



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

WHY CAN'T JANGALA WRITE?

* M.A. Gale

Jangala is Aboriginal. He is twelve years old and the eldest in a family of six boys. In his tribe's eyes, he is still just a boy, but next year he will become a man. He will go away into the bush with his "banji" for secret "men's business" and when he returns he will be a man. His mother will be very proud of him then and she won't treat him like a little boy any more.

Jangala's father is an important man in the tribe: he also has an important job on the cattle station where they live. He owns a Toyota 1500 long-wheel-base ute and everyone on the station knows it belongs to Jangala's father. He sometimes lets Jangala drive the little white Toyota and everyone knows that Jangala can drive. He can hardly reach the pedals, but he is very proud that he can drive, and especially proud that his father owns a Toyota. His father also drives the great big grey four-wheel-drive Toyota owned by the station. He uses it in his job and sometimes he takes Jangala for a ride in the back with his brothers.

When Jangala becomes a man and later gets married, he will also be an important man in the tribe like his father. He may even be like his uncle who often flies to Canberra for important meetings with other Aboriginal leaders. His uncle tells him stories about Canberra and says it is even bigger than Alice Springs.

His uncle and the rest of the family often sit around the camp-fire at night and tell stories to each other. They are all true stories and some of them are very old stories passed down by their grandfathers and grandmothers. None of the older people in Jangala's family can read or write, but they can all tell wonderful stories and they draw pictures in the sand as they tell the stories. Not pictures like those in the books at school: they are different pictures with dots for trees, half circles for people and a cross for the fire.

Jangala goes to school on the cattle station every day; well, nearly every day. He doesn't like school much, but if he stays

away too long the other children call him "bush-boy" or "bush-ranger". Once Mr White, the headmaster, drove down in his yellow long-wheel-base Land Rover to see Jangala's mother in the camp. He asked his mother why Jangala hadn't been to school for five days and she told Mr White that she had actually sent Jangala to school, but he went off down to the creek instead to shoot birds with his shanghai. She then picked up a stick (just a little one) and hit Jangala and yelled at him in front of Mr White. This must have made Mr White happy because he drove away then and he hasn't been back for a long, long time.

Jangala doesn't know why he has to go to school. His father didn't go, his mother didn't go and his uncle didn't go either. In fact, there wasn't even a school on the station when they were Jangala's age. The school started only thirteen years ago when some men towed a long, silver caravan onto the station. In those days there was only one teacher and he taught everything in English, but now there are eight teachers and they teach in both English and Jangala's language, Warlpiri. Some of the teachers are Aboriginal but they are all women. Jangala's father says that school is "women's business". Maybe Mr White works in the school to look after all the women teachers because some of the *walypali* (European) teachers have no family living on the cattle station.

At school Jangala learns all the letters in the alphabet and to do sums: Mr White says that the children who come to school every day will learn how to read and write. Jangala wonders about this because some young men on the station used to go to school every day and they can't write much. They can write their names though on the bottom of their cheques every pay-week. Jangala can write his name too.

Jangala, in fact, is a very neat writer. He can copy words from the blackboard with copy-book perfection. He always takes a long time to copy anything and he rubs out a lot with his rubber before he gets it right, but the teacher always says it's very neat. Jangala can also read lots of books. He can read all the Warlpiri instant readers in the classroom; in fact, he knows most of them off by heart. He has a sight vocabulary of about eighty words which he can identify in the readers and on flashcards. He can also read all the stories in his own story book; but, alas, Jangala can't write his own stories. He can write the first few words by himself; that's because he starts with the same old words every Monday morning: *Pirrarni nganimpa-rmalu...* "Yesterday we..." But that is when Jangala's confidence runs out. He then sits and fiddles for a while, rubbing out, and writing the same words again. Eventually he makes

his way to the Aboriginal teacher and patiently waits his turn for assistance. If he is lucky, it will be time to start the maths lesson before his turn comes and he won't have to finish his story until tomorrow. Better still, his teacher will write his story for him as he dictates. If there is time, she usually writes the 'hard' words on a piece of paper and Jangala copies them methodically and happily into his book. Fortunately (or unfortunately?), Jangala's teacher has been obliging him with such assistance ever since he started school, and Jangala knows he can copy the sight words from cards and readers when she is not obliging.

This account is typical of many tribal Aboriginal children in Australian schools today. It would be easy to say that the low achievement is due to "dyslexia", or laziness, or even backwardness. Such an attitude, however, would be very uninformed and very wrong. Maybe the problem is inappropriate teaching strategies, which I believe, in Jangala's case, is partly to blame.* But, as I see it, the problem is largely a cultural and social one.

