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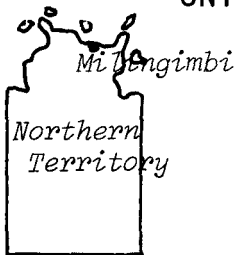
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WHAT TO DO

UNTIL THE READING SPECIALIST COMES



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In an earlier issue (Vol.4 No.2) Michael Christie told us about the reading program he was using at Milingimbi. In this issue he outlines "a number of teaching techniques which are both simple to implement and congruent with what (little) we know about learning styles in Aboriginal children."

Nothing is more depressing for a teacher than to hear about other teachers' fabulous successes while feeling incapable of replicating them. Enthusiasm for other people's programs begins to wear thin in the cold light of your own circumstances. What exactly can be done to achieve reading without tears at your school? There are so many ideas and theories in the teaching of reading, we are at a loss as to which of them to choose. And teaching Aboriginal children to read is an even more difficult task for two main reasons. Firstly, they come from a culture where reading is not a part of everyday life, so there is a lot of reading which we take for granted and which they don't understand. Secondly, we know only a very little about the ways in which Aboriginal children learn. If we think carefully, we can see that our past failures have only taught us that white teaching methods are by and large simply unsuitable for Aboriginal children. This paper is essentially an attempt to rectify this in the field of reading.

What exactly do we know about the ways in which Aboriginal children learn? Not a great deal really, although some interesting research has been performed in the last few years which is setting us on the right track. Research is not within the scope of this paper, so I won't go into detail, but there are two things which are worth pointing out before methods are discussed.

Firstly, it has been found that Aboriginal culture (like most non-Western cultures) places a considerably greater emphasis on learning through the visual modality than through the verbal modality. In other words, an Aboriginal child is more likely to

remember exactly what is shown to him, than what is explained to him. White culture on the other hand is much more verbal in its thinking, and white children at school quickly learn to use language as a thinking tool and often drop the use of the visual mode to a large extent. This is why white teachers talk so much. Thus whereas the white child might be quicker to analyse words, to discuss them, to break them down and build them up, the Aboriginal child may be quicker to use his visual ability and remember large numbers of sight words, phrases and even sentences simply from their shapes.

The Aboriginal's extensive use of the visual modality has some far-reaching effects upon the way he learns. So often he needs almost no explanation, (and so often, as we know, our explanations seem to achieve very little). But he watches something once or twice, and can copy it almost exactly. How nice if we were all like that! Now of course, reading is essentially a language process, not a visual process, but with careful planning, we can utilize what the children are able to do well, and worry less about what they worry less about. Oral language is an important part of the curriculum, but instead of working to improve the oral language basis of the reading program, as many of us have been doing so valiantly and so unsuccessfully for years, we should be more concerned with capitalizing on the children's visual abilities which are so strong.

This second point may be a touchy one, but I feel that it is important. For so long I tried to stir up the creative urges of the Aboriginal children who worked with me. We tried everything, from cookery to space travel, and interest was always polite but faint. After my creative urges had all but fizzled out, I realized that my children were still working very happily and relatively consistently week after week. Unlike the white children I had taught, these Aboriginal children did not need a catalytic burst of freshly creative ideas once a week to keep them motivated. Of course, new ideas and old ones would regularly float in and out of the classroom and be snatched up by teacher and children alike, but I found that using the artificial and contrived sources of motivation which had been so necessary in teaching white children, was generally a waste of time and energy with Aboriginal children. In pre-European Aboriginal 'education' there was never anything artificial on motivation or subject matter, and contemporary Aboriginal culture is still geared towards relevance and reality in the teaching/learning situation. Apart from the fact that they expressed interest in the oddest of uninteresting things, and generally the same things for week after week, these children were

content to work, not hard, but consistently, without my having to stand on my head to entertain them. Teachers of Aboriginal children are thus more able to get down to the serious business of teaching without too many trimmings.

