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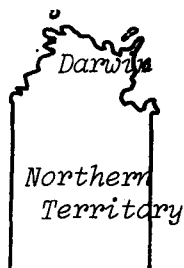
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA...

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



STORY BOOKS

Ms Nancy Batenburg,
Ludmilla Primary School,
Darwin, N.T.

Over a period of four years teaching at Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt, Maningrida and now at Ludmilla Primary School in Darwin teaching the Bagot Reserve children, it has come to my attention that one of the largest stumbling blocks to reading seems to be the realization that what I say can indeed be printed, and then in turn read. So often the Aboriginal child arrives at school to face a barrage of flash cards and the European teacher finds it difficult to figure out why Silas and Buki just aren't achieving the desired results.

I am convinced that a large part of the problem is under-stimulation in the home, but other factors must include the child's maturation rate, and the novelty of the entire school situation. Assuming the teacher has received some sort of a response to her insistent use of flashcards, but not the correct one, the child's sense of failure starts to rear its ugly head - and this with a child in Year 1 !!

One of the more effective solutions to this sense of failure, (taking into consideration the child's maturity) that we have in our classroom, is what we call "story books". A story book is a blank-paged exercise book with a teacher-drawn line about two-thirds of the way down the page. Above the line is ample room for the child to draw a picture of his or her own choosing. Below the line is room for the teacher to write *exactly* what the child dictates about that story. Time enough later to correct grammar - the main idea here is simply to get the child to realize that what he has drawn can be described and written, and nine times out of ten that child can read back his or her story without teacher help. And you know, you can see when it clicks, that "I can read it!"

I do not worry if a child repeats a success story for three or four days in a row, but by the fifth, I might suggest *we* try a different approach to the same words. For example, a new pupil might just give me "flower" as her story, but by the fifth day of "flower", I would suggest "this is a flower", or, "I can see a flower", or, "it is a yellow flower". I would also ensure that there was sufficient stimulation around the classroom in case she wanted to add a different word to her vocabulary. In any event, the child is not rushed into changing, and if she steadfastly refuses, well, we stick to plain old "flower" until further notice (and it has never gone beyond a fortnight on the same word. Once the child gets the drift of what we are doing, that child is usually fairly keen to explore the possibilities. Little boys favouring war and army, can usually be stimulated by helicopters, planes, rockets, jeeps, uniforms, police, ships, crooks, "Six Million Dollar Man", etc.)

Each day, each child reads the story from today, as well as at least two previous ones. As time becomes available to the teacher, the child would read as much as his or her entire book - and I have not yet met a child that didn't enjoy reading his or her own stories to a teacher giving undivided attention. There is no sense of failure because the child cannot decipher the visual clues, and should such a difficulty as "forgetting" occur, I am quite willing to help by telling the correct word.

By seeing exactly what the children are saying, it also becomes more obvious to me which areas of our oral program need working on.

As the children progress, they are encouraged to write their own stories as well, and by this time they are so confident that it is a little matter of helping them with a bit of grammar. For example, a picture of great violence with the caption, "the two crookmen are hitting the six million dollar man" is easily corrected to "crookmen" or even just "crooks", after an explanation to the child. I never correct it myself - I explain and leave the option to the child.

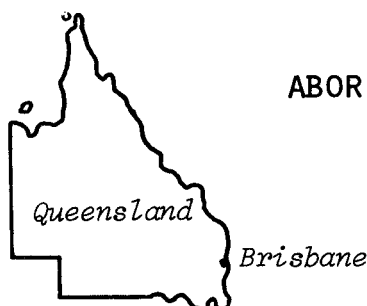
Any words requested by the child are listed at the back of the story book, and as the entire class reaches the stage where dictionaries are understood and can be of use, those words are put into our dictionaries for individual use. If I know that a word requested by Silas is in Cindy's dictionary, I refer Silas to Cindy, as I consider a word given by a peer to be one much better remembered than one given by me.

Let me add that this is not in place of my reading program, which is dictated by school policy. This is in addition to our normal English program, and we do a story every couple of days. I am greatly assisted by having a helpful, motherly, teaching assistant in the room, who encourages the shy ones and smoothes over any momentous difficulties such as Cindy wanting to keep her word a secret and refusing to part with it.

The great benefits from this are the increased confidence of the children when they read, and the massive increases in the vocabulary that the child is interested in, and hence remembers. It is an enjoyable activity for all of us, and, for a child struggling elsewhere in the school system, a chance to succeed in a non-threatening activity. Also, this sense of success carries over to other activities.

If nothing else, I'll go down in history as the teacher who encouraged stories about Abba, and the Six Million Dollar Man!

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ABORIGINALS AND READING

*John Salmond,
Education Department,
Brisbane

For some time it has been obvious to teachers of Aboriginal children that the schools have been failing their young clients. This failure is nowhere more apparent than in reading. Comments such as the following one from Fleming (1974:49) are by no means isolated or solely applicable to his Western Australian Aboriginal situation. He says,

"...we have a reading problem in the 11-14 year group. Some of these children have failed to reach any standard of reading competence and coupled with this deficiency have a dislike for any form of reading at all."

*Formerly Milingimbi, N.T.