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THE MURAWINA READERS -

a first stage in the development of community related curriculum materials in an Aboriginal context.

Dr W.G. Coppel,
School of Education,
Macquarie University,
New South Wales.

On many occasions in recent times, at conferences and in reports, it has been said that it is of considerable importance to produce curriculum materials which are relevant to the lives of Australian children. In particular, it has been asserted that language teaching programs for Australian Aboriginal children and for the children of recently arrived community groups would be facilitated, if there were materials available to which these children could relate. Many materials presently available in schools are criticized, because they have been designed for child audiences in the United Kingdom and the United States, or that minor 'cosmetic' adaptations have been made to suit them to an Australian market. One argument put forward for the use of these 'imported' materials is that the Australian market is too small to support the development and production of materials designed specifically for Australian conditions. Contributing factors to this cost element are the use of four-colour printing, high quality glossy paper and expensive binding techniques. It is asserted also, that the use of these materials may be necessary, as they form part of integrated language teaching programs. In many instances, however, the classroom practitioner may develop an ideosyncratic language teaching regime which incorporates facets of several 'recognized' schemes. The problem arises therefore of how to capitalize upon the techniques and skills of the teacher with 'established' methods and yet provide materials with which the children can achieve a degree of empathy and self-identity and thereby, through the materials, experience stimulus motivation.

In 1974, a Rotary Club made a donation of \$1000 to the author of this article, and this donation has been the starting point of an expanding program of the design and trialling of low-budget, community related, stimulus materials. The program was initiated at the Murawina Pre-school in the inner city area of Sydney, and although a number of other schools have become involved in the production of materials, the books have acquired a generic

description as *The Murawina Readers*. Murawina Pre-school is concerned solely with Aboriginal children, and although other groups have become incorporated into the materials, they are still substantially identified as being primarily intended as stimulus materials for Aboriginal children.

The rationale for the production of the Murawina Readers included the following principles:

1. It was proposed that materials should be produced which portray children in their natural settings, be they urban or rural.
2. The Murawina Readers were designed with several objectives in mind, viz.
 - a) They were to be low cost publications which could be used in specific areas.
 - b) They would feature in photographic form subjects who would be familiar in the specific area. Black and white photography would be used to reduce costs, and to ascertain whether or not black and white photography was readily accepted by the children.
 - c) They would serve to stimulate and motivate Aboriginal children towards an interest in books and the written word through the degree of identification they would establish with the material.
3. It was not intended that these readers would constitute an English language scheme. The first set of books have a graduation of difficulty and this was incorporated in order to obtain teacher feed-back of the level at which they felt the books could be used most effectively.
4. The production of the Murawina Readers was undertaken as a pilot scheme. It was hoped that a response could be obtained from teachers as to whether or not they found that stimulus material of this nature could be an effective support to the teaching of language skills to Aboriginal children. It was also hoped that teachers would indicate the form of language structures they considered should be incorporated into more definitive reader series. From teacher feed-back it was anticipated that information could be obtained which would enable modifications to be made in subsequent series.

5. It was recognized that a variety of basic English language development schemes are used in New South Wales schools with an Aboriginal population (e.g. Distar, Tate Oral English Scheme, PM Readers). Therefore it was felt the future series of readers would be designed to meet the English language program needs of specific schools. Series were developed for Darlington, La Perouse, Enngonia and Bourke schools which incorporate the language patterns which the teachers feel need particular attention in these schools.
6. Although the readers are designed for the needs of a specific community group, it was thought that the stimulus/motivation factor might make them of use for other groups of children.
7. In other than the specific areas for which the readers were designed, it was thought that the Murawina Readers could be used as supplementary readers. It was also thought that the material, because of the deliberate attempt to show Aborigines in a positive, natural manner, could be effective in sensitizing non-Aboriginal children to an understanding of aspects of the contemporary Aboriginal life style. A guiding principle followed was that, when Aboriginal children were depicted in the material, they did not represent a greater numerical proposition than that of the situation in which they were normally placed. As a consequence, Aboriginal children in the books often appear with children belonging to other community groups, for example, Greeks, Italians, Lebanese, rural white children.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the books in achieving the objectives set out in the rationale, sets were sent to 45 schools from whom 37 responses were received to a questionnaire seeking information concerning the use and assessment of the books. The schools sampled included inner city, metropolitan, country town and rural, and responses came from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Eight of the schools in South Australia and the Northern Territory classified themselves as Aboriginal schools. Although the material was specifically orientated towards children in infants' classes, nine respondents stated that it had been used at the primary level and in one case it was used at the secondary level. Five teachers used the books in English as a second language classes and the range of nationalities covered included Greeks, Italians, Yugoslavs, Turks, Armenians, Portuguese, Korean, Arabic and Spanish speaking children.