I can hear teachers objecting to this even as I write, so I will hasten to add that I have seen teachers (seldom, I admit) use all sorts of creative techniques to vastly improve the relevance and standard of their classroom practices. I think that that is tremendous and I really am most envious. The point that I am really trying to make is that the things which we can and must do in teaching white children to read are very likely not the same as what we must do for Aboriginal children. In trying to work out a good reading program for Aboriginal children, our best bet is to put our knowledge of Aboriginal children together with our knowledge of the reading process, and pay less attention to our experiences with white children.

What then are some sound strategies useful in teaching Aboriginal children to read? I feel that there are nine points which are important, and some of them refer more to work with young readers, but most of them are generalizable to all reading teaching throughout the school.

1. *If you already have a reading program which seems to be working well, don't drop it.*

Although we are loath to admit it, very little of what has happened in Aboriginal education seems to have worked very well. So if you feel like a failure, don't worry. You are not alone. But if you see that your program is successful, keep going. But be realistic. Do your children really understand what is going on? -- What reading is and what it is for? -- Or do they think that reading is something you do sitting in a circle with the teacher? Do they read in their spare time, I mean, actually *read*? And are they developing their reading skills as well as you would like them to? The fact that they say the right work at the right time is really not a good measure of the success of your program. So look objectively at what you are doing and be prepared to drop anything that isn't worth salvaging. In my class for example, I was forced to stop using duplicated work sheets for practice on specific reading skills, and I had to drop virtually all the word games and reading games. They looked impressive, and they kept the children happily busy for hours, but they weren't teaching them anything. So I dropped them. Drop what you have to, but work hard to keep what is worth keeping. We need all the help we can get.

2. *Make your classroom into a reading environment.*

We Europeans come from a language-oriented, reading-oriented culture. It is impossible for us to imagine how different the life of an Aboriginal child must be. It is also difficult for us to estimate the tremendous advantage a white child brings to school with him when he comes from a language and reading-oriented culture and home. The child from a reading home is half-way towards reading on the day he arrives at school. Now, a wise school will try to change the reading habits of the community as a whole, but what can be done at the classroom level? Even if the community is not a reading environment, the classroom can be. Reading should be incorporated into as much of the classroom activity as possible. In the early grades, and probably up into the post-primary as well, this usually means the teacher reading to the children continually.

Soft-pedal natural science, arithmetic, oral English, social studies, and formal reading lessons for the first few years at school, or at least until the children have a good grasp of their own language - both spoken to them and read to them - and are little experts at the scientific processes of developmental play which they learn slowly with plenty of practice (again, visual more often than verbal).

A little window dressing doesn't hurt either; labels for things, maybe some reading games, signs and posters all around the classroom. But a reading environment really requires *reading* and lots of it. Teachers reading to children, children to children and even teachers to teachers.

3. *Use the lap technique.*

The lap technique is the perfect way of learning to read. The child sits in an adult's lap, and they read together. The adult demonstrates a love for reading. This is important because all children, and especially Aboriginal children, learn by imitation. The adult reads the book - a children's book - and the children in his lap read along too as much as they can. They talk about the pictures and point to the words. They discuss the story and predict the outcomes. It is an emotional conditioning to books. Later the children will always pick the same books to read to themselves, reciting some of the texts from memory, making up the rest of it, repeating the catchy phrases and instructing younger friends and relatives concerning the plot and its denouement. Short books with lots of repetition are the favourites. Considering the nature of

reading and the nature of Aboriginal children, I am convinced that teachers reading to children in an emotionally warm setting is the single most important factor in teaching children to read. Do it often, four or five times a day with different groups of children. Even if for no other reason, white teachers in bilingual schools should develop some rudimentary language ability in the vernacular so that they can read simple stories to young children. (I can add that in my own experience the children's hasty corrections of my pronunciation and the discussions of the stories was one of the least painful methods of language learning.) Above all, lap sessions must be relaxed and enjoyable. You might not be teaching, but the children will be learning.

4. Make the classroom library into a going concern

I always had problems with the nature table in my classroom. I hated it, and the insects would always be dead or dying and the tadpoles with their bellies to the surface before I would do anything about it. Don't let that happen to the classroom library. Keep it in the centre of activity, not in the back corner behind the nature table. Instead of telling your children to use the library after they have done their lessons, try telling them to do their lessons after they have finished in the library. Change the collection regularly, and stock lots of books which you and the class have written. Start making your own personal collection of good quality children's books which appeal to Aboriginal children. When reading to the children, show a healthy bias towards their own books - read at least one or two of them a day. Make sure that you and the class all have an opportunity to read books from the library for a good few minutes every day. Try SSR (see No. 9).

