by the program's participants that really worthwhile change is of necessity slow.

This report was a collaborative effort by staff at Driver High. Please address further enquiries about the program to: Mary Knight, Driver High School, PO Box 85, Palmerston NT 0830.

# English Language Arts Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

*Rose Cunnington*

Regional Equity and Development School Support Centre,  
Cairns, Qld

---

## Abstract

State schools in far north Queensland's remote communities now have an English Language Arts Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This program was developed to help students communicate well in standard Australian English without losing any facility in the language or dialect in which they were raised. The program is context-based. Teachers are asked to devise life-like social contexts that will allow the students to become personally involved and encourage them to talk, read and write in English appropriate to the context and genre.

---

This English program aims to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities in far north Queensland to competently and confidently communicate in standard Australian English, both spoken and written, in all situations where the use of English is appropriate. That is, they should develop their ability to use English effectively

- to participate as confident members of family and community
- to undertake further study
- to obtain employment
- to participate in a range of recreational activities involving literature, drama and the mass media

In using English for each of these purposes, the students will speak, listen, write, read and use associated non-verbal, visual and auditory language. However, this can and should be done without the children losing facility in their first language/dialect.

Teachers need to recognise that English is not the everyday language of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This makes a significant difference in both the way the program is designed and the way teachers are asked to implement it.

The goal of this English program is to develop children's ability to compose and comprehend spoken and written English for real purposes—fluently, appropriately and effectively—for effective participation in Australian society.

### Language in use: genres

At each year level, participation in the English Language Arts Program should develop the students' awareness and use of English in a wide range of literary and non-literary genres.

### Language in use: social contexts

At each year level, the program should also develop the students' use of English in a wide range of social contexts, beginning at the community level and extending into the broader community. Social contexts will vary according to

- the subject matter referred to
- the roles and relationships of people involved
- the mode and medium of communication

### Elements underlying language in use:

#### attitudes, processes, skills and knowledge

To assist the students' use of English, the program progressively develops and refines their underlying attitudes, thinking processes, skills and knowledge within the context of language use.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote communities need to use English to participate effectively in mainstream Australian society. They need to be aware of the purposes for which English can be used, to respect the language, culture and experience of

*Rose Cunnington is assistant coordinator of the Cairns Regional Equity and Development School Support Centre, which supports work for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in far north Queensland. Cunnington's interests include curriculum work for students in remote communities who are learning English as a foreign language.*



their own and other people, and to appreciate language in its many forms.

They also need to deploy and interpret textual features in ways appropriate to the genre and the social context and to use appropriate procedures while composing and comprehending. Finally, they need to understand some of the principal aspects of the nature of the English language and the way language changes with genre and social context.

### The students

This program is used by teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in isolated communities in far north Queensland. These children, in most instances, do not speak standard Australian English as their first language. They may speak a traditional Aboriginal language, a creole (a language that has developed as a means of communication between two groups) or a dialect of English.

### The teachers

Many of the teachers working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are young and have very little experience in teaching. Most have had no prior experience in teaching people from other cultures and no specific training in teaching English as a second language/dialect. Teachers and principals tend to stay for an average of two years before transferring.

A pattern is emerging, however, of some teachers and principals requesting a transfer back to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools after some time away. These people bring with them an added maturity and sensitivity to the issues of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher aides are employed in community schools. These teacher aides can provide an important link between the home and school, assist with communication in the classroom and provide continuity.

Assistant teachers are also employed in community schools. These teachers take on an added responsibility, which includes more of a direct teaching role. Community teachers who have completed some training at various institutions are also employed in most schools.

### When and how are the students assessed?

The main source of assessment information is the students' language use (oral and written) and elements that underlie it. Data for assessment can be collected in many ways, including observation, consultation, focused analysis and students' self-assessment and peer assessment.

Assessment of children's language learning should be ongoing and progressive. Assessment can be of two kinds, formative and summative. *Formative assessment* involves the collection of assessment information on children's language use in order to improve teaching

and learning. *Summative assessment* provides periodic judgements of a child's overall performance.

It is necessary for classroom teachers to be aware of the suitability of the class English program for each individual and the class as a whole. Students should be assessed in the range and effectiveness of their language in use and their underlying attitudes, skills, processes and knowledge.

Teachers need to monitor the students, the language activities presented, the learning environment, their own ability and style and the types of assessment procedures used. Community teachers and teacher aides should play a consultative role in this area, as they may be aware of cultural reasons for success or failure of activities, styles and procedures.

This evaluation should form the basis for the planning of future programs. When planning context-based programs for students with an oral tradition, teachers can ask themselves a series of questions to help evaluate their teaching and the program.

### How is the program integrated in the Literacy Program?

This program is the literacy program, not a separate ESL program.

### Why has the program been successful?

This program has been successful because it takes account of

- the cultural background of the students
- the community's first language/dialect
- the role of print in the community

This program is context-based. Teachers using the program are asked to establish real life or life-like social contexts that

- relate to the children's current needs, interests and experiences
- allow the children to become personally involved
- provide a real purpose or need for the children's involvement
- allow the children to work towards a task (or several smaller, related tasks) that genuinely arises out of the social context
- provide opportunities for the children to hear, see and use the types of oral and written language that are appropriate for that social situation

A social context is a real life situation in which people behave, feel, think and communicate in ways appropriate to that specific situation. In a social context the children behave (do things) and use the language (talk, read and write) that is appropriate to the situation. Children get actively involved in the social context. They have an immediate need for the appropriate language and behaviour. They must continually take into account the place and time, the subject matter, the people involved, the reason for communicating and



the method of communicating (oral and written) as they interact. The children see, hear and use authentic (real) language and can later reproduce it in situations outside school.

## The Koorie English Literacy Project in Shepparton District, Victoria

*Rosemary McKenry*

Project Officer to the Koorie English Literacy Project,  
Shepparton, Victoria

---

### Abstract

Recognising the need to improve their children's literacy, the Aboriginal education consultative group in northern Victoria's Goulburn Valley initiated the Koorie English Literacy Project. One of the project's first tasks has been to make mainstream teachers aware of the fact that many students are bilingual—standard Australian English being their second language, and Koorie English (the type of Aboriginal English used locally) being the language spoken at home. Data collected at three schools were used to plan a professional development course for teachers, which was trialled at six primary and secondary schools in 1993. The project officer has also tape-recorded stories with Aboriginal elders and students for transcription and publication in Koorie English.

---

The Koorie English Literacy Project (KELP) was initiated by the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and is being conducted in the Shepparton district of Victoria. It involves a professional development course for teachers in local primary and secondary schools that have Koorie students in attendance. Most of these schools have a Koorie educator on staff.

The data used as the basis of this professional development course have come mainly from Barmah Primary School, Gowrie Street Primary School (in Shepparton) and Shepparton South Secondary College.

### Pilot program

The draft form of KELP is now being trialled in a pilot program involving six schools: Wilmot Road Primary School in Shepparton, Mooroopna Park Primary School, Shepparton High School, Shepparton South Secondary College, Mooroopna Secondary College and Nathalia Secondary College.

This trialling process incorporates classroom action research that will gather more data on language and learning. Issues addressed in the professional development course include:

- Aboriginal learning styles and the 'conditions of learning' (Is there a 'Koorie way'?)
- the need for a 'safe, secure environment'
- expectations of parents, teachers and students
- Koorie English, as distinct from standard Australian English (SAE)
- the question of decontextualised language
- whether there is a need for 'intervention', as distinct from 'immersion' or 'submersion' in language, and if so, what form this intervention should take
- the concept of 'identity'

Other issues and topics may be selected by people involved in the pilot project as the focus of action research. These could include social as well as literacy aspects of education.

The pilot program is expected to be completed by mid-1994. The professional development course will then be rewritten using feedback from these schools, and we hope that, funding permitting, it will then be made available to other schools.

