



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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REVIEW :

Work Papers of SIL-AAB. Series B Volume 8 -*Language and Culture*. Editor S. Hargrave. Summer Institute of Linguistics, Australian Aborigines Branch, Darwin, December 1982.

D.M. Muir

While most of the material to appear in these work papers is of a preliminary nature, this volume of current research reports of the Summer Institute of Linguistics should prove of considerable value to teachers of Aboriginal children. While all the work papers are of general interest to the teacher, of particular relevance are the three papers considering the characteristics of Aboriginal mathematical concepts.

Judith Stokes, following a number of years experience in education and linguistics on Groote Eylandt "attempts to highlight and explain many of the more important differences between Aboriginal [Anindilyakwa] and Western thought, with particular reference to those concepts most frequently encountered in school." The detail of observation illustrates very clearly a different mathematical basis from the one European teachers take for granted — a system with which, ideally, teachers should be familiar before planning lessons and activities to enable the most transfer of learning to occur.

Judith Stokes has used her powers of observation admirably and in her work paper sets a model of action research that all teachers of Aboriginal children could undertake.

The work paper by John Harris attacks the three very prevalent misconceptions about Aboriginal number systems, namely "the belief that no Aboriginal languages have number words which extend beyond two or three"; that counting is limited by these words and that "the absence of extended number systems indicates some kind of cognitive inadequacy." Western lack of knowledge of the complexity of Aboriginal number systems has led to erroneous and quite damning preconceptions and assumptions.

The third work paper, "Aboriginal Mathematical Concepts: a Cultural and Linguistic Explanation for Some of the Problems" by Barbara Sayers, considers the relationship between mathematical language and the Aboriginal culture and highlights the need for

white teachers to gain an understanding of the semantic and mathematical systems of their Aboriginal children's language. Barbara Sayers concludes her paper with teaching ideas that should prove of considerable general practical application.

In all, this volume of work papers published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics is of great potential usefulness to the practising teacher, in providing both a greater understanding of differences between the cultures of the white teachers and their Aboriginal students and a basis for curriculum development in mathematics.

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SURVEY OF LITERACY TUITION NEEDS IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES*

Adult Aborigines surveyed in three communities in Victoria and New South Wales found little to motivate them to become interested in English literacy tuition, according to a report commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education.

This was true even for those who admitted to having reading or writing difficulties.

The report, titled *Bala Bala* and prepared by Ms Eve Fesl, the director of the Aboriginal Research Centre, Monash University, discusses the literacy and educational needs of adult Aborigines. It was conducted entirely by Aboriginal researchers in Dandenong and Shepparton in Victoria, and Bourke in New South Wales.

Bala Bala says that many adult Aborigines, particularly those who were raised on missions or reserves, were the victims of forced English literacy tuition in their early years. This had the effect of a 'switch-off' which, along with other factors, has resulted in avoidance of the subject in youth and adulthood.

* Commonwealth Department of Education News Release 24/11/82

Other reasons given in the report for the disinterest in literacy tuition are:

- . literacy ability has little value as a skill in Aboriginal society;
- . oral transmission remains the main communication link between Aboriginal people throughout Australia today;
- . in a number of areas the only jobs Aborigines perceive as being available to them are jobs where literacy is not needed, e.g. labourers, cleaners, gardeners;
- . within an extended family support system it is not necessary for every individual to be highly skilled in everything.

The report says that some of those interviewed were interested in learning more about sporting activities rather than career education or literacy tuition.

"Although programs centred around sporting activities would probably be favourably received, the inclusion of literacy tuition within such programs should only be attempted after consultation with intending participants", *Bala Bala* says.

The study shows that few Aboriginal people in the communities surveyed want one-to-one tuition because group learning is in line with their cultural tradition.

Bala Bala advocates more consultation with Aboriginal communities in planning educational programs so that money available for Aboriginal adult education is not wasted by educators or others on tuition and programs which are not wanted.

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