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THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AND LITERACY IN ENGLISH

Dr R.M. Boyd,
School of Education,
University of N.S.W.

While it is important that Australian teachers are made aware of their failures in teaching many Aboriginals to master literacy (Salmond, 1977; Duncan, 1974) there is a danger of developing a general expectancy that children of Aboriginal descent will be poor performers at school. Resnick and Robinson (1974) emphasize the influence of parent and teacher expectations on the expectations of the children themselves. Teachers' expectations are particularly important for Aboriginals learning academic skills at school. It is the teacher who can grade learning tasks to ensure the child gains success through his own personal effort, a fundamental experience if low expectations are to be raised (Gurin and Gurin, 1972).

The purpose of this paper is to examine data from the ACER Literacy and Numeracy study of Australian 10 and 14 year olds in 1975, as it relates to the Aboriginals in the sample. On the basis of this evidence it should be possible to draw some conclusions about the successes and failures of Aboriginal pupils in reading and numeracy.

Of the 6628 ten year olds tested, 119 (1.8%) were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, as were 109 (1.7%) of the 6247 fourteen year olds. Table 1* shows that 74% of ten year olds in the Aboriginal schools of the Northern Territory spoke languages other than English. In the other Australian schools, where the language of instruction is in English, 91% of the ten year old Aboriginals were monolingual English speakers. Although bilingualism was more common among the 14 year old pupils in Aboriginal schools, there were still 38% who were classified as speaking languages other than English. Because of the high percentage of children in the Aboriginal schools of the Northern Territory learning English as a second language, it is not surprising that no one in the Aboriginal schools reached a mastery level in reading

* See p.4.

Table 1
Languages Spoken by
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Children
Included in the Numeracy and Literacy Sample

Language	10 year olds		14 year olds	
	Ab.Schs N.T.	Other Schools	Ab.Schs N.T.	Other Schools
English only	2 (3%)	53 (91%)	4 (6%)	38 (83%)
English and other language	14 (23%)	5 (9%)	25 (40%)	5 (11%)
Other language(s)	43 (71%)	0	24 (38%)	2 (4%)
Unknown	2 (3%)	0	10 (16%)	1 (2%)
<u>Totals</u>	61	58	63	46

Table 2
Reading Test Results

	Total Sample	Ab.Schools of N.T.	Aboriginals in other schools
<u>10 Year Old Scores</u>			
Mastery 24 to 29	54%	0	9 (16%)
21 to 23	24%	1 (1½%)	13 (22%)
18 to 20	12%	4 (6½%)	12 (21%)
15 to 17	5%	5 (8%)	13 (22%)
0 to 14	5%	51 (84%)	11 (19%)
Maximum Scores		21	26
Minimum Scores		0	2
<u>14 Year Old Scores</u>			
Mastery 27 to 33	72%	0	16 (35%)
25 to 26	11%	0	5 (11%)
23 to 24	6%	2 (3%)	6 (13%)
19 to 22	6%	7 (11%)	13 (28%)
0 to 18	5%	54 (86%)	6 (13%)
Maximum Scores		24	32
Minimum Scores		0	14

English. Mastery was judged by Bourke (1977) to be 24 out of 29 for ten year olds and 27 out of 33 for fourteen year olds. However, 35% (16) Aboriginal fourteen year olds attending other Australian schools reached a mastery level and 16% (9) ten year olds achieved mastery, as shown in Table 2.*

Bourke and Parkin (1977:146) show that ten year old Aborigines performed more poorly on questions requiring comprehension of a newspaper. This is not surprising when an examination is made of the figures in Table 3. Comprehension questions involving the reading of newspapers would be quite foreign to ten year old Aborigines living out in their tribal lands. It would be like asking a city dweller to read the tracks of animals out in the bush. Aborigines in the other Australian schools had more comparable experiences with the total sample as far as English newspapers in their homes were concerned. Responses to the question about English newspapers in the home suggest that more fourteen year olds than ten year olds in Aboriginal schools were aware of the value of becoming acquainted with them, for there is a drop in the percentage of pupils stating that they never had an English newspaper in their homes (80% of 10 year olds cf. 63.5% of 14 year olds).

Table 3
Frequency with which the Family Gets an English Newspaper

Age	Frequency	Aboriginal Schools of N.T.	Aboriginals in othr.schls	Total Sample
10	Every day	0%	62% (36)	57%
	Most days	10% (6)	14% (8)	6%
	Some days	0	15½%(9)	7%
	Never	80% (49)	7% (4)	7%
	Unknown	10% (6)	1½%(1)	23%
14	Every day	5% (3)	65% (30)	80%
	Most days	3% (2)	15% (7)	10%
	Some days	9½%(6)	18% (8)	8½%
	Never	63½%(40)	2% (1)	1½%
	Unknown	19% (12)		

*See p. 4

In an earlier article (Boyd 1977) it was pointed out that many Year 3 Aboriginals did not understand the meaning of common English words. Results from the Word Knowledge test used in the ACER study underline a general weakness in word meanings for both Aboriginals in Aboriginal Schools and the English speaking Aboriginals in the other Australian schools. From Table 4 it can be seen that no Aboriginal gained a score in the Word Knowledge test that would have placed him in the top 10% of the total sample. On the other hand 26% of ten year olds and 37% of fourteen year olds in the other Australian schools obtained scores among the lowest 10% of the sample. The meaningful teaching of English words to Aboriginals would seem to be fundamental if they are to read English with comprehension.