### Aims

The main goals of KELP include the following:

- to raise the awareness of mainstream teachers, both primary and secondary, as to the reality of Koorie English being the first language of many Koorie students
- to investigate how to use this awareness to develop the literacy standard of Koorie students
- to bring about necessary changes in school policy so that programs more adequately cater for the needs of Koorie students
- to collect local stories from students and elders so

*Rosemary McKenry has been a classroom teacher and ESL consultant over many years in a variety of settings, including outback Australia, Papua New Guinea, and urban and rural Victoria. This work has taken her to primary and secondary schools. At present she is seconded from the Victorian Directorate of School Education to work as Project Officer to the Koorie English Literacy Project in Shepparton. Her Master of Education thesis, now being completed, is based on a case study that focuses on academic success for speakers of non-standard English—especially Koorie students studying at senior secondary level.*

that these can be published as part of the reading material used in schools

### The students

Of the general population in the Shepparton district, 4.4 percent are Koorie. Many of these people speak Koorie English as their first language.

In the town area of Shepparton and Mooroopna, Koorie students are enrolled in all the government secondary schools and most of the primary schools. There are also a few who have a Torres Strait Islander background. To the northwest, on the Murray River, there is a small, one-teacher school at Barmah, where most students are Koorie. Other schools in the district, such as Nathalia, usually have a few Koorie students.

### Koorie English

Koorie English is a type of Aboriginal English (AE). Diana Eades (1993) tells us that

Aboriginal English is the name given to dialects of English which are spoken by Aboriginal people and which differ from Standard Australian English in systematic ways. (Eades, page 2)

Differences are found in all aspects of language: i.e. phonology (or accent and pronunciation), morphology (or grammar), lexico-semantics (or words and their meaning), and pragmatics (or the way that language is used in socio-cultural contexts). (page 3)

Because many Aboriginal people are bilingual—they speak two dialects of English, AE and SAE—teachers often do not realise that SAE is not the language that is spoken in the home. Or they think that the spoken language of the Koorie students is just an uneducated variety of English, similar perhaps to the language spoken by some non-Koorie students. However, as Eades points out,

while there are a number of features (particularly grammatical features) which AE shares with other non-standard varieties of English, there are many others which are distinctively Aboriginal. (page 5)

These include non-verbal language—the use of gestures and silence. Let me give you an example.

The English teacher of a Koorie student who completed Year 11 in 1993 told me that because she now realised that pointing with the lips was part of the Koorie English communication style she regretted her reaction when, two years earlier, she had seen the same student do this in class. She had wrongly interpreted his action as being insolent and had reprimanded him strongly. She now believes that all teachers should study Aboriginal English as part of their training. If this occurred, she said, there would be much less misunderstanding. 'Discipline' as well as literacy standards would naturally improve as a result.

Senior secondary students involved in the KELP The workshop I presented at the 1993 Forum on Exemplary Practice focused on the Koorie English Literacy Project as it applied to four students in Years 11 and 12 who were studying for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). All were male. Three of them were Koorie, and the fourth identified himself as a Torres Strait Islander.

Over a period of six months I met with the students regularly once or twice a week (one student left school during the year). Nearly all sessions were taped and later transcribed so that the student, his teachers and his parents were able to read the account of our session together. This proved to be a time-consuming but valuable exercise, according to feedback received. In fact, the teachers commented that it was a pity that they couldn't do this for *all* students. The students later found the transcripts useful as a reference when writing assignments.

The students were initially asked their strengths and areas where they needed help. They all included 'reading' as a strength, while 'writing' and 'spelling' were in their list of weaknesses. One said that 'organisation' was his weakness. Another mentioned 'putting the words in the right order so that they made sense'.

All insisted that I work with them out of class, either because they did not want to miss what was happening in class or because they were embarrassed about being seen as needing help.

Always using their VCE Work Requirements and in collaboration with the classroom teachers, I showed them strategies I hoped would assist them, such as the use of data charts and concept maps. They would evaluate these, and with their reactions in mind I could choose what was suitable for inclusion in the professional development course which I was then preparing.

It is essential that students develop the necessary skills to write for a specific audience. Indeed, the Work Requirements for the VCE demand the skills to write for a wide variety of purposes, in English, and across the curriculum. Students need to be taught the socially acceptable (according to SAE culture) format that makes up a particular genre.

Any explicit strategies that I modelled had to be transferrable. For example, the students I worked with often asked me to assist with subjects such as Legal Studies or Politics and commented that the methods we used for the VCE English Work Requirements had helped with such subjects.

During the final session with one of the students, he told me how he devised a concept map for his 'Presentation of an Issue' Work Requirement in English—using 'that little round circle thing with the things coming off it' to put everything in order, according to priorities. He described the process in the following way:

Well, I did something like that the other day in, um, not that same sort of round thing, but something

similar— same sort of thing. Oh yeah, it was in Legal Studies, that's right. And, you know, I just made all sort of subheadings and, you know, on what pages to find things and all that. When I went home to write it up, it was a lot easier to find. It was two weeks later, and if I hadn't done it I wouldn't have been able to remember any of that. Would have had to start again. That was good.

Because classroom teachers need to use teaching and learning strategies that can be valuable to all students, I modelled the strategies with the whole class, team-teaching with the English teacher. Non-Koorie students were then asked to evaluate the suggested strategies.

Sections of the transcripts are included in the professional development course. Interactive activities for the participants follow.

It should be noted that the students were aware of the purpose behind my involvement in their program and were more than willing to cooperate. As one of them explained, it is 'to help the teachers understand some good ways to teach Koorie kids'.

#### **Koorie English in relation to all this**

Eades writes about Aboriginal English and standard English:

It is only since the 1960s that AE has been recognised by linguists and some educators as a valid, rule-governed variety of English which differs significantly from SE in a number of ways. There is still a widespread lack of acceptance of AE, often based on ignorance. In areas where AE does not sound very different from SE, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers are often unaware of the subtle but crucial differences between the two dialects ...

Education systems in Australia still have a long way to go in recognising the home language of Aboriginal children and accommodating the special needs of Aboriginal speakers of English ...

... the training of teachers to recognise both AE and the needs of its speakers has hardly begun. Aboriginal children are still being wrongly classified as 'slow learners', in large part because of their different ways of communicating, and in particular because of their different ways of responding to teachers' questions.' (Eades 1993, page 5)

Through the KELP we are trying to address this need. It is not easy to list the linguistic features of Aboriginal English as it is used locally—in Koorie English—but with the cooperation of students, their teachers, their parents, the Koorie Educators and the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, we are confident that teachers' awareness will be raised.

The students who have assisted this project have received significantly improved marks for VCE Work Requirements and Common Assessment Tasks

compared with the marks they received before the project was implemented.

#### **Differences between spoken English and written English**

If students are to achieve academic success they need to be able to write in the accepted linguistic dialect that is commonly used in texts. Cummins (1984) has drawn up a framework that differentiates between language that is 'context embedded' and language that is 'context reduced'.

Students whose first language is Koorie English are among those who require instruction dealing with this. One method is to create a learning environment in which students can link what is in the text to something in their own experience. The inclusion of metalinguistics also helps, so that they can see how a particular concept can be communicated in a variety of ways, including KE wherever possible.

#### **The need for locally based reading material**

Unfortunately there is very little in the way of published Koorie stories (as distinct from other Aboriginal stories) that are suitable for young children. As part of the KELP, oral and written stories by Manega students (at Gowrie Street Primary School) were collected and published. Multicopies were made so that they could be used as reading material by schools. These were illustrated by the students. Barmah and Manega students even made photograph books of excursions and other language experiences.

A Koorie newsletter was begun. The editor was a Koorie student studying in Year 12 at Shepparton South Secondary College. This newsletter was published once a month and sent to schools all over the district. Koorie students from other schools contributed as well those from Shepparton South. Printing was done at Shepparton School Support Centre.

#### **Why has the KELP been successful?**

Key factors in KELP's success include the following:

- The project was initiated by the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (GVAECG) because they saw a need to improve the literacy of their children.
- The project is 'owned' and therefore supported by the GVAECG in partnership with the Victorian Directorate of School Education.
- The project has been administered by the Koorie Education Action Network, which is made up of the GVAECG plus school and school support centre administrators and teachers. It is therefore a cooperative effort.
- The project officer works closely with students, teachers and administrators as well as the Koorie parents and GVAECG. She has a strong commitment to the project.