5. Make class books

Most teachers, at some time or another have made at least a perfunctory attempt at producing books from classroom materials. Get serious about it. In earlier grades, before children can write well themselves, get them to tell stories on to a tape, transcribe them and make books yourself (this can be wildly successful). Only use the very best stories and make a careful job of the books. Concentrate on quality more than quantity. Other stories can be composed by the class as a whole - those repetitious stories that Aboriginal children generate spontaneously - and illustrated by the children themselves. Some of the books will never stand the test of time, but some will become classics in their own right, and make a valuable contribution to the classroom reading supply.

They are also important in that they contribute to the understanding that reading is a process associated with the thoughts and idiom of the children themselves, and is relevant to them and their reality.

6. *Use instant reading sheets*

Instant reading sheets are one of the many things which fit under the broad heading of language experience methods in reading. I have talked about language experience methods previously (Vol.4 No.2 p.39) and they are becoming generally well known, so I will not discuss them in detail. However, here is a brief account of my own version (and further references are given in the bibliography). After a couple of years in a reading-rich school environment, the Aboriginal child will begin to read, quite automatically. By this I mean that he will know what reading is and he will enjoy being read to, he will be able to recognise a few words, mainly his name and the names of other children, and a few words of interest that have cropped up in the classroom. For some time now, his teacher has been writing short labels - only a word or two - on the bottom of his pictures when he has told her about them. And slowly he has come to realise that the next day the teacher is able to read these words back to him. He is ready to learn to do it himself. Every day, at some stage, he draws a picture - anything which takes his fancy. He leaves a space at the bottom of the page, reading back each word as she writes it. The child immediately reads the story back to the teacher, and so do any other children who are standing around.

The child also has a large paper bag (the dirtiest and most patched up piece of equipment in the classroom) in which he treasures all the other stories he has written. He brings these out, and reads them as well. Because they are all his own work, and because he can tell that the teacher thinks his sentences are the most interesting and important things in the classroom, he knows nearly all of his stories perfectly. Any words which he can't read, the teacher tells him immediately so he isn't left puzzling nervously over words he doesn't know. At this stage the words he reads are all sight words; if he doesn't know them, he doesn't know them. But it is amazing how quickly a stock of sight words is built up. Any story which gives trouble can be culled out. Soon each child has a stock of sentences which he can read fluently.

It is important to appreciate the advantages of this method:

- . the child composed the story himself so the vocabulary, grammar and idiom are perfect for him to read;
- . he made up the topic himself so it is something interesting and familiar to him;
- . it is a whole word, meaning-oriented approach which is appropriate to young children and especially, I think, to Aboriginal children;
- . his own picture provides the best sort of context cues.

and finally,

- . it is a good source of simple reading material in unpublished languages.

I have used instant reading sheets as the basis for a whole program and as a supplementary method. Both work well. To me it is the most meaningful and least painful way to begin reading.

7. Use *"very-own words"*

Very-own words is really a fashionable way of saying individual sight words. Silvia Ashton-Warner calls them "key words". When I went to school in New Zealand in the 1950's they were called "look-and-say" words. It's basically how I learnt to read (although everyone had the same words to learn) and I think it is still a useful technique with the majority of children. They get a kick out of having their very-own words. And because the child chooses his words himself, they are words which are already emotionally important to him - they are *his* very own.

This is how the system works. The child (or a group of children) armed with their paper bags (see No 6) sit in a group with the teacher. After a few minutes of discussion concerning the things that are currently trendy for eight-year-olds to talk about, the teacher asks if anyone wants a new very-own word. Not everyone wants a new card every day. The child tells the word to the teacher who writes it on a light piece of cardboard and hands it to the child. If it's a genuine very-own word, the child is delighted with it, and before long it is indelibly printed on his mind. He shows it to the other children and reads it to them, and

goes off and copies it into a special book or piece of paper and draws a picture. Instant reading again. A more advanced child will write a sentence with the word in it, and maybe use some of his previous very-own words, and hopefully some of the words he's learnt to read on his instant reading sheets. The papers are illustrated and made into little books which the children use like dictionaries. Very-own words are liable to turn up in the dictated stories and are quickly spotted. Children are supposed to keep their cards in their bags, but they are always bringing them out, reading them, using them in their writing, counting them, gloating over them, and losing them. Clean up time every afternoon involves helping a few stray very-own words find their way back to their rightful owners. Everyone seems to know everyone else's words.