Table 4
Correct Word Knowledge Scores Grouped in Categories
for Aboriginals and for the Total Sample

Categories	Total Sample	Aboriginal Schls of N.T.	Aboriginals in Other Schools
<u>10 Year Olds</u>			
Up to 2	10%	51 (84%)	15 (26%)
3 to 10	20%	9 (14½%)	24 (41%)
11 to 22	40%	1 (1½%)	13 (22%)
23 to 30	20%	-	6 (10%)
31 to 40	10%	-	-
<u>14 Year Olds</u>			
Up to 4	10%	55 (87%)	17 (37%)
5 to 10	20%	6 (10%)	14 (30%)
11 to 19	40%	2 (3%)	10 (22%)
20 to 25	20%	-	5 (11%)
26 to 40	10%	-	-

In traditional Aboriginal cultures mathematics is of minimal importance. The figures in Table 5 highlight the lack of relevance a number of numeracy questions must have had for these children. But a number of the Aboriginals attending the other Australian schools were able to reach a mastery level on the tests. Although

no ten year old Aboriginal gained the maximum of 33 marks, two scored 32 and one 31, placing them clearly in the top quartile for mathematics in the total sample. Two fourteen year olds gained the maximum possible of 33, placing them among the top 9% of fourteen year olds on the tests.

Table 5
Numeracy Test Results

		Total Sample	Aboriginal Schls of N.T.	Aboriginals in Other Schools
<u>10 Year Old Scores</u>				
Mastery	25 to 33	75%	0	24 (41%)
	22 to 24	10%	1 (1½%)	4 (7%)
	20 to 21	5%	2 (3%)	3 (5%)
	16 to 19	5%	1 (1½%)	9 (16%)
	0 to 15	5%	57 (93%)	18 (31%)
	Maximum Scores		21	32
	Minimum Scores		0	0
<u>14 Year Old Scores</u>				
Mastery	25 to 33	75%	0	14 (30%)
	22 to 24	10%	0	12 (26%)
	20 to 21	5%	1 (1½%)	4 (9%)
	16 to 19	5%	1 (1½%)	3 (7%)
	0 to 15	5%	61 (97%)	13 (28%)
	Maximum Scores		21	33
	Minimum Scores		0	4

DISCUSSION

A breakdown of scores gained by Aboriginals in literacy and numeracy highlights a clear distinction between the tribal Aboriginals who are learning English as a second language and Aboriginals attending normal English speaking schools.

While most ten year old Aboriginals in Aboriginal schools do not have sufficient English skills to be classified as speaking

English, those in the other Australian schools tend to be monolingual English speakers. Thus they are able to cope better with the reading tests and with comprehension questions based on the reading of an English newspaper.

Of the Aborigines in the other Australian schools, 38% do achieve mastery or near mastery in reading at the ten year old level. While it is true that 41% of these children are in the lowest 10% of the total sample, it is very easy to underestimate what Aboriginal youngsters are able to achieve in reading, in spite of the many problems they face in our English speaking schools. It must be emphasized that failure to read is not because the children are Aborigines. They can read in English as the figures in Table 2 show. But one factor that is a drawback for Aborigines in the normal school is their shyness (Bourke and Parkin, 1977). Because of shyness they feel unable to ask the teacher for guidance and are apt to just sit and do nothing. The use of cross-age tutoring with Aboriginal pupils who have sufficient mastery of the basic skill might alleviate the problem of the child not learning because he is too shy to ask.

In Table 6*, a comparison is made between 16 items in the ten-year-old and fourteen-year-old reading tests that were the same. The older Aborigines in both Aboriginal and other Australian schools showed significant gains in these items, indicating that reading skills were improved during those additional four years at school. With more emphasis on vocabulary building and the use of Aborigines to tutor younger children in reading, the improvement could be even greater.

In conclusion, it must be stressed that Aborigines are learning to read in English. Some Aborigines have been shown to achieve mastery in the reading skills tested in the Literacy and Numeracy study. However, it is important that Aborigines want to learn in our schools, and that they do not see literacy in English as conflicting with their own Aboriginal identity. In some cases it would seem advantageous to have achieving Aborigines tutor those who appear to lack motivation in the classroom. However, such cross-age tutoring with Aborigines will involve the teacher in considerable preparation and guidance of the tutor.

* See p.9

Table 6
Reading Test Items That Were Identical
for Both 10 and 14 Year Old Pupils

	Aboriginal Schls of N.T.		Aboriginals in Other Schools	
	10 years	14 years	10 years	14 years
16*	-	-	2 (3%)	8 (17%)
15	-	1 (1½%)	5 (8½%)	14 (30%)
14	-	4 (6%)	11 (19%)	9 (19½%)
13#	4 (6½%)	7 (11%)	13 (22%)	5 (11%)
12	3 (5%)	6 (9½%)	8 (14%)	5 (11%)
11	1 (1½%)	9 (14%)	7 (12%)	2 (4%)
10	3 (5%)	5 (8%)	5 (8½%)	3 (6½%)
9 & below	50 (82%)	30 (47½%)	7 (12%)	-
<u>Totals</u>	61	63	58	46
Means	4.21±0.82	7.76±0.63	11.85±0.41	13.94±0.26

*16 maximum #13 mastery.

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