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BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY - A COMMENT

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In Vol. 2 No 3, Mr. F.H. Barker from Kennedy, Queensland, examined the advantages of black and white photography in the school. Here, Mr. Bucknall reports on the use of black and white photographs as language stimulus material.

I fully support Mr. Barker's conclusion that we cannot ignore the gains to be achieved in increased interest, relevance and achievement in all aspects of the school program through the use of black and white photography.

Readers may be interested in a 'trial' or 'investigation' that we are currently conducting in a number of Western Australian schools using a kit of black and white photos specifically designed to provide language stimulus material for use in remote, predominantly Aboriginal schools.

While the photographs, taken earlier this year at Halls Creek by Nicholas Clark of Mt. Lawley's Learning Resources Centre, cover a wide range of subjects, all fifteen emphasize some aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life.

The basic issue to be decided as a result of this investigation is whether or not stimulus material, centred specifically on Aboriginal children and communities has any value over and beyond material that is already in production and use in the standard European classroom. The questions that the trial seeks answers to, are, broadly speaking, as follows:

- a. Are Aboriginal children stimulated to a greater degree by material that includes relatively familiar scenes and objects, than material with a more marked European emphasis?

- (b) Will the children at Halls Creek (where these photos were taken) respond more positively than say, those at Warburton Ranges?
- (c) Is there a marked difference in the reaction to this type of stimulus material according to the age of the students?
- (d) Is there a marked difference in reaction to relatively unambiguous photos as compared to those open to a wider range of interpretation?
- (e) Given the wide variety of subjects, that is, adults, children, old buildings, countryside etc., is there a marked difference in the reaction of students to one type of subject as compared to others?
- (f) Is there a marked difference in the reaction to commercially produced "outside photos" from that shown towards "one off" local material produced there and then on the spot?

While teaching at Milingimbi, in the Northern Territory, I used photographs taken locally to encourage the development of oral and written language. The means of communication was largely confined to English, but on occasions I did use this type of material for similar work in Gupapuyngu - the predominant 'trade language' of the area.

Sometimes I used a single large print as the basis for a discussion on something that had taken place recently, for example, the cutting up of a dugong on the beach. On other occasions I used a series of approximately five large prints as a basis for descriptive writing, for example, the unloading of the supply barge. Photos of an open-ended nature were also used as a stimulus for creative writing, for example, an unusually shaped object found on the beach. "What is it? How did it get there, How long has it been there?" as a starting point for developing a fantasy or creative experience. Such photos were also used to stimulate art and drama type activities.

As those of you who have taught Aboriginal children will realize, encouraging this type of divergent, creative thought is difficult, and I used a variety of photos in an attempt to encourage students to break free from the usual pattern of a fairly rigid response. Questioning, allied to creative expression and experience is, I feel, a pre-requisite to any formal appreciation of European cultural values and future options that may be open to these students.

For a number of largely 'intuitive' reasons, I felt there was a considerable value in this approach to language development. Since leaving Milingimbi, I have discovered that in the United States a number of researchers have directed critical attention to the effects of visual literacy training on extending and enriching oral and written language facility, on developing self-concept, and on heightening environmental awareness. Of particular interest is the effect of using visual literacy training strategies with children who have had limited language experiences, or have different cultural backgrounds, and consequently, inadequate development of total English language skills. Because a disproportionate amount of emphasis is placed on verbal skill development, these children rarely have the opportunity in school to draw on their rich and varied visual experiences.

".....learning is facilitated when a child's attention is drawn to stimulation sequences. If some of a child's verbal communication skills are related to a passive visual language base, then a relationship between visual and verbal expressive skills is suggested."(1)

Initially I drew up a number of objectives that had as their basic theme the extension of what I suspect is an acute visual literacy skill possessed by Aboriginal children. Activities were designed to develop a relationship between visual and verbal language that would see its outcome in improved speech, writing, visualizing and (what I hoped to achieve at a later date) their own picture making.

Although I lacked any supporting evidence I felt that there existed a difference between Aboriginal and European children in their manner and approach to perceiving objects in photographs that would allow the Aboriginal child to perhaps operate at a superior level to that of his European counterpart.

Basic to the use of the photos is the development of written and spoken language in association with an introduction to the language of images in that the use of the photos involves observation and exploration of images.

For example, in drawing up a detailed inventory of the image, the student is developing observation, imagination and sensitivity. This can be seen in the use of the photograph of the children playing on the slide, where the intention may be to

simply extend vocabulary and word concepts. This is a composite photograph of four frames, each taken from the same angle. They show a young boy at the top of a slippery slide, half-way down, near the bottom and standing up to walk away. His playmates can be seen at the top of the slide in each frame. Slipping, sliding, skidding (alliteration not intended); poised, waiting; happy, laughing etc., covers a range of visual language experiences.

A more mechanical use may be made of the photographs where use is made of one as a frame of reference for language drills. Where they are incorporated into a Situational English program, they lose their value as a stimulus for more creative work, and for this reason I suggest teachers should limit this particular use.

For both oral and written use I would suggest that a variety of responses may be elicited along the following lines:

- a simple description of a scene including all the important details. What can you see? e.g. a photo of a cattle station.
- interpretation of facial expressions; describing the person, imagining what has happened to him, what he is feeling, thinking; e.g. girl in an old building.
- association of people and places. Justifying the choice, who and why do they live here; e.g. two boys and the European man sitting outside a building. Men in street, one with a hose.
- developing powers of observation. From memory listing, describing or drawing the picture just seen.
- inventing a story suggested by the picture either using the picture as a background and describing the characters it evokes, or using the characters as a basis, imagining the background.

An interesting article by J.P. Golay, *Introduction to the Language and Image of Sound*, Visual Education - June 1973, (the magazine of the National Committee for Audio-visual Aids in Education) uses this approach as an introduction to a wide-ranging program aimed at the development of visual literacy. Teachers involved in the construction of experience readers would find this an invaluable reference.

With the whole class, discussion could bring out the main features and a variety of feeling evoked. Where discussion is lively it is always wise to start writing while it is at a high point rather than leave it until it is exhausted.

It is also possible to have smaller groups working from a photo, devising a story or poem to be later shared with the whole class.

One final suggestion is to allow individual students to arrange a set of four or five photos so that they tell a story. The subject matter in each photograph need not be related. It is the experience of ordering a sequence that is important. It is possible then to go on to writing sentences under each of the photographs.

I hope these suggestions are of some use to teachers who have been encouraged by F.H. Barker's article to use Black and White photographs in a Black and White school. Like him, my introduction to enlargers, chemicals, papers, etc., came about when necessity became the mother of invention.

Reference

1. Deutsch, M., *The Disadvantaged Child and the Learning Process*, from *Education in Depressed Areas*. Ed. A. Harry Parson. New York; Columbia University Teachers College. Quoted in R.B. Fransecky and J.L. Debes - *Visual Literacy, a Way to Learn - a Way to Teach*, Association for Educational Communication & Technology 1972.

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