Men in Warlpiri society have higher social status than women. They do not have to earn this status, but today they have to maintain it over their wives and children. They do not have to be able to read and write, but they do need to know all about the "dream-time" and about "tribal ways". They also need to be good dancers, hunters and fighters. Knowing how to drive a car is also a desirable skill, and owning a car to drive is even better. All these assets and skills are attained through daily life; not through logically sequenced, verbalised instruction. Failure is very rare and every boy learns quickly with purpose and incentive.

In school, however, the girls often out-perform the boys in reading and writing. As they get older, the gap between the achievers and non-achievers increases; the boys often give up altogether. They feel humiliated and defeated, hence losing any early incentives they may have had to learn. Besides, school is "women's business" and they will be men soon and won't have to go to school. They still

* Jangala's teacher is Aboriginal and untrained; she is responding to Jangala's request for help in a very "Aboriginal" way. Research by Stephen Harris (1980) into Aboriginal learning styles has revealed that learning (and for that matter, teaching) in the Aboriginal home is informal, involving passive and inductive processes. There is relatively little discussion or questioning between the teacher and the learner, and the learner is never told to go away and think about or experiment with a problem.

like to look at books, however, and discuss the glossy pictures with their friends. Especially the English books in the school library with the coloured pictures of snakes and lizards, and the one with the photos of all their heroes in the movies: John Wayne, James Garner and "Bad Ronald" (whom the rest of the world calls Bert Reynolds). They laugh a lot at the book about the two naked Aboriginal children who got lost in the bush. Everyone knows children of their age wear clothes and they would never get lost like that. The girls like to look at the pictures too, but they also like to read the words. They can read most of the Warlpiri books by themselves, and some of them have even started reading English. When the girls finish at school, those who can read and write may get jobs in the school as teachers, or work in the office, or even in the clinic and drive the health Toyota like the other nurses.

Christie (1982) says that reading, and for that matter writing, is a very active, purposeful, creative process into which an individual must put a great deal of conscious effort to succeed. He suggests that:

Aboriginal children do not expect to and do not participate in the school program in an active purposeful self-conscious way, but rather in the same way as they participate passively in their day-to-day home life. (p.11)

Passive participation is not sitting back doing nothing. It is doing something in a special way which reflects your view of yourself, your world, and the situation you are in. Some Aboriginal people in some situations employ active participation but generally, in traditional and modern Aboriginal culture, the passive style is preferred...But when we look at the school learning system, it requires active participation. (p.13)

This seems a very reasonable explanation for Jangala's non-active participation in writing his own stories. He has no difficulty in learning sight words or performing simple decoding skills in reading, but these processes are more passive than active. He relies on his good memory rather than deductively analysing the 'hard' words or reading for meaning. Nor does he attempt to write his own stories independently when his teacher will write them for him, or when he can copy all the 'hard' words from flash-cards.

The need for children to participate actively in the learning process is particularly important in writing. It requires much active and creative thought in selecting and developing ideas. Traditionally, writing was taught as a discrete subject by teachers with little discussion or participation on the part of the children, especially in selecting a topic. However, Donald Graves, of the "Writing Process Laboratory" in the University of New Hampshire, America, says that writing is a self-teaching process and children should be allowed to develop as writers under the watchful and helpful eyes of teachers. Donald Murray, (1968) another researcher into the writing process, who has greatly influenced Graves, confirms this idea in his book *A Writer Teaches Writing*.

It seems the key phrase amongst writing researchers is "the writing process". It implies that writing or learning to write involves much more than a short, daily lesson where children are given a topic and hopefully learn to spell correctly and to structure words together in some meaningful order. Writing is an ongoing learning process that involves many steps, much discussion, and much drafting and re-drafting. Writers must consider and discuss things such as: the audience for whom they are writing and the purpose of the article (whether it be for public display or for publication in a school magazine or local paper). Once these decisions have been made, the actual writing process may cover a period of days with much discussion and editing and with several drafts and re-drafts being produced before the final draft is written. The untidy scrawls and incorrect spelling in preliminary drafts don't matter; they are all part of the learning process.

Getting back to Jangala, I realise that concepts such as: self-chosen topics, writing for an audience, invented spelling, editing, and preliminary and final drafts are completely foreign to him. Unfortunately, Jangala has always been told by his teacher what to write, whether it be the same old story about the weekend, or a story about a class excursion, or about the travelling singing group that visited the night before. Sometimes he is told to write a story for the school magazine, but his story never gets printed because he never finishes it; only the good writers get their stories printed.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that Jangala does not perceive writing as an on-going learning process as Gray and Murray do. He sees the end-product as the sole purpose of a writing exercise; that is, a neat page of copy-book lettering, strung together in words, to show his teacher. Jangala likes to please his teacher

and to get praise for a neat page. He is not going to risk spelling any words incorrectly, and getting his teacher's red biro marks on his page, when he can spell them correctly by copying. He does not like to experiment with writing, hence he has never experienced the self-satisfaction of writing a story all by himself, just for himself. It has always been for his teacher.

