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ADAPTING READING METHODOLOGY TO ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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It is quite likely that at the start of a teaching career at an Aboriginal school, a teacher would know how to teach reading. He** would have received the theoretical background at college or university, and applied this knowledge with varying degrees of success at practice-teaching sessions and possibly with increasing success at an urban school. Therefore, when an obviously talented teacher finds that previously used strategies simply do not work, and even his knowledge of how to cope with disadvantaged and remedial children seems to be of no use, it is time to look a little deeper into what motivates his pupils.

HARNESSING ABORIGINAL DIFFERENCES

A greater degree of sensitivity and perceptiveness would have enabled this teacher to recognise the fact that his children had entered school not with less knowledge than their urban counterparts, but with *different* knowledge and experiences. Because these children are culturally different, not deficient, any sub-major in special education would therefore be of little use in this situation. What is helpful in this case is a willingness on the part of the teacher to discover what the children know, what interests and bores them, and with what experiences they enter the classroom. He might even be in for a few surprises. The story is told of one school where a class was writing language experience stories every day, and when one of the school buildings burnt down (to the pupils' delight) not one of them included this incident in their stories the next day or later (Russo, Harris, 1981:13). If "experiences of *culturally significant* (emphasis mine) language have *always* been powerful modes of learning" (Holdaway, 1979:64), it follows that culturally insignificant experiences inhibit learning if they are used as the basis of learning experiences. The burning down of the school building, interesting though it proved to be, was not a culturally significant experience to the Aboriginal children. A reading teacher, therefore,

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in order to move the children successfully from the known to the unknown, has to know himself what the children have learnt, how they learn and what they find interesting before he attempts to teach them new skills. In this way the cultural gap between the teacher and the pupils is bridged, so that he can successfully continue to apply educationally sound reading theory with culturally appropriate teaching-to-read strategies.

Although a lot of research still needs to be done in the area of Aboriginal learning styles and appropriate teaching strategies for Aboriginal children, some of those which are especially relevant to the classroom have been identified. These are:

"Aboriginal children

- a) learn by observation and imitation rather than through verbal instruction.
- b) learn through personal trial and error rather than through a combination of verbal instruction and demonstration.
- c) learn through real-life-performance rather than through practice in contrived settings.
- d) learn through context-specific skills rather than through context-free principles.
- e) tend to be more person or group oriented than information oriented.
- f) learn through successive approximations to the efficient end product, rather than by practising separate skills which later would be combined into the whole activity. That is, they learn wholes rather than parts."

(Harris, 1981)

In fact, when we look at the above strategies in terms of teaching reading and language skills, we will find that these informal social, as opposed to formal instructional, methods are probably applicable to the non-Aboriginal as well as to the Aboriginal classroom, but to the latter even more so because of cultural background. They tend, however, to threaten our innate traditional concept of teachers as being sources and providers of knowledge, rather than facilitators of learning. And we must admit, to organise good, planned, informal learning experiences is much more work than to teach skills directly. However, if the reading teacher is sufficiently adaptable to adopt the role of provider of planned, informal learning experiences, he will be not only a successful

teacher with urban children, but especially with Aboriginal children to whom formal, highly structured programs in any subject tend to have an alienating effect.¹ Therefore, understanding and applying the above-mentioned learning styles can meaningfully enhance the teaching of reading in Aboriginal schools. In the following paragraphs we will look at each of these points a little more closely.

a) We teachers have a tendency to be very verbal, chalk-and-talk people. This approach enables us to keep careful control over our lessons, which can be relatively easily planned, and we can accurately monitor our own dissemination of information. Children, however, learn to read firstly by observing that reading is an enjoyable and informative experience and secondly by doing it themselves.²

When Aboriginal children enter school, they come from a background characterised by a great deal of independence and a lack of formal constraints and admonitions. Non-Aboriginal children have, by this stage, absorbed a 'formal lifestyle' which is virtually unknown to Aboriginal children. For example, times are set to have meals, to go to bed, to attend church, etc.; some chores have to be done daily, while other activities must not be done. Breaking these rules is accompanied by a great deal of verbal admonition which strongly promotes the learning and observance of set ways of life which overlap much more with school behaviour than is the case with children from an 'Aboriginal lifestyle' background. Aborigines are also very verbal people. Their verbal interaction has, however, largely a social rather than an instructional function. Therefore, if the teacher wishes to facilitate the learning of reading in the classroom (rather than at this stage to teach 'school-like' behaviour), reading to and with the children in an unforced, informal environment will produce the best results.

b) A hallmark of good teachers is efficiency, a personal quality which is often transmitted to children through strong encouragement to 'get it right the first time'. There are, after all, time constraints to be observed. Because of the lack of this kind of pressure

¹ The use of informal teaching strategies does *not* negate the necessity for careful planning in the Aboriginal classroom, without which any informality will soon degenerate into unplanned confusion.