- Students see that it is a cooperative process, in that they provide advice to teachers while at the same time receiving personal assistance from the project officer and teachers.
- The students' expectations have increased, as has their self-esteem.
- The stories used in the primary school—and the Koorie newsletter—have been written by the students themselves.
- The principals/head teachers and teaching staff have been supportive.
- Strategies recommended have been suitable for whole classes and across subject areas.
- A tape recorder has been used for recording students' stories for publication. It has also been used for recording working sessions between the project officer and senior students, and transcripts of these sessions are made available to each student and his or her teacher and parents.
- Sufficient funding has been available in 1993 to employ the project officer.
- The Shepparton School Support Centre provided excellent resources for materials production (in 1993).

It is really too early to ascertain the success or otherwise of the professional development course as it is still being trialled. However, participating teachers and the GVAECG have reported enthusiasm for what they have done so far. As yet no funding is available to continue the project in 1994.

Unfortunately, the Shepparton School Support Centre (along with all other school support centres in Victoria) ceased to function at the end of 1993 because of a change in state government policy.

#### References

- Cummins, Jim, 1984. 'Bilingualism and special education: issues in assessment and pedagogy', *Multilingual Matters*. UK: Clevedon.
- Eades, Diana, 1993. 'Aboriginal English', in *Pen '93*. Newtown, NSW: Primary English Teaching Association.



## Two Sisters Teaching And Writing: A Model For Education

*Gail Dawson and Birritjalawuy Gondarra*  
Elcho Island, NT

---

### Abstract

Gail Dawson and Birritjalawuy Gondarra worked as a teaching/learning team in adult education during 1992, and their program was considered highly successful by students at the Northern Territory Open College. They considered not only academic readings and theories of education but also the place of education in community life; the ways that education for Aboriginal people can draw its form and processes from Aboriginal culture and knowledge; the power relationships, not only between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but also between teacher and student; and the language used to resist change the power inequalities. Attendance was high throughout the year, and students were sought after as top-quality employees.

---

This article was written using the way of working together that we developed during our 1992 teaching/learning program. It is the process of developing our relationship with each other that we see as the fundamental element of effective teaching and learning. The development of a state of openness and trust comes from a relationship between the two of us, which begins with our relationship in the Aboriginal kinship system as sisters but which is nurtured by our shared experiences and the personal qualities that each of us brings to the partnership.

In this partnership our ideas come out of our everyday talk, which we think is a good situation for learning. Notes are taken during a series of wide-ranging discussions about events in the community and the pertinence of education programs to the realities of Aboriginal community life.

The conversations move between Djambarrpuyngu and English, and at times move far from 'education' and 'literacy' so that the place of education in community life is not forgotten. Histories of kin and places are traced and retraced, current happenings within the community are examined from various angles, and lifestories are told and retold. Personal reflections and histories are woven in with academic readings and theories of education to create a discourse that can say new ways but let the outline of the old ways show through.

From the notes, the text is developed, with Dawson working the ideas into a language and framework for use by non-Aboriginal educators, and Birritjalawuy checking that intended meanings have not been lost or damaged within the cultural crossings.

During such sessions there is a very strong sense that we are both learners and teachers, and we reaffirm this continually by statements that explicitly name our changing positions as we negotiate our ideas and the way we will write about them. We believe that it is this negotiation from a state of openness and equality that forms the process, content and method for a successful teaching/learning program.

### Education for peace and justice

The education system at present educates Yolngu<sup>1</sup> to be in only one side of society, the Balanda<sup>2</sup> way. However, Yolngu wish to stay Yolngu but use their knowledge of the Balanda world (and its knowledge) to increase the potential for a peaceful life.

The metaphor we use to explain how we can do this is a linking and meshing. The connection—the partnership between Balanda and Yolngu—can be shown by interlocking fingers of two hands, meshing two parts that are the same but different, fitting together to make

*Gail Dawson is assistant principal of Shepherdson College (a community education college) at Galiwinku, on Elcho Island, off the northern coast of Arnhemland. Birritjalawuy Gondarra is an assistant adult educator at the Northern Territory Open College of TAFE at Galiwinku. They have worked together in adult education since 1992. The importance they place on equality has led to the development of mentor-peer programs, in which adults collaborate as peers in equal partnerships rather than mentor-protege relationships.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Term used in northeast Arnhemland for Aboriginal people.

<sup>2</sup> Non-Aboriginal people are referred to as Balanda.

a better, stronger shape. It is the shape that can support someone as they climb, and it can also symbolise the handshake of a meeting, the renewal of an acquaintance or the sealing of a contract between two sides.

These two sides—Balanda and Yolngu—are connected through a goal in life, which is the same. In the language of northeast Arnhemland, we call it *magaya*. Woven in and around and through that word are ideas of peace and justice, law and order. These are concepts that Balanda people hold as precious and worthy goals for education, just as Yolngu do.

But it is the path and process to achieve this goal that might be different. The education provided for Yolngu children must enable them to reach this goal as Yolngu, still part of their Yolngu community, history and future.

Because of the interconnection, the web of Yolngu understandings, any new knowledge being presented to Yolngu students must have its foundation in Yolngu history/knowledge. When Yolngu look at the Balanda curriculum, in order to understand that knowledge and make it part of their own meaning system, Yolngu must find the place in Yolngu structures where it best fits.

The solution to today's Yolngu life problems won't be found in the history of the Balanda, for those solutions were shaped by and for others. Yolngu can see that solutions that have worked for Balanda in Balanda communities are right for Balanda, but Yolngu also know that they can't apply to the Yolngu context.

Occasionally the education system assumes that this can be done and tries to teach Yolngu children ways of operating in the Balanda world, somehow believing, because the Western influence is visible in Aboriginal lives, that Aboriginal people are living according to Balanda beliefs and Balanda worldview. This is an illusion, for although Yolngu people speak English and use a lot of Balanda tools, these artefacts have been incorporated into Yolngu culture for use in a different way, according to different rules.

Any education for Aboriginal people, our *marngidhinyawuy*, must draw its form and processes from *Yolngu Rom* (Aboriginal Law/Way) and follow Yolngu structures and systems for it to have meaning in the community.

To make sure this happens in the Balanda education system, this interlocking of two ways, with neither pushing or pulling the other, requires a relationship of equality that models and speaks daily to everyone, Balanda and Yolngu, of the ways in which it is done.

It is not just the relationships between Balanda and Yolngu that must be brought into the open but also the relationships between teacher and student. The previously hidden curriculum of power relationships must be revealed and brought into the discourse, and it is the constant negotiation of these relationships that becomes the educational process, content and method.

While the content of our lessons may include Balanda beliefs and knowledge, we are finding more

and more that the Balanda linear representations, binary oppositions and limited structures are inadequate to talk about what we are doing. The Yoingu system, which appears to us as a network or web, is more useful to us as a model for knowledge representation and ideas about education. Because we see that the masculinist Western discourses of education have placed a certain group at the centre of its structure and called the rest of us 'Other', we prefer to use this web metaphor, which allows us to include all people who are marginalised by the current system.

As part of the process of uncovering tricks of power, the planning and thinking behind our teaching is discussed with students and is open to students and anyone else who comes through the learning place. Curriculum documents, planning notes, resource lists and diaries are open and accessible in the public area, displayed on walls and in other places within the community.

Success for us in our teaching program is *not* in completing a planned session and achieving set objectives, but in the continual negotiation of learning content, processes and methods. The teachers are not talking all the time but are also listening and participating in the learning, even when taking a directive role.

#### The teaching team

Our way of teaching and learning is through the teaching/learning team of Yolngu and Balanda. The best team is usually same gender (for reasons that apply in either culture), but successful mixed teams are possible. The success of mixed teams depends on variables such as age, personal qualities and the perceptions of the particular community in which the team is working.

The Balanda partner knows the Balanda curriculum. He or she must have the ability to pass the requirements of the curriculum onto the Yolngu partner. The Yolngu partner knows *Yolngu Rom* and practices it. This person can talk to the Balanda partner about the best ways to present Balanda knowledge and then needs to be able to show how this knowledge fits into the Yolngu system.