Thirty per cent of the teachers used the books with groups of 2 to 10 children and thirty per cent with groups of 21 to 30 children. Fifteen teachers preferred using the material with small groups.

In 10 instances the preferred use of the materials was as supplementary readers, and in 16 cases the teachers used them as a combination of stimulus materials, part of a reading scheme, and as supplementary readers. Thirty-two of the respondents said that the situations used in the books were appropriate to the child's experiences of the subject in the material presented, and four suggested that the inner city situations were inappropriate to country children.

Thirty-two teachers saw the material as a support to language skills programs, and 28 said that the use of coloured photographs would increase the stimulation value of the material.

The survey also sought information concerning teacher/pupil response to the material. Twenty-seven respondents stated that they would be encouraged by the children's response to the materials to make their own stimulus/motivation materials. Sixty-seven per cent of the teachers supported the proposition that the materials, if used regularly, would stimulate and motivate the children towards an interest in books and the written word.

No attempt was made to suggest to the teachers receiving the books, ways in which they might be used, and it was of interest to note that 24 of those who responded would "like to see a manual of instructions on ways in which these materials may be used." Twenty of the teachers stated that their pupils reacted mildly to the materials, while 17 rated the pupils' responses as enthusiastic. In 19 cases the children commented freely about the materials and 18 commented "with encouragement". Twenty-nine teachers reported that their pupils were able to identify with the actions depicted and 35 that their pupils were able to discuss the content of the photographs. In 16 cases it was stated that the photographs motivated the children to make up their own stories.

A second survey was carried out with a group of 22 Aboriginal children attending a centre conducted in inner city Sydney to assist Aboriginal children with learning difficulties. Fifteen children reacted enthusiastically to the material, 17 commented on it "with encouragement", all were able to discuss the content of the photographs and to identify with the actions depicted. Twenty-one of

these pupils made attempts to read or recognize familiar words in the textual material. A record was kept of comments these children made about the materials. Examples were:

- a) Thought it was a good book.
- b) Asked for more - "Got any more?"
- c) Pictures very good. Interest in people doing work.
- d) Cousins - comments on clothes, furniture (comfy).
- e) They identified children, the home, objects (furniture) in the home.
- f) Yeah, I know Lionel, Wendy, Kelly-girl. I don't know his name.
- g) Happiness meant warmth, sunshine, good warm clothes, nice home.

The evidence suggests that these materials have achieved, to a substantial degree, most of the objectives incorporated in the rationale for their preparation. As a result of feed-back from the surveys and from in-depth discussion with teachers and professional personnel working with Aboriginal and other community groups, it has been decided to proceed with further development and trialling of these community-related materials. The first eight books are to have alternative texts and to have a bolder type-face used. In addition, some 40 more titles are at various stages of preparation. These cover a wide range of situations and will be designed to meet the needs of children over a wide age range. Approximately 500 copies of each of these titles are to be printed by the Curriculum Development Centre, Canberra and then distributed to schools throughout Australia, in order that a more intensive evaluation may be made of these types of stimulus/motivation curriculum materials.

The format of the booklets was of an 8" x 10" page with a photograph filling the left-hand entry and the text on the facing page. It was thought that the 'photograph' page was of a size which would allow the teachers to use it as a 'story-board'. In general, the books consist of eight pages, this size being decided upon as it was considered that pupils experiencing language difficulties would become more highly motivated by the achievement of a fairly rapid 'finishing of a book'.