² This is not to state that the teaching of phonics should have no part in the teaching of reading. Indeed, an understanding of the symbol-sound relationship of the letters is an important skill to be acquired. This skill, however, should be taught as a planned consequence of, not as a pre-requisite to reading. (See Holdaway, 1979 Ch. 4).

in Aboriginal society, its imposition in the classroom is likely to be resisted, albeit passively. Aboriginal children do enjoy reading. But they enjoy the activity by doing it, however imperfectly, rather than by being told how to do it. While they are involved in this process, both the encouragement of, and the ingenuity of the reading teacher to structure informal experiences as valuable learning experiences, will play a significant role in the success or otherwise of his pupils' learning to read.

c) Aboriginal children, when entering school, are not familiar with the school game of practising before the real thing is attempted. Whether it is in football, writing or reading, teacher-initiated practices invariably become ends in themselves. Is there, after all, any reason for not attempting the real thing the first time? Practices, in our sense of contrived acts, are generally unknown to Aboriginal children. It is imperative, therefore, for the reading teacher to ensure that every reading performance by the children is an end in itself, not a means to becoming a fast reader, getting a good job, being able to read longer words, sentences, books, etc. Instant reward in reading commands a higher interest and motivational value with Aboriginal children. If that gratification does not follow as a natural consequence of their reading, they will very quickly lose interest.

d) Related to the previous point is the traditional technique of teaching children to read through the learning of meaningless letters, syllables and chunks of words. Once the pupils have gained a mastery of these, they are then expected to read meaningful words and language passages by blending these kits together in various ways. This process requires a great deal of deductive reasoning which most children are unable to accomplish until they reach the upper primary level.¹

In Aboriginal society, when skills were 'taught', they were not taught through general principles to be applied in different contexts, but they were taught *within* a certain context. When a child learned about hunting, for example, he went out hunting with adults. He was never taught theories and ways of hunting which he could conceivably apply to different situations. Similarly, if reading skills are taught within the context of reading, an Aboriginal child will learn much more successfully, than if these skills were taught separately and then applied to different reading contexts.

¹ According to Piaget, this intellectual process does not occur until children reach the period of Concrete Operational Development (ages 7-11).

e) Aborigines - children as well as adults - generally tend to be more person or group oriented than non-Aborigines. To us, *how* we teach is of primary importance; to Aborigines it is *who* does the teaching and *with whom* they share the learning experience. A close, warm relationship between teacher and pupils is, therefore, an essential prerequisite to learning. A teaching-to-read approach which is permeated by such a relationship, e.g. the Lap Method (Harris, 1982), has a relatively great chance of success. If a personal touch, an emotional closeness such as the Lap Method provides, is combined with group-sharing and otherwise relevant approaches such as Shared-Book-Experience (Holdaway, 1979, Ch.4), Language Experience and Breakthrough to Literacy, the teacher is more likely to experience success than by teaching in an impersonal fashion. If the teacher shows himself to be a warm, understanding friend, half the battle is won before it even starts.

f) It is often observed in Aboriginal classrooms that Aboriginal teachers virtually never force Aboriginal children to struggle with a problem, nor, for example, do they encourage a child to grapple with a word, a phrase or a sentence for any period of time. Invariably, when a child is confronted with such dilemmas, the Aboriginal teacher provides the solution. Similarly, while non-Aboriginal children learn songs or poems bit by bit and verse by verse, ensuring mastery before moving on to the next section, Aboriginal children display a much greater tendency to struggle with any particular skill in its total entity, usually by repetition which allows successive approximation to the efficient end product. Through this strategy, initial imperfections will gradually decrease until, hopefully, complete mastery is attained. Because of this familiar approach to learning, Aboriginal teachers tend to spend much more time on teaching by rote than do non-Aboriginal teachers. This is not to say that non-Aboriginal teachers should completely abandon teaching mastery through sequentially introduced skills because, in a highly complex, technological society, that approach is obviously the most efficient method with regard to gaining mastery in many higher level skills. However, to get the best out of Aboriginal children at this early stage, the teacher should be aware of the fact that methods such as teaching by rote, telling children the answers and providing solutions to problems are at times very sound and useful teaching strategies.