There must be shared understanding and a critical approach to the idea of 'Both Ways' education that educators talk about (see, for example, Harris 1990). If there is an implied message that while Balanda knowledge is good for everyone, Yolngu knowledge has a limited application, the implication is that Balanda holding Balanda education are knowledgeable but Yolngu need Balanda knowledge to be fully educated. In this view of knowledge and learning, non-Aboriginal people and their ideas are the norm, while Aboriginal people are construed as lacking.

It is essential that the Balanda teacher shows an openness to learning Yolngu ways and demonstrates it in daily life. This is easy to say but difficult to do, yet it

is crucial to meaningful education, as Michael Christie comments:

The major stumbling block for meaningful development has been the reluctance of white educators to critically examine the invasive assumptions of formal education, and their refusal to acknowledge that they can learn anything important from Aboriginal people, their refusal to pay more than lip service to the aim of learning to speak and understand Aboriginal languages, and their assumption that learning about aspects of Aboriginal culture, tradition, social structures, belief systems, perspectives on the world, work, life, money, nature, commitment, power etc is just a fringe interest to be pursued in one's spare time. Quite simply, white educators cannot commit themselves to the idea that they have anything really meaningful to learn from Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal people continue to accept this silently, they continue to vote with their feet, and they continue to wait for whites to stop talking and start listening. (Christie 1988, page 17)

Aboriginal people are offering non-Aboriginal people the wealth of their knowledge, and non-Aboriginal teachers need to accept the offering and use it for change to themselves and their structures if they are to continue their involvement with Aboriginal people.

For the non-Aboriginal educator, this cannot be just a belief, an intellectual 'knowing', being able to write a paper on it. It is *doing*, and knowing when you haven't done it. This commitment to learning Aboriginal Way requires the same planning and monitoring of one's own educational program as that required for the students' programs.

Openness to Aboriginal learning requires flexibility, because the 'teachable moment' is in the hands of another. Balanda must drop the urgent paper to listen to Aboriginal people, even if the immediate relevance of the lesson being offered isn't always obvious. (When this happens, we need to think of Aboriginal students who are placed in this situation in classrooms for many hours each day.)

It is also important that Balanda educators speak openly about their fears and stress in the learning experience. Yolngu need to know that Balanda, too, are struggling to understand, to know, to fit new learning into their lives.

The Balanda educator plays an important role, one that changes the form of the discussion, for he or she provides a communicative purpose different from that which would operate in a homogeneous cultural and language group. The Balanda educator's presence also provides the context for participants to experiment with reworking the usual power relations in ways that are better for everyone.

### Pedagogical foundations

The beliefs about learning and education which we two sisters share, and which we place in the foreground of our work together, have been developed not only in our lives together but also independently. We build commentaries into our teaching and learning so that there is continual negotiation and renegotiation of our work together. To allow for this, we make opportunities to talk every day, not just about our work but also about ourselves and our lives, for it is our belief that these cannot be separated.

It is on *Yolngu Rom* that we stand to look at any learning, and Birritjalawuy is the director for this. The Yolngu educator, in order to take this responsibility in the partnership, needs to live the Law and be able to speak it to outsiders.

Our pedagogical approach is constantly under development through our discussions with others, too. Both of us use our Aboriginal kin, our colleagues, our formal studies in the academic system, the natural world and each other to keep reworking our relationship with each other and our education practice. Often we reach the same understanding independently and surprise each other with the same brainwave when we next meet.

Before we read anything about critical pedagogies, we had decided that the unequal power relations in our situation needed to be acknowledged and spoken about in explicit terms if we were to overcome the barriers to learning exchange that we were seeing daily in our work with the students. Our observations of students revealed the different way they reacted to each of us as teachers. It was not language barriers that caused the students to sometimes fall silent when working with Gail.

We began to talk about the colonisation process and what this meant in our teaching. We drew the students into our discussion, talking about the missionary days and the changes since then.

At this time, Birritjalawuy's father was working on a similar project, and so Birritjalawuy was bringing exciting ideas from liberation theology into our negotiations. Gail was studying critical literacies and was introducing elements of the critical approach for consideration. Our ways of working together have developed from all of these influences, but for all this knowledge to be useful in our life and work as educators, it must fit into the framework of our personal relationships with each other and our students, for it is this that determines our success as educators.

### Negotiated pedagogy, negotiated learning

The pedagogical style we have come to is a 'visible pedagogy' (see, for example, Veal 1991, page 127). While we concur with Delpit (1992) that minority learners require explicit instruction in mainstream codes, registers and practices in order to have the

opportunity of educational achievement (Luke et al 1993, page 3), we say that for this knowledge to be taken into the students' lives it is necessary for all the secrets of unequal power relationships in the Yolngu-Balanda and teacher-pupil relationships to be brought into the open.

We don't subscribe to the fallacy that what is on offer is merely content—impartial, disembodied knowledge. Aboriginal people know about the power of 'the word' (see, for example, Sansom 1980); and to not include power relationships in a discourse of language and literacy education seems sly and secretive and therefore dangerous.

We need to make a language to talk about these things, because the words to resist and change power inequalities are not to be found in the curriculum of the dominant group. The words to talk about these things need to be found through negotiations of power relationships in context, and learnt along with all the 'appropriate' forms of English language and culture in the curriculum.

'Demystification' is the word we use to describe a pedagogical process that does not take for granted that because people use a word, they share the same web of meanings surrounding the word. Language and literacy are socially and historically constructed, and we can't assume that meanings are absolute in the words we use in our teaching. Rather, language and literacy are negotiated social processes, and meanings are negotiated in each context.

The 'genre approach' fits our style ... but rather than presenting the text as a neutral conduit of meaning, we speak out about the power of certain expressions and where these values have come from. Power relations are presented by the Balanda educator, who provides options for word and phrase choice, and presents the likely effects of various choices, which are then discussed by the group before making a selection for a particular purpose. This has proven to be a very powerful strategy and has changed the way our students ask questions about English.

In negotiating texts this way, the representational cultural texts that are presented as models are shown in their interrelationship with life, as lived social texts (Gilbert and Taylor 1991, page 14), rather than as models for each student to learn in order to 'possess' functional literacy.

We use the word 'challenge' a lot in our work. We challenge the students and each other, asking for wider and wider descriptions of ideas and meanings. Nothing is left unchallenged. We want the students to accept nothing in the learning we are presenting. We goad and prod and tease them and each other to challenge what might seem 'natural' and 'normal', and we negotiate alternative ways of doing things.

This negotiation is at the core of the learning experience in our way of working together. This is the

curriculum. The accredited course within which we work is the base but not the boss for us.

While we use the curriculum, we are more interested in looking at what is behind the document, rather than what is written in it. We show the students how to question the wording of the document. The goals of a learning module are examined critically (for agreement or amendment), and the activities and processes are laid open for negotiation with the students.

This is part of the course, for surely education is about learning ways to negotiate the world. This kind of learning always fits into the curriculum and needs no fancy resources.

Together, students and educators rework the content and processes to a form that makes sense to the Aboriginal system but still fulfils the requirements of the Balanda system. The Yolngu educator directs the negotiations with contributions that reflect *Yolngu Rom* and an understanding of Balanda culture. The Balanda educator's contributions come from a sound knowledge and understanding of Balanda culture and its social processes, as well as a knowledge of Yolngu culture which allows them to select the best resource items for learning in any particular negotiation.

The way to new knowledge is always through the Yolngu system. Learners come to Balanda knowledge through Yolngu knowledge. The Balanda educator is learning about Yolngu knowledge and perspectives at the same time as the Yolngu educator and Yolngu students learn to read the Balanda side<sup>3</sup>.

### Conclusions

We believe that our way of teaching is effective in our particular context because we work as a team. It is our personal relationship with each other that we put to the foreground of our work—showing, by the way we work together, the possibilities for renegotiating the way things are.

Our methods are supported by philosophies and principles of learning that hold true as we continually test them against the realities of our life in this community. It is the development of critical faculties in ourselves and our students that we believe is the best path to our goals of peace and justice. As the educational guides for our students, we have chosen to use a 'visible' pedagogy, which acknowledges the importance of our personal relationship with each other and our students, and provides the framework within which we can negotiate and renegotiate our relationship with each other and our business together. It is this continual negotiation, and the discourse we create in order to negotiate, that we believe is the real stuff of education.