Very-own words are always a good basis for writing. A class book about "My favourite thing is...", or "At night time we see..." usually starts from the very-own words set. Children know each other's words and lend and borrow them freely. Sometimes a word catches on and everyone wants it. "John Wayne" was an all-time favourite. More than one language is often represented in the very-own words, but don't worry about that.

This is not the place to teach the little words which are so necessary in writing, like *if*, *but* and *because*. They should be taught elsewhere. Very-own words have got to be fun, and personally important to the children. And they usually are. But they can also be overworked. Children should be given an opportunity to get a new one every day but should only be given one if they want one. Sometimes very-own words are forgotten. If any of them are forgotten or lose their interest, they can be extracted. A child should be able to read all of his very-own words by sight, and loves to go over them with the teacher. This system takes a while to get started but it is well worth it. Apart from the obvious aid to reading, the words can be used for everything from card games to creative writing.

8. *Sounds and letters*

I could have called this section phonics, but unfortunately the word upsets me. I am always suspicious when I hear teachers say that their children are learning to read by a phonic method. I'm inclined to suspect that children in the early stages of reading teach themselves the look-and-say methods in spite of, as much as because of, the teacher, and recognise nearly every word

they read by its shape. However, eventually all good readers need phonic word attack skills. And every beginning reader needs some rudimentary knowledge of the letters of the alphabet. He should be able to write them correctly and have a basic knowledge of the differences among them. I think that knowledge of sounds, and knowledge of letters can be combined and teaching them can start quite early if it is done carefully.

The way that I do it, every child needs his own blackboard. Individual blackboards are so useful for so many activities that they are basic equipment. I think that the whole class (or as many as you can muster) could work with sounds and letters for 15 to 30 minutes every day or longer, depending upon how much success you are having. There is no magic order in which to introduce the letters, but there are some practical considerations. Don't worry about trying to cover everything. Remember, it's not really a phonics lesson. What you are trying to teach is:

- that words are made up of letters
- the letters (usually) represent sounds
- how to write the letters
- how some sounds and letters correspond.

Look at the written form of the language you are working with. Begin by looking only at the letters (or digraphs) which start words, and calculate which of these occurs most frequently. This is where you start. Because the sound/letter match (or more correctly the phoneme/grapheme match) seems to take forever to sink in, I would, for the first month or longer, use only consonants and only those which frequently occur word initially. Vowels and blends can be introduced later. And because it is so difficult and confusing, I would also avoid asking, "What does this letter say?" or, "Write down the letter which says 'm-m-m-m'". Also, for the first few months I would concentrate upon the writing of the letters rather than attaching the sound to the symbol.

The teacher sits with the children. "Today we are going to talk about the letter *b*. This is what it looks like." The teacher writes the letter on his blackboard and the children write it in the air with their fingers and then on their own blackboards. "What does it say?" "B". "Can you show me where the *b* is in this word?...We know lots of words which start with a *b* - banana, bathi, Baymaramawuy, Boys' Club. Watch my lips pop open when I say them...

Who can think of some more b words," (I never had much success with that question but it's worth a try.) "Let's write it again and say it as we write it..." Discuss the shape of the letter, talk about b words and get the children to write, write, write. The principle involved here is that the sound symbol relationship is gradually established when what he sees, what he hears and what he does are co-ordinated over a period of time.

It takes a long time for this sort of activity to pay off. In the meantime, console yourself with the fact that, at least the children are learning to write with correct letter formations. Make sure that they start in the right place and go in the right direction, and you've saved some other teacher untold trouble in years to come. (I always find myself calling out "Dow-w-n, up and around" as I write the letter to give verbal reinforcement to the motor activity. I don't know if it does any good, but I think it's sound theoretically.)

