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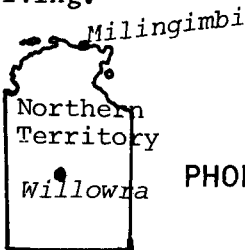
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We got the people thinking about employing a second teacher and suggested that the community use I.C.A. money to pay the second teacher. All outstations agreed and it was a big start for budgeting for the communities, and a big step for the young people to start using balanda skills to an extent where they can start talking for themselves and their communities.

To have a good relationship with the outstations we always worked closely with the Yirrkala Community Development staff. Whenever we came up with something big we always went to them to seek advice and they in return used to come up to us to seek out advice. We were both called liars and unprofessional by one or two people at one of the outstations. Rather than making these people unhappy and making bad relationships with them, we would always share problems of that nature with the Community Development staff. They were most helpful towards problems that we were faced with and that we couldn't solve.

#### CONCLUSIONS

I think that the outstations are right because I feel that the people want it there, so that they can determine their own destiny. I feel that the Aboriginal way of living will always be there and the community will have to start expanding their ideas in staffing their schools, developing curriculum, teacher training and so on. I think that the people out at the outstations will be a proud group of people because I envisage that they will get a chance that no Aboriginal people in Australia got in determining their own way of living.



#### PHONICS FOR THE ABORIGINAL CLASSROOM

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Much has been said and written by the reading specialists about the way children learn to read and how teachers should be facilitators in this natural process. Frank Smith says that phonics need not be taught in the classroom; in fact he says it makes the learning to read process more difficult for children (Smith 1973, p.185).

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Phonics or grapho-phonics tells a reader and writer how spelling patterns relate to sound sequences (Reed 1977, p.393). Whether phonics is taught incidentally on a one-to-one basis or whether it is taught more formally, I believe phonics does have a place in the classroom today, particularly in the bilingual Aboriginal classroom. Teachers of Aboriginal children should feel free to teach phonics, despite what the specialists say.

Much that has been written relates to native English-speaking children, brought up in a literate society where newspapers and bedtime stories are the norm. In this paper I am concerned with non-English speaking tribal Aboriginal children, in a pre-literate society. They attend bilingual schools where they learn to read and write first in the vernacular and then in English. I will point out that what the reading specialists advocate in learning to read naturally, is not always sound advice for tribal Aboriginal children learning to read and write in the vernacular.

I shall first examine the part that phonics plays in the reading process itself. When children or adults read a text, there are three cue systems available to them: grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic. (Goodman 1973, p.25). Goodman says that reading requires a strategy of selecting the most productive cues (p.26). Generally, a beginning reader relies more heavily on grapho-phonetic cues (unless one includes rote-reciting of stories as a beginning stage in reading). As readers' proficiencies increase they rely more heavily on semantic and syntactic cues, including the readers' knowledge and experience of the world, of language and language structures.

Proficient reading is a process in which readers process integrated grapho-phonetic, syntactic and semantic information as they strive to construct meaning. Reading consists of optical, perceptual, syntactic and semantic cycles each melting into the next as readers try to get meaning as efficiently as possible using minimum time and energy. That involves sampling from available cues, predicting syntactic structures and subsequent graphic cues, confirming or disconfirming predictions, correcting when necessary, and accommodating the developing sense as new information is decoded.

(Goodman 1976, p.20.)

According to Goodman, then, the processing of phonic or grapho-phonetic information is an undeniable part of the reading process.

Questions that teachers must therefore ask themselves are - "Should I teach phonic rules and graphic information in the classroom (either formally or informally)?" Or, "Is such teaching unnecessary because the children will learn these rules for themselves in the right environment?" In answer to this, Smith says:

An over-concern with teaching segments of language (sounds and letter-names) risks giving them a narrow and restricted idea of what literacy is, and what it means to be literate.

(Smith 1975)

The Goodmans agree with Smith's view on the non-teaching of phonics with their statement:

Instruction does not teach children to read. Children are in no more need of being taught to read than they are of being taught to listen. What reading instruction does is help children learn.

(Goodman 1976 p.5)

Smith and the Goodmans make two assumptions in their research. The first is that the language the children are learning to read and write is English. English is a comparatively difficult language in which to gain literacy skills because of its irregular structure and orthographic form, accompanied by 166 phonic rules and 45 exceptions (Smith 1973, p.185). The second is that the children learning are from a literate society, with emphasis on analytical thinking and ability to hypothesize about regularities in written language and to modify these hypotheses when exceptions occur.

If the reader considers tribal Aboriginal children, these assumptions may not be valid. In the Northern Territory there are presently (May 1982) 15 bilingual Aboriginal schools where the children learn to read and write initially in the vernacular. Many Aboriginal languages have only been recorded in any written form in the last decade or so, and their orthographies have been written phonemically. The spelling systems are straightforward with no vast lists of phonic rules with associated exceptions. To learn to read and write in any Aboriginal language should therefore be a relatively simple task. In fact, English-speaking non-Aboriginal teachers find it amazingly easy to read the Aboriginal literature used in the classrooms (although in the pedagogical sense this is not true reading, as they get little meaning from the text).