<sup>3</sup> 'Balanda side' is used to refer to Western knowledge/culture, which is seen as separated from Yolngu knowledge, on the 'other side'.



## References

- Christie F., Devlin B., Freebody F., Luke A., Martin J., Threadgold T. and Walton C. (1991). *Teaching English Literacy: A Project of National Significance on the Preservice Preparation of Teachers for Teaching English Literacy*, Vol. 1. Darwin: Centre for Studies in Language Education, Northern Territory University.
- Christie M., 1988. 'The invasion of Aboriginal education', *Learning My Way*, papers from the National Conference on Adult Aboriginal Learning, Perth, pp. 5-19.
- Gilbert P. and Taylor S., 1991. *Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Harris S., 1990. *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Luke A., Kale J. and Singh M. G., with Hill T. and Daliri F., 1993. 'Talking difference: discourses on Aboriginal identity in Grade One classrooms', in Corson D. and Hargreaves A. (eds), *Power and Discourse in Education*. Clevedon and Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Sansom B., 1980. *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Veel R., 1991. English literacy for Aboriginal students, *Teaching English Literacy: A Project of National Significance on the Preservice Preparation of Teachers for Teaching English Literacy*, Vol. 2. Darwin: Centre for Studies in Language Education, Northern Territory University.



## Kuranda Early Childhood Personal Enrichment Program (KEEP)

Jenni Buzacott

Kuranda Preschool, Queensland

---

### Abstract

A six-year collaboration between parents, teachers and children at Kuranda Preschool, inland from Cairns, has resulted in an effective program for early childhood personal enrichment. By observing and assessing various educational experiences, the program (known as KEEP) has given parents and teachers a more direct focus on the needs, learning styles and progress of children in Preschool and Years 1-3. Culturally appropriate activities in one-to-one sessions and small groups have provided the most successful learning situations for these children, 40 percent of whom are Aboriginal (Djabugay).

---

KEEP provides young children (Preschool to Year 3) who have had little or no previous experience of formal early childhood groups with opportunities to participate in educational processes/activities to develop their social, literacy and numeracy skills so that they can function successfully, confidently and independently as learners in their school community.

In KEEP the concept of 'enrichment' does not equate with disabilities. The focus is individual strengths. Direct observation of the children's positive interaction and success in learning situations has been used as the basis for further development, and emphasis is given to enrichment of their cultural background.

KEEP challenges assumptions that Aboriginal children have low self-esteem, low academic achievement within their regular school environment and apparent lack of attendance and active participation. Parents and teachers from Kuranda's school community certainly believe in the children's capabilities.

At Kuranda the area for change (the key variable) needed to be in methods and delivery of instruction, to ensure that practices and language matched the children's level of understanding and their learning styles. Primary consideration has been given to the children's cultural background, Djabugay, as a key towards motivated learning and success in social and academic areas.

### School profile

Kuranda is fringed by both urban and rural settings, inland from Cairns. School buses provide the only means of transport for many of the children, more than 50 percent of whom travel to school by bus (including preschoolers and some kindergarten children).

The total student enrolment is currently 375, including 50 preschoolers and 27 children currently enrolled on KEEP. More than 40 percent of the students are Aboriginal.

The children come from widely diverse cultural, religious and socio-economic groups. Indeed, a survey conducted in the school in 1991 revealed more than 30 different groups. They cover the full economic spectrum, from millionaires to families living well below the poverty line in substandard conditions.

Essentially KEEP recognises the importance of accommodating all cultural groups and learning styles represented in the classroom. The program builds upon respect for individual differences in ability, gender, location, culture, beliefs, values and socio-economic background.

### Guidelines for KEEP

In line with the school's development plan and draft mission statement—'the individual child is the focal point of our concern'—KEEP promotes community interaction aimed at developing the children's appreciation of our unique environment and providing

*Jenni Buzacott has been involved in early childhood education for half of her life. She has worked with remote-area programs and correspondence school, kindergarten classes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and an intervention centre for children with specific disabilities. She is now in charge of the preschool program at Kuranda in northern Queensland.*

resources and meaningful learning experiences, which are essential for these children to realise their potential in a changing world.

Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Education Policy (1992) and other departmental policies (including those from other states), as well as various findings in the literature, have provided guidelines of *why* KEEP should be implemented. The *what* and *how* have been established through extensive research within the Kuranda community. Relevant modifiable, practical educational experiences have been developed and systematically recorded, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to verify which teaching strategies are effective for the multicultural environment of Kuranda.

It has taken six years of collaboration between parents, teachers and children to establish effective early childhood practices appropriate to the children's needs. A major influence has been the revival of the Djabugay language and the integration of both language and culture into all aspects of the curriculum. Djabugay has been combined with elements from Human Relationships education. Emphasising the development of children's positive self-concepts, KEEP focuses on the positive and builds on individual strengths in social and academic areas.

The community shares the responsibility for children's learning. Djabugay parents are the teachers in Djabugay activities, providing positive role models for their children. They do not need books to teach. Extensive 'hands on' activities are based on knowledge and experiences taken directly from the Djabugay culture. These activities are culturally appropriate and are designed to enhance the children's primary Aboriginal culture, in which an 'oral' mode of learning is often more effective. These parent educators provide powerful support for their children's success in the program.

#### Rationale of KEEP

Priority 'needs' are identified by parents and teachers. The question most constantly asked is whether the school is adjusting to the needs of the children. Serious concerns had been expressed about the large number of children who lacked positive social interactive behaviours with peers and adults in the more formal settings of the Year 1, 2 and 3 classrooms; and parents and teachers had reported a large number of inappropriate attention seeking and disruptive behaviour (both physical and verbal) in the classroom and playground. Other concerns included some children's apparent lack of concentration and inability to listen, retain information and follow instructions in class. No evidence was found to substantiate these children having auditory or visual problems. However, in young children we have observed a lack of control in

fine motor manipulation, specifically related to prewriting tasks, together with a lack of awareness of print and basic numerical representations and basic numeracy concepts. Many children could not identify colours or shapes.

Recurring illnesses, poor personal hygiene, poor nutrition, lack of transport and/or extended family commitments all contributed to irregularity of attendance and associated behavioural regressions after extended absences.

The fact that these problems were consistently evident in a minimum of five children per classroom in Years 1-3 reinforced the importance of curriculum review to identify

- more appropriate early childhood teaching practices, which would empower these children to achieve their true learning potential
- practices that would help them to focus their attention and interact more positively towards others, towards learning and towards their school environment
- teaching practices that would allow the children to match their 'reality' more closely to their learning experiences
- learning based on practical personal experiences, in contrast to theoretical, book-based learning, which held no meaning or interest for these children

The guidance officer, learning support teacher, speech therapist, community liaison officer and Aboriginal and Islander P-3 counsellor—all strong supporters of the importance of early childhood learning—were concerned that methods of assessing children's academic achievement were culturally biased. This necessitated more culturally and developmentally appropriate screening of children's direct interactions in learning contexts.

As part of KEEP, extensive 'hands on' activities were designed to reinforce and enhance the children's primary Aboriginal culture, building on existing skills and recognising the appropriateness of an oral mode of learning.

The majority of children really enjoy and excel at activities involving gross motor skills such as dance, bush survival skills and environmental awareness—regardless of their cultural background. This can possibly be attributed to the way of life at Kuranda, surrounded as it is by rainforest and semi-rural areas.

It is our belief that if children can develop positive attitudes to active involvement and personal success through early childhood learning processes that build on their personal strengths, then potential learning difficulties can be remediated before the children reach upper school. In the past, by the time children reached the upper school levels their negative experiences of school had been firmly established, and they were given little incentive to change.

Yet, in the majority of cases of 'negative' interactions or 'failing' academic work, the same children had been observed in positive interaction with both materials and peers in the preschool setting early each morning prior to their more formal school involvement. The children appeared to feel secure and comfortable. They would independently select academic-related activities and work diligently for up to 40 minutes at a time without supervision, assisting others when they needed help, and freely discussing what they were doing with confidence and self-satisfaction. All needed reminders when it was time for school.