Worst of all, Jangala does not realise or understand the purpose of going to school. He just accepts it as part of his life as a boy. It is something to do between week-ends and holidays. Mr White says the children who come to school every day will learn to read and write. But that just does not seem to be happening for Jangala. He does not realise that the crucial factor is the way he spends his time while at school, and the way he applies himself in each lesson.

In this paper, I have not presented the reader with any solutions for Jangala's problem of non-achievement in writing. Instead, I have outlined Jangala's dilemma as I perceive it. I have also outlined what writing researchers say about the writing process and learning to write. It then became obvious that Jangala is not approaching the writing process as the researchers recommend. It also became obvious that Jangala's teacher is not aware of the problem and hence fails to assist him in overcoming his problem of low achievement. Jangala begins well by attending school nearly every day. But he fails to spend this time in active, creative and effective learning. He seemed to be progressing well by learning a remarkable eighty sight words. But he fails to use this knowledge to make generalisations about letters and words, and how they function in print.

Jangala does not blame his failure to write on himself. He does not realise that, in order to succeed as a writer, he must make some effort and take personal responsibility for what he learns. That is, he does not realise that school requires active, purposeful participation of children in order to learn. Jangala's passive behaviour is reinforced by his teacher's willingness to write his stories for him and not encouraging him to think and act independently. Christie (1982, p.20) says, it is therefore the role of Aboriginal and white teachers to teach Aboriginal children that they themselves have a responsibility in the process of learning to write. They must encourage children to write by themselves, or for a chosen audience, apart from their teacher.

This can be achieved through more discussion about the writing process and initially through group writing activities, involving all the stages of selecting a topic, audience, drafting, editing and re-drafting. It is necessary for teachers to demonstrate the writing process to children (particularly children from non-literate homes) modelling the purpose, pleasures and procedures involved in successful writing.

It is true that Jangala's failure in learning to write is partly due to inappropriate teaching strategies, but it cannot be denied that cultural influences and low social expectations are largely to blame. First, his Aboriginal approach to learning is not suitable for the formal school situation. That is, he is approaching the active task of learning to write in a passive way. Second, his position as a tribal, twelve-year-old, Warlpiri boy (soon to become a man) does not give him any reason or purpose to learn to write. In fact, his failure humiliates him and discourages any possible active learning. If Jangala, and any other child with a similar dilemma, is to succeed as a writer, there is an obvious need to alleviate these social and cultural barriers by appropriate classroom strategies. Teachers must step in early before failure and loss of interest and incentive in learning occurs, particularly amongst the young boys. Teachers need to make a conscious and deliberate effort to observe and influence the development of each child as a successful and confident writer throughout his school life. They must also give children some purpose for writing, apart from seeking teacher approval and praise. The rewards of writing must be conveyed and a desire to enjoy, discover and experiment with print must be instilled in the children. This is not an easy task for teachers, but with sensitivity, patience and hard work, it can be achieved - I'm sure.

REFERENCES

- Christie, M.J., 1982: Teaching purposeful reading to Aboriginal children. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April/May 1982.
- Graves, D.H. (n.d.): Let children show us how to help them write. Report of Writing Process Lab. Uni. of New Hampshire, USA.

Harris, S.G., 1980: *Culture and Learning: Tradition and Education in Northeast Arnhem Land*. Darwin, N.T. Department of Education.

Murray, D.M., 1968: *A Writer Teaches Writing*. USA, Houghton Mifflin.

FURTHER READING

Walshe, R.D. (Ed.), 1981: *Donald Graves in Australia: 'Children Want to Write'*. NSW, Primary English Teaching Assoc.

.....

*MORE JOBS SOUGHT

A special program will be launched in four major Queensland centres in April to seek more jobs for Aborigines and Islanders.

The campaign will be run by the National Aboriginal Employment Development Committee.

The scheme will cover Mackay, Rockhampton, Bundaberg and Maryborough.

School leavers will be a special target area for the campaign and Commonwealth Employment Service teams will run job interview skills training schemes. A spokesman for the campaign said an important feature would be to promote awareness and acceptance of Aboriginal and Islander job seekers amongst employers in the zone.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has made a 45-minute video program to aid the campaign and to train Aborigines and Islanders in job interview techniques.

* Reproduced from *Aboriginal Newsletter* No.122 March 1983.