Aboriginal children, however, do not come from literate homes where written literature has meaningful and social functions. Hence the process of learning to read and write is not as easy and natural for them. Aboriginal society, instead, has a rich tradition of oral literature. For thousands of years stories have been passed on from generation to generation. Any non-Aboriginal who has worked with Aboriginal people can tell of their amazing powers of memory. Stories, skills and other vital information were not recorded in writing; they had to be retained in their minds and passed on by word of mouth or by demonstration. I never cease to be amazed by Aborigines' instant recall for names of singers, film stars, relations and even government officials. I once heard an old Chinese proverb saying that : "No memory is as strong as the faintest ink". I argue that an Aborigine's memory is sharper than any ink - faint, Chinese, Indian or otherwise.

Many teachers have taken advantage of Aboriginal children's high capacity for remembering many sight-words in the teaching of reading. So, too, have the children themselves in learning to read or just recalling texts given them by their teachers. I remember one child I taught in Grade 2, Desmond, who was a keen reader with a large sight vocabulary of up to 80 words. He did not like to write at all, and when he did he relied solely on those words he could copy. Some of these words were very long and rather than analysing them and spelling them out syllable-by-syllable, he would go straight to the book and page he knew they were on.

Teachers need to encourage Aboriginal children to rely less on their memory and to analyse and hypothesise about words and basic letter-sound (or syllable-sound) relationships. They need to encourage children to predict words in a text using all the reading cues. Making a wrong prediction should not be scorned by teachers but accepted as a natural part of the learning to read process. Similarly, children need to be encouraged to experiment with writing. However, my experience indicates that Aboriginal children do not like to experiment. They do not like to make mistakes, and they make good use of rubbers in a writing session. The use of scrap paper by each child for experimental purposes before writing in their books can help with this problem. But once they realise what writing and the spelling of words is all about they are keen to write their own stories, rather than dictating them to their teachers.

I do not advocate a phonics-only program for teaching Aboriginal children to read, although I believe phonics should not be ignored. An eclectic approach should be adopted and the classroom should be a warm, secure and pleasurable reading and writing haven.

From the first days of schooling, children should be enabled to read a story fluently. This can be done through the Shared-book Experience as outlined by Holdaway (1979, pp.64-80) where emergent readers read along with others more familiar with the text. Harris (unpub. pp.1-10) outlines the Lap Method which gives children a sense of what reading is about, as well as teaching them basic reading techniques such as left to right movement over print and one-to-one correspondence of words. The term 'Lap Method' comes from the practice in reading homes of parents frequently taking young children on their laps, reading to them and along with them (Harris, p.1). When teachers feel the children are ready, incidental word analysis and sound-symbol correspondence can be tackled.

Words from most Aboriginal languages can be easily broken into syllables, either open or closed. These words can be very long with up to ten syllables. The syllable is a naturally realised phonetic unit and children have no trouble identifying the syllables within words orally. With a basic oral and visual knowledge of the phonemic syllables of a given Aboriginal language, any word can be written by the children. These syllable units can be taught incidentally to each child or more formally, depending on the manageability of the class size. Sight words can be used for analysing different initial and component syllables, and for noting similarities with new words encountered. The children delight in building words for themselves with syllable cards when they realise the task is not so difficult.

I distinctly remember the two separate days when two children, Amanda and Susan, both in Grade 2 at Willowra school in the Northern Territory, suddenly realised that words are made up of syllables and they could build any word desired with a set of Warlpiri syllable-cards. They both laughed in excitement and started building words they had known as sight words and been reading in their language-experience story books since the beginning of their school days. These two children already knew what reading was, and they thought they could read, but they knew they could not write their own stories. They were dependent on their teacher for writing down their experiences as they dictated.

Smith and others may argue that Amanda and Susan would have come to the realisation that words are comprised of syllables, and all syllables with the same vowel have a similar sound, without the help of teachers and their kits of syllable-cards. He may be right, but only for Amanda and a few other elite Aboriginal children who learn to read despite the system, no matter what the system is. But I feel that Susan, Desmond and countless others need those concrete syllable cards at some stage in the learning process.

An amusing incident occurred at Willowra school that brought one important point home to me: after a painting session with infants one afternoon, I was pleasantly surprised to find the classroom absolutely spotless after its messy paint-speckled appearance just half-an-hour earlier. However, in cleaning up, the Aboriginal teacher and children had not only mopped the floor, wiped the desks and washed all the paint pots and brushes, but also put all the completed paintings in a neat pile and thrown them in the bin! The purpose of the exercise (in their minds) was not to produce interesting paintings for discussion the next morning, but to occupy themselves until the bell rang for home-time.

Similarly, in teaching Aboriginal children the different syllables through card games, the ultimate purpose of the exercise must be realised. The purpose is not merely to have fun and find the 'card-sharp' of the class, but to give the children an active knowledge of words and syllables comprising words. With this knowledge they can proceed to become confident, independent readers and writers.

In conclusion, I must stress that teachers should make themselves aware of what the specialists say with regards learning to read and write. The traditional approach of following a sequenced phonics program may be easier for teachers, requiring less preparation and initiative, but certainly does not present the reading process as a pleasurable and meaningful experience. I feel, however, at some stage Aboriginal children must be made aware of the relatively straightforward phonics of the Aboriginal language in which they are learning to read and write. But first, the purpose and pleasure of reading and writing must be displayed to and experienced by children. This may not be an easy task for teachers but it can certainly be a challenge, and well worth the effort.

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