#### **KEEP aims and objectives**

The objectives of all enrichment activities/interactions are to increase the individual children's awareness, interest, knowledge, understanding, acceptance and proficiency in basic social, literacy and numeracy skills and concepts.

Teaching practices are designed to allow sufficient time to enjoy, experiment and discover the active processes of learning for themselves. Activities allow time for both teachers and children to build on identified strengths, cultural background experiences and involvement that allows for success, thus enhancing positive feelings about themselves and others.

Parents and community members are encouraged to be active participants in planning, delivery and evaluation of KEEP. They help to produce appropriate resources that enhance the children's enjoyment and participation.

Priority is given to continuity of effective learning processes across the school curriculum, with constant collaboration between all the people involved to ensure success. Detailed records are kept to help disseminate information about relevant teaching practices for young Aboriginal children.

We hope that teachers as well as students become involved in the Djabugay Language Program to allow students to view teachers as 'learners' while the parents and children are 'instructors', thus creating a two-way learning process and positive models for learning, as well as an opportunity for all students to develop understanding and respect for the Djabugay culture.

All of the children involved in KEEP had previously exhibited social, emotional or academic inability to cope in the formality of the mainstream class setting; school represented an alien and frustrating environment for them. Acclimatisation time has therefore been necessary to allow the children time to

- develop social and academic ability
- develop a willingness to learn
- develop rapport with peers and teachers
- develop positive attitudes towards others
- develop confidence in communicating needs and interests to peers and teachers to ensure continuity of learning success throughout the school

Combined Djabugay and Human Relationships education activities on the importance of self and others have proved very effective.

- Time to experiment in the processes for fine motor learning and coordination related to development of skills necessary for successful literacy and numeracy work

Combined educational kinesiology/perceptual and fine motor activities have been effectively integrated throughout the school campus. The children now display more focused attention and concentration in fine motor activities and literacy and numeracy work in all learning contexts.

- Observation time to match the children's comprehension of verbal and written instruction with personal success in understanding and applying instructional requests

Kuranda's speech therapist has devised a culturally appropriate program for staff. Marion Blank's 'scale of perceptual language distance' and 'oral comprehension levels' enable a match between children's comprehension levels and the levels of instruction, with guidelines on four simple distinct levels for instruction, from basic skills to more complex and abstract problem solving and reasoning skills. It is practical and it works.

- Time for the children to develop an awareness and understanding of the meaning of 'print', scripted words and numerals

It has been important to develop a match between oral and written work. Although the children loved to write, they displayed a fear of words—often called 'maps' by them. The breakthrough has been their realisation that they have only 26 letters and 10 numerals to learn.

- Assistance to support the development of additional resources (locally and professionally produced), which are attractive and culturally appropriate, focusing on skill development in literacy and numeracy

#### **Key people and their roles**

KEEP has been designed by and for the parents and teachers to meet the unique needs of the children. The program is not a prescriptive handbook on early childhood practices, nor is it suitable for implementation in every early childhood context. To the people of Kuranda school community, the reliability of the program is more important than any attempt to generalise.

Long-term continuity of dedicated, experienced, approachable, early childhood staff has enabled parents to become familiar with them and establish positive communication processes. Frequent staff changes in the past discouraged parents' contributions, but now parents are active participants in the entire program.

It takes time and encouragement to establish this rapport. Much of the information gathered from parents has been through informal social interactions, including neighbourhood meetings conducted in the security of family environments. Formal interviews and written requests and documentation intimidated parents, whereas practical demonstration and direct involvement in their children's success is effective.

Parents and children find the preschool setting, with its self-selective work stations catering for all areas of social and academic development, more comfortable than the formal environment of the main school campus. The preschool environment is non-threatening and stimulates the children's interests. Parents are valued as instructors and can see representation from their community groups through student teachers who are actively involved within the program.

Over the past few years, most families have developed familiarity with preschool routines and have been able to bring younger children as well as relatives and friends into the preschool at any time. In response to community and departmental support, the preschool became the most acceptable venue for the coordination and development of KEEP. The community supports the exclusive use of the preschool on Fridays for small group KEEP enrichment sessions for children from Years 1 and 2. The children regard Fridays as their special day. These sessions are viewed by children, parents and teachers as definitely *not* regular preschool sessions.

We also have an Early Childhood Withdrawal Room (arranged as a miniature preschool) in the P-3 teaching block of the main school. This room has positive associations for the children, because they become involved in small group games and special one-to-one activities involving staff and parents as instructors. Individual and small group sessions are conducted in this room throughout the week.

Individual and small group work is also provided by parents and familiar aides in the Learning Support Room, regular classroom settings and outdoors, even beyond the school grounds. These include incidental experiences of interest to the children.

Individual and small group settings were found to have the most positive and personally satisfying results for the children. They seek the security of familiar instructors in their preferred settings of the preschool and the withdrawal room, as well as the security of established routines. Small groups and one-to-one sessions are 'focused' and allow a close rapport to develop among children, teachers and parents, and we have found that parent instructors are more comfortable and willing to assist in small group situations like these. Children sought their teachers' company for 'nurture', as well as for positive reinforcement for jobs well done.

Observations of interests and personal successes have formed the basis for further planning (including the children's requests for particular activities and resources). This constant collaboration has created a spiralling and flexible process, which allows all participants to evaluate KEEP's effectiveness. It also allows us to easily identify areas for review, as well as potentially enjoyable ways for each child to learn as a 'whole' person, using culturally relevant content.

The children are aware of their acceptance as individuals. Where instances of negative behaviour do occur, teachers constantly reinforce that it is only the negative behaviour that is unacceptable, and not the child.

Simple rules for positive interaction have been constructed with the children's help. Their acceptance and understanding is displayed in their reminders to each other when a child digresses; they are quick to correct each other on means for fair play, sharing and taking turns, as well as care of their special equipment and resources.

Further role models are provided by 'peer teachers' as well as adult instructors. These 'peer learning' experiences allow for individuals to share experiences with older siblings and friends. The benefits of these sessions are that younger children enjoy the social aspect as well as the chance to demonstrate their success in emerging literacy and numeracy skills. The older children (who had previously been experiencing failure in the upper school) enjoy personal success in learning on this level, displaying their new skills as well as developing personal confidence as tutors. This in turn has improved self-esteem and personal confidence for both younger and older children. Teachers from upper school report that these 'tutors' have improved attitudes to and involvement in learning when they return to their regular class.

**Learning outcomes for students, parents and teachers**  
KEEP has given parents and teachers a more direct focus on the children's needs, learning styles and progress, allowing the children to overcome potential difficulties before they reach upper school.

By focusing on personal strengths, particular children have shown remarkable improvement in literacy and numeracy skills. The children's gains in self-esteem and confidence has helped to improve their classroom involvement and attitudes towards personally motivated learning in both the regular classroom and the small group setting. Most learning outcomes are specific to individual children because of the individual focus.

The children definitely benefit from the daily one-to-one contact. Withdrawal of these children from their regular classrooms has also given teachers time to enhance learning experiences for the remainder of the class.



The socio-cultural context has contributed to improved academic development, which is achieved through the children's involvement in culturally and developmentally appropriate 'processes', especially those that recognise the significance of the Djabugay culture.

Participants have developed skills in an environment that is secure and allows for expressions of affection and support, evident in their increased confidence in self-management skills associated with learning, shared responsibility for success (between children, parents and teachers) and enriched interpersonal relationships observed when the children interact in their regular classroom.

Integration of Djabugay language, culture and resources throughout the school curriculum provides a very positive base for children's total development. Djabugay activities always receive 100 percent of their attention and participation. The school's effort to match the children's life experiences with their learning situations has resulted in improved attendance records. This may be attributed to their successes in learning sessions and the resulting improvement in self-esteem and confidence. These children now feel good about themselves, and they show it through improved social interactions and involvement in their learning tasks—tasks that are interesting, relevant and culturally appropriate, applied through instruction that matches the children's levels of understanding with their 'real' abilities.