Finally, don't try to force the carryover from these lessons into reading. It can cause untold confusion. Just be content to wait for the day when the light dawns, and they start to "sound out" for themselves.

9. *Sustained silent reading*

SSR is one of the new ideas in the teaching of reading. It is based on the principles that children learn to read by reading. and that children often learn *how* to read, but seldom get around to actually doing it. How will they ever learn to read for pleasure?

Basically SSR is simply getting the children to read for a certain period of time every day. It can be really valuable in providing reading practice and in promoting positive attitudes if a few simple rules are observed.

1. Everyone must read. Every child, and even (or especially) the teacher. Children learn through imitating models. At SSR time, the teacher gets out his book and reads it conscientiously while the rest of the class does the same. Sometimes whole schools practise SSR. Everyone from the headmaster and office workers to the janitor sits and reads for ten minutes or however long every day. If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for the children.

2. Reading must be individual and silent. Each child selects one book (which he must not change) and he must read it silently, interrupting no one. If the teacher expects the children to read silently, they will do it. Non-readers look at pictures and "read" old favourite books which they know by heart. In classes which aren't really used to silent reading, the teacher could put a pile of books on the floor in the middle of the rug (more books than children) and before she tells them to choose a book, she might choose a couple herself, read the first couple of pages aloud to the class, make some comment, and put them back. They will be the first books to be taken. If the classroom is a reading environment, many of the books in the pile will be class favourites already.
3. A timer is used. The teacher explains that we are going to read anything we like quietly for a sustained period. The timer must be out of sight so no one becomes a clock-watcher, not even the teacher, and a bell must ring so the children won't begin to think that the teacher has forgotten and interrupt to ask if time is up. Use a kitchen cooking timer. Start with only two to five minutes a day, and build up gradually to ten, twenty or thirty minutes or more, depending on the reading level of the class.
4. It must be reading for enjoyment only. Don't keep records or reports. Don't ask comprehension questions or insist that children choose books which are at their "right level" (whatever that means). When the timer rings, allow any children who want to continue to do so.

SSR is a great idea, and if you follow the rules, it will really work. It might take a week or two to get it established, but it will be worth it.

For Further Reading:

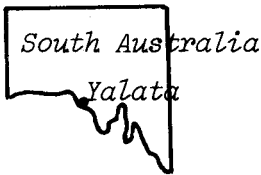
Reading Is Only the Tiger's Tail. (McCracken & McCracken, 1972, Leswing Press) is in my opinion the best practical book on teaching reading (although no book on teaching European children is ever completely appropriate to teaching Aboriginal children.) This book can be obtained cheaply in paperback, and it discusses, among other things, SSR, very-own words, and the lap technique.

Language Experiences in Communication. (Van Allen, 1976, Houghton Mifflin) discusses language experience methods including class-made books.

Teacher. (Ashton-Warner, 1963, Simon & Schuster) is a readable account of teaching non-European children which includes the extensive use of very-own (key) words.

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TECHNICAL STUDIES AT YALATA ABORIGINAL SCHOOL



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Ceduna, S.A.

In technical studies at Yalata we are trying to cater for two worlds, that of the traditional Aboriginal and that of the present-day Aboriginal.

Incorporated into the technical studies course is a section taught by the Aboriginal teaching assistants, in which the students learn to perfect their own artifact making skills and learn new skills. These new skills are taught by men from the Community. The most frequently made artifacts are wombats, kangaroos, snakes, emus, lizards and the more traditional woomeras, spears and boomerangs. Lessons are held in the shade of a tree, using local myall wood. Artifacts find a ready sale through the Kalinguratja Co-operative and the boys make pocket money as well as raising money for excursions and other class projects.

Another side of the technical studies class includes training for employment. This includes such skills as submitting tenders for local work, keeping timesheets and calculating payments, welding, flame cutting, thread-cutting, mechanics, carpentry, joinery and painting. Numerous minor repairs are carried out for both the school and the community. Some of these include broken window and door replacement, making reinforced septic tank lids, shed construction, demolition of old buildings, fencing and construction of an Adventure Playground.