PURPOSEFUL READING : READING TO LEARN

Expanding Harris' research into Aboriginal learning styles (Harris, 1981), is Christie's study into Aboriginal children's responses to teacher-initiated learning experiences (Christie, 1982). He concludes that traditionally oriented children naturally respond

in a passive rather than in an active manner unless the teacher, having recognised and understood this fact, adapts his teaching strategies accordingly. With respect to reading, this variance in response can make the difference between children learning to read with or without purpose. Therefore, in order to enable the children to acquire purposeful reading skills, the teacher must first be able to elicit active responses from the children. These responses can be summarised under three categories:

- 1) *Goal*. The children are actively searching for meaning. They are not merely calling out words and participating in the 'school game'.
- 2) *Internal Control*. The children recognise and understand that whether or not they do read purposefully depends on them, not the teacher, and that they must derive meaning from reading themselves. The teacher's praise does not make print meaningful.
- 3) *Judgment*. The children think about what they are reading and make predictions. If meaning has not been obtained, the children initiate strategies (e.g. they re-read the word or passage) to remedy the situation.

These responses will only be achieved if the teacher remains dissatisfied with merely teaching the children decoding skills which, according to Christie, require very little truly active participation. Active participation, however, is certainly required by children learning to read purposefully and for meaning. When the teacher provides an abundance of opportunities for the children to do so, can the true purpose of learning to read, viz. reading to learn, be realised.

THE BEGINNING OF A LITERACY PROGRAM SHOULD BE THE PROVISION OF MATERIALS THAT READERS PERCEIVE AS WORTH READING

When considering the above-mentioned learning styles and resultant teaching strategies, teachers must keep in mind that tribal Aboriginal children do not come from reading homes. The experience which the children bring into the classroom is geared towards relevance in the present real-life situation. Therefore, when the teacher introduces English books into the classroom he should not be too surprised to find that 90% of the books found in the library bear little or no relevance to the children. Some initial research has shown (Russo & Harris, 1981) that the following features of children's

books interest and motivate Aboriginal children to want to read and to expand their reading skills:

- 1) Books about the familiar - i.e., books about the bush, the beach, the mangroves, etc.
- 2) Books with which the children can identify. That is, do the children portrayed in the books speak a language and have feelings, interests and aspirations which are similar to those of the Aboriginal readers?
- 3) Books which have photographs, illustrations or pictures that are *detailed* and relate to concrete experience.

Ideally, these photographs, illustrations or pictures would have the Aboriginal children themselves as subjects. However, Aboriginal children also tend to identify very closely with other Aboriginal children and with children of other minority groups, such as black Americans.

- 4) Books that have repetition and rhythm in the story/text.

Although repetition and rhythm are universal motivating factors for children, their inherence in traditional Aboriginal learning styles dictates that these features take on greater importance for Aboriginal children than for non-Aboriginal children.

- 5) Books whose stories include dialogue and conversation or that have an economic/novel use of language.

Although most Aboriginal children do not come from reading homes, they do come from homes where language is of paramount importance socially. These children, therefore, immediately feel familiar with books containing dialogue. This is especially true when the complexity of language falls within the children's limits of comprehension, or when this language captures the children's attention and interest with any unusual form or visual presentation.

- 6) Books about adventure, murder, violence (fighting) and danger.

When one considers that Kung Fu and King Kong, followed closely by westerns and James Bond, are evergreen favourites of the silver screen in Aboriginal communities, it is little

wonder that children find books containing subject matter of a similar nature highly motivating. A lot can be gained if non-Aboriginal teachers are open-minded enough to choose such reading materials for their pupils regardless of any personal aversion they may possess towards their contents.

- 7) Books with humour to the point of ridiculous, particularly dealing with the misfortunes of others.

The ridiculous is a favourite topic with children of all cultures; the misfortunes of others is not. Non-Aboriginal parents shield their children rigorously from as many unpleasant facts of life as possible, and when perchance they do come in contact with others' misfortunes, they are taught always to respond with appropriate tact and decorum. Aboriginal children, by the time they reach primary school, would have encountered more death, sickness and other adversities than many non-Aborigines would in a lifetime. Having fewer cultural hangups towards such matters, their reactions would naturally be less restricted by prior conditioning, so much so, that other's misfortunes often cause laughter. For example, it was observed that when the movie *Champ* was shown on an Aboriginal settlement, heart-rending scenes such as that of the bitterly sobbing face of a little boy leaning over his dead father, caused a considerable amount of mirth among Aboriginal children. Once again, the teacher will have to resist the temptation to moralise in favour of providing the child with highly motivating reading materials.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that teachers of Aboriginal children can make their reading lessons into "corporate experiences of culturally significant language" (Holdaway, 1979:64). It does, however, take effort. A willingness to revise one's own preconceptions of what children like or should read, a zealotness to glean appropriate books from the school library and to order more relevant ones, and a degree of adaptability and cross-cultural sensitivity to modify one's teaching strategies to the learning styles of the children are qualities which the Aboriginal children's reading teacher should endeavour to cultivate in himself. The positive response of the children, their accelerated increase in reading skills and heightened joy of reading, together with the teacher's own satisfaction at being able to provide an educationally sound and meaningful experience across cultures, will make the effort most worthwhile.

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