The whole school community is 'learning' Djabugay, with parents as instructors, providing further reinforcement for the children's self-esteem through evidence that their culture has a valued place in the learning process. This success extends to the number of Djabugay resources produced with and by the children. Lending facilities for these resources (and others) have been established as a result of constant requests from parents and people outside the Kuranda school community for more information.

Educational kinesiology (perceptual motor/neurolinguistics/brain gym), while being controversial to some, are effective at Kuranda and are fully supported by staff and parents. The EK formula devised from direct observation and practice with the children works! After EK sessions children show improved concentration and application to literacy and numeracy tasks. Teachers are receiving an increasing number of requests from individual parents for their children to be included in further EK activities.

Constant feedback between all participants has ensured more appropriate continuity of learning across the year levels. The ability for parents and teachers to observe effective strategies 'in process' has helped us to make the transition from previously inappropriate practices and modify curriculum structures and content. Teachers, particularly, display more awareness

of their own instructional style and language of instruction.

#### Effective strategies implemented by KEEP

- a positive approach, building on children's 'oral' learning styles and their existing skills and interests
- small groups and one-to-one sessions
- 'hands on' and 'hands in' experiences of interest to the children, with time to play and to experiment with materials to establish meaning
- provision of resources that are interesting and culturally meaningful to the children
- level of instruction matched to the children's level of understanding and application
- constant observation of the children's interactions and collaborative feedback to ensure appropriateness of the program and continuity of learning in differing educational contexts
- flexibility to allow for impromptu activities

#### Resources

Effective resources include books in Djabugay language (professionally produced and home made) showing the children's relatives working and celebrating their traditional culture, 'Storywater' legends illustrated by the children, artefacts from Djabugay culture, story tapes and songs.

We have established a music and movement area, in which individual children may play taped music. This area is separated from quiet work areas and is very popular.

Homemade literacy resources include: favourite stories, some of which have been broken down into single pages or repetitive phrases or words, for use in word 'bingo' games for recall of sequence to assist with word-building skills; large letters of the alphabet made of wood for construction (on the floor) of words; story books and tapes made with the children; alphabet board and puzzles; a 'word' book showing each letter of the alphabet accompanied by words that the children frequently want to write (this is constantly added on to); photographs of the children working, evaluated by the children, checking for recall and reactions; and videos of the children for recall and sharing of accomplishments.

Homemade numeracy resources include: 'gamin' lollies (made out of clay by the children and then wrapped in cellophane and boxed in groups of ten), which are used in conjunction with large, colourful templates depicting the numbers 1 to 10 and one-to-one dots and 'lollies'; large dice; throwing and catching games and skipping, which we use for counting, addition and subtraction; manipulative puzzles and construction materials; and a large abacus painted in Space Age colours by the children.

We also have materials on dinosaurs—anything to do with them, particularly factual references. The children



really enjoy learning the features and names of these extinct ('stinky') creatures.

A soft toy named Shen Zhen (a panda from China) can ask these children to do anything, and the children include him in most of their activities. He is particularly good at teaching incidental geographic lessons.

**Cooking:** Frequently requested by the children, it provides them with 'hands on' and 'hands in' experiences. Using the microwave oven encourages the children to retain concentration from beginning of the mixing to their favourite part, eating the end product! It incorporates literacy (reading recipes), numeracy (measuring, counting, matching, dividing, time sequencing), science (mixing, observing changes from liquids to solids, temperatures), health and hygiene (clean hands, clean equipment) and of course sensory enjoyment and satisfaction shared.

Other effective resources include: clay, sand, water, seeds and other items from the natural environment; puppets; self-selective creative materials; 'dramatic play' areas such as 'camping/fishing', 'surgery' and 'bank/post office', in which individuals and small groups may play roles and practise social and academic skills in an informal setting, thus catering for development of the 'whole' child.

Effective strategies include allowing each child to progress at his or her own pace, through activities that interest them, and 'needs' identified through collaborative observation. The tasks have varying degrees of difficulty. About 70 percent of work is at their present level, and 30 percent is designed to challenge their learning and stimulate their curiosity.

Tasks are often broken down into sequential components, and the children have an opportunity to engage part of the process at their level of ability. Time and opportunity for repetition and practice is provided to enhance skills, using a variety of resources to cover the same work task. The 'how to' of tasks is made explicit, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy tasks. Set texts are adapted to make understanding easier, with consideration given to experiential differences, helping the children to make sense (establish meaning) of the activities.

The children seek immediate feedback for a job well done. It involves direct teaching, one-to-one or in small groups, in a supportive atmosphere where cooperative activity is encouraged.

Additional 'human' resources include the local doctor, who talks with the children about basic health and hygiene matters—growing 'germs' from dirty hands and running noses, and letting the children see them through his microscope. This receives 100 percent of their attention!

#### **Problems encountered**

The primary concern is lack of permanency of funding. This is regarded as extremely important, because we

see the benefits of continuity of support provided to the children and their parents and teachers.

While most parents are very supportive, a few retain the attitude that it is solely the school's responsibility to educate their children, and while they are happy to have their children involved, they seek no input for themselves. If their previous experience of the education system was not positive, they may be reluctant to become involved in what previously held little meaning for themselves and their children.

In these situations our community liaison officer acts as a valuable go-between, encouraging the parents to become involved in their children's education. Scripted notes and photographs of the children at work are sent home to encourage parental support. Lack of transport also poses a problem for family involvement, but parents are welcomed into the centre whenever they do get a lift into town.

Attendance records have improved, except for children who suffer from recurring illness. Children regress after these absences, and they need further time to re-establish their confidence and competency levels. Here program flexibility is important. Extended family commitments and the transient nature of some families also contribute to absenteeism. The school recognises the family and cultural obligations; and where families move between communities, efforts have been made to establish networks between the schools to assist with continuity of learning for the children.

Another area of importance to the Kuranda school community is the teachers' preparation and experience in working with Aboriginal children. Specialised competencies in Aboriginal education are required to ensure that the methodologies and content are appropriate from an Aboriginal perspective.

We believe that student teachers should undertake compulsory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies to ensure that their teaching practices in the classroom will be appropriate. As well, teachers should be familiar with their community's cultural beliefs. Kuranda parents believe that tertiary institutions should consult with Aboriginal communities to ensure that pre-service Aboriginal Studies are appropriate. Curriculum content should be simple and based on the Aboriginal people's personal life experiences and environment. For success at Kuranda it has been necessary to 'listen' to students and parents and match 'doing' to ensure full participation.

When KEEP began there was a shortage of culturally appropriate resources, but with support from the whole community this problem is slowly being rectified. Access to funding is the only restriction. Some resources are very basic while others are professionally produced, but the important thing is that these resources should be meaningful and interesting to the children involved.

KEEP representatives also consider it important that Aboriginal resources should be included in schools that do not have Aboriginal students, to enrich their appreciation of Aboriginal culture.

#### Monitoring, evaluation and reviewing

All KEEP activities are designed for individual or small group contact time within the Preschool, Years 1-3 classrooms and the Early Childhood Withdrawal Room. All activities are conducted with a teacher or an aide.

Consistent feedback is provided to all parents, teachers and other interested people to ensure continuity and relevance of the learning experiences offered.

Evaluation and review of individual program involvement is conducted through appraisal of daily and weekly observations (case studies) of the children's individual and group interactions. All observations have been recorded in a set format to allow more detailed focus on activity, strategies, social and academic interactions and specific behavioural responses, both to objects and to people with whom the children have regular contact.

KEEP is an ethnographic study conducted through participant observation (action research), which has allowed the teachers and parents to share the same experiences as the children, enabling us to understand more accurately 'why' the children have reacted in the manner observed. It has also assisted in identifying areas for improvement, in matching children's reality with their learning processes within the school environment and thus rendering ordinary preschool and school experiences comprehensible for them.

Documented evidence includes written records (including parents' observations of their children's interactions at home), work samples, audio and visual tapes of interactions, and photographs evaluated by the children themselves in a wide range of settings.

Overall program review is conducted each term to assist with ongoing submissions for continued funding, which is not yet permanently available to KEEP.

Extensive documentation on research, design, implementation, evaluation and review processes for 1992-93, plus additional resources (including the program video), are available for observation from Kuranda Preschool.

#### Educational significance of KEEP

KEEP has reinforced the importance of collaboration between school and community and the need for additional personnel who are trusted and respected within the community to act as liaison, enabling equitable representation. We want to implement an inclusive curriculum, which addresses issues raised by parents. The priority is that Aboriginal children retain their Aboriginality while they develop social, literacy and numeracy skills to ensure success at school.

The importance of continuous collaborative review between all parties involved cannot be overstated. This includes access to additional support personnel, particularly community liaison workers, health workers, the learning support teacher, guidance officer, speech therapist and P-3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood counsellor. Provision needs to be made for 'on the job' training for all participants.

Individual and small group learning situations with culturally relevant content have provided the most successful learning situations. The children cope confidently and independently with preschool and the withdrawal room, exhibiting positive interactional behaviours, personal confidence, satisfaction and enjoyment displayed through their participation in literacy and numeracy activities (especially 'hands on' and 'hands in' experiences). Small 'focused' groups allow the teacher to nurture the children's progress towards becoming active, independent agents, taking pride in their development.

Parents and teachers have requested that individual and small group learning support is extended beyond Year 3 to Year 7 to ensure continuity of learning/success/support throughout the school. Formal submissions have already been made for funding for stage 2 of KEEP. Stage 2 proposes to establish Year 1 classrooms in similar layout and management to the preschool setting—providing children with continuity of learning experiences and a more positive transition into formal schooling. Parents have indicated their support for this proposal and are willing to assist with small group instruction.

Stage 3, for Years 4 to 7, is currently being negotiated. At these levels we hope to extend the success of the present 'peer teaching' situations. Peer teaching provides a very positive medium for shared learning in multi-age, individual and small group settings. Choosing previously unsuccessful upper-school students as tutors has allowed success on all levels, providing a positive influence for peers and siblings.

Program flexibility must be maintained to include incidental experiences when the opportunity arises. Informal visits from parents, grandparents and respected community members, as visiting teachers and lecturers, provide valuable opportunities to extend the children's learning potential. Aspects from their natural environment and personal items of interest can be incorporated to allow the children to experiment and enjoy these situations as part of their active learning process.

The community's major concern is for the program's guaranteed continuity. At the present time, funding applications must be resubmitted every six months to the Special Programs Schools Scheme. While this scheme has been very supportive, we have received no assurance about permanent support. Other sources of financial support have been approached, but no

commitment made. The school community has already recommended that if funding were withdrawn, the school should review its financial priorities and continue to support KEEP.

Debbie Hartman, coordinator of the Intyalade Akaltye (Butterfly) Program for the Aranda people of Alice Springs (a program similar to Kuranda's Djabugay Program and KEEP), has gained access to European financial support through the 'Van Leer' program. This guarantees funding for a minimum of two years, with potential permanent support to be provided by the Australian government. It is unfortunate that programs like this, designed to enrich the learning experiences of Aboriginal children, must seek financial support outside Australia in order to succeed.

Since its inception KEEP has offered a totally 'positive' approach to early childhood education. The program rejected previous negative stereotypes associated with the 'learning deficit' model, which blamed the child for failure, rather than looking at the school system for the real reasons—cultural deprivation, lack of acceptance of the Aboriginal English spoken by the children, inexperienced teachers, students' lack of understanding of information presented and language of instruction used, and teachers' lack of knowledge and respect for the local Aboriginal community.

KEEP recognises the wealth of experiences the Aboriginal children bring with them to school and uses these strengths as the basis for further learning. Perhaps KEEP could be regarded as an 'anti-deficit' model. KEEP promotes respect for all cultures and encourages the integration of Djabugay culture into the community, recognising the importance of cultural studies. The curriculum is appropriately locally based, with parents as instructors and partners in a two-way learning process. The content is culturally relevant to the children, and instruction is matched with the children's learning styles.

The initiative has really been the shared responsibility for the curriculum, relying on collaboration and full participation to ensure learning success for the students involved.

### Conclusion

KEEP has been generated from knowledge gathered directly from the Kuranda community. Program implementation resulted from the 'needs' identified and then acted upon directly to serve the community that had provided the information.

It is Kuranda's effort towards changing traditional white middle-class views about Aboriginal children's previous lack of achievement within the school system—failures that were the direct result of unrealistic expectation from unsympathetic educators and the children's misunderstanding of school regulations and procedures.

Implementation of KEEP represents a dedicated effort by Kuranda to offer Aboriginal children the same opportunities and levels of success as those available to their white peers. The children are encouraged to work at their own pace through active experiences, learning by 'doing' in order to generate understanding, followed by assimilation of information learnt.

'Play' equates with 'child's work', and time for spontaneity and enjoyment. Oral methods used do not reject book-based learning; they are designed to lay a solid foundation for future academic success. Learning cannot be forced, understanding cannot be assumed, and items of importance to the children cannot be considered irrelevant to their learning experiences.

The strategies applied in KEEP are effective for the children of Kuranda, but this does not automatically guarantee that they will be effective for all Aboriginal community groups. This paper has merely skimmed the surface of the multitude of recorded interactions and strategies applied.

When parents and teachers involved with the program since its inception were asked what they considered the most important strategies for success, their responses include:

- Think positively, and take each day as it comes.
- Apply constant patience and persistence.
- If the strategy works, use it!

Never think you have finished sharing, researching, observing, questioning, listening, modifying, adapting or reviewing a program for children. The program is an on-going process of learning in itself.

### References

- Blank M., Rose S. and Berlin L., 1978. *The Language of Learning: The Preschool Years*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Buzacott J., 1993. *Kuranda Early Childhood Personal Enrichment*, Vols 1-4.
- Department of Education, Queensland, consultative committee and Education Department of South Australia, 1987. *Teaching Aboriginal Children*.
- Department of Education, Queensland, 1988. *Human Relationships Education for Queensland State Schools*, policy and guidelines statement, revised draft.
- Department of Education, Queensland, 1992. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Education Policy*.
- Eckermann A. K., 1987. 'Learning styles, classroom management, teacher characteristics and rural-urban Aboriginal people: some thoughts', *Discourse*, Vol. 7, No. 2.
- Fry G., 1986. 'An appraisal of problems of Aboriginal students in the education system', *Contemporary Issues in Aboriginal Studies*, proceedings of the first conference on Aboriginal Studies, Nepean College of Advanced Education, October 1986. Edited by B. Wright, G. Fry and L. Petchkovsky.

- Grant M., 1993. 'An innovative approach to tertiary Aboriginal education', *Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference on Contemporary Issues in Aboriginal Studies*, September 1993, Australian Catholic University, Sydney.
- Hall B. L., 1979. 'Knowledge is a commodity and participatory research', *Prospects*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 393-408.
- Hewitt D., 1993. 'Cultural conflict and learning styles', *Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference on Contemporary Issues in Aboriginal Studies*, September 1993, Australian Catholic University, Sydney.
- Heymsfeld C. R., 1992. 'The remedial child in the whole-language, cooperative classroom', *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, Vol. 8, pp. 257-273 quoted in *Speld News*, May 1993.
- Hutchinson S. A., 1988. 'Education and grounded theory', in *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods*, edited by R. R. Sherman and B. Rodman, London: Falmer Press.
- Kemmis S. and McTaggart P., 1988. *The Action Research Planner*. Geelong, Vic.: Deakin University.
- Lieberman K., 1985. *Understanding Interaction . . . Central Australia: An Ethnomethodological Study of Australian Aboriginal People*. Melbourne: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Malin M., 1990. 'The visibility and invisibility of Aboriginal students in an urban classroom', *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 312-329.
- Singh M., 1992. 'Social justice in education and teachers' interests: catering for teachers' special needs', *Catering for Students with Special Needs* seminar, 30-31 October 1992, Cairns Education Centre.
- Walkerdine V., 1984. 'Developmental psychology and the child-centred pedagogy: the insertion of Piaget into early education', in J. Henriques et al. *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London: Methuen.