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WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE FORMAL TEACHING OF READING BEGINS

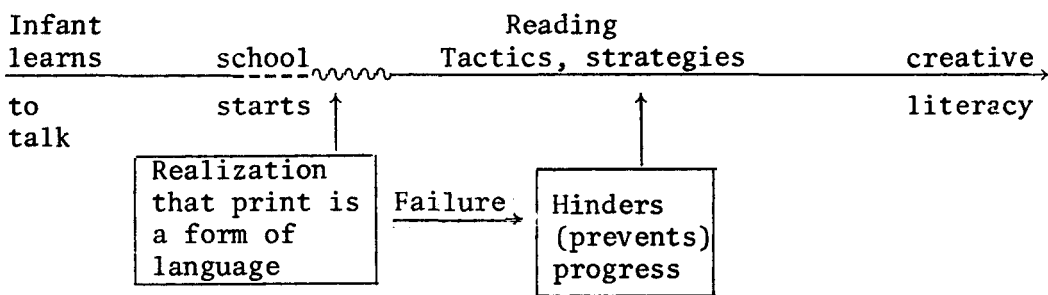
*A.C. Durre

The teacher sits on her low stool with the children around her. They are seated comfortably on a piece of carpet. Eyes and faces show intense interest in the story being read. Then -- "Teacher Pam, show me that word 'wallaby'."

The teacher is delighted at this interruption from little ----- as it is the first indicator after many weeks that she is making the connection between marks on the page and MEANING - a very necessary step for any child who is going to learn to read successfully and effectively.

Many texts on the teaching of reading immediately enter upon teaching tactics. Reference may be made to starting where children are. The question is - Where *are* Aboriginal children relative to the commencement of any 'Learning to Read' program? It is suggested here that programs and classroom teachers too often commence at a point beyond where these children are - (and this applies to any ethnic group who do not have, or experience, a literary tradition in the home.)

Ray of Literacy



It cannot be assumed that children from non-literate societies will automatically make the leap from oral language to written language, that print is language and therefore should be meaningful. It is this gap in the literacy ray that is under consideration.

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It is easy for teachers to assume that Aboriginal children are deriving meaning from what they read. Even very young children from reading cultures expect meaning to come from printed matter, so teachers of white children can usually safely assume that, if they teach decoding, then comprehension will, to a large extent, take care of itself. This is by no means true of Aboriginal children. Reading activities need to be designed specifically to encourage interpretation...

(Christie, 1982, p.73)

Christie's article details the passive approach to school learning of community Aborigines as well as an attitude that perceives 'school' as a ritual simply to be passed through. He comments further about reading -

As teachers, and as middle class whites we know that reading is a useful and entertaining skill in a whole variety of life's settings. Teaching this to Aboriginal children is more important and much more difficult than teaching them the actual process of reading. In fact, we can be sure that if we teach them the social meaning and value of reading effectively, they will go a long way in teaching themselves the actual process.

(Christie, 1982, p.69)

Appreciating that print has communicative qualities, that it is language in written form, that it is language which is already known would have a motivating effect as it would no longer be a ritual to be endured.

...learning is rarely the result of a passive exposure to "instruction" but rather the result of an active search for specific kinds of information...

(Smith, 1973, p.179)

Thus the teacher needs to promote active participation on the part of the pupil in the learning of the reading act. This effort will achieve greater success if the pupil has made the link between print and oral language. This linking of language and print is one of the chief points determined on by Torrey in the study of a black child from a low socio-economic home who had taught himself to read.

He appears to have asked the right questions in his own mind about the relation between language and print and thus to have been able to bridge the gap between his own language and the printed form.

(Torrey, 1973, p.156)

It is essential then that attention be given to the establishment of the concept that print is language before formal teaching of reading commences.

RELEVANT READING FACTORS

After reviewing various approaches to reading which attempt to take account of Aboriginal learning styles, learning competencies and reading approaches *per se*, Davidson comments:

Despite these guidelines for teachers, much of success of Aboriginally oriented literacy instruction seems to depend on students comprehending the act of reading itself.

(Davidson, 1983, p.13)

To gain meaning from 'the act of reading itself' concerns the child's eventual ability to use *language cue systems* which are:-

Word order, inflections, e.g., 'd', 'ed', 's', 'es';

Structure or function words, e.g., articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions;

Contextual meaning, that is, what comes before and after.

Cues within the reader, which are - language facility, physiology, learned responses to graphic cues, experiential background of learner-reader, conceptual background.

(Smith *et al.*, 1976)

For the teacher the very first concern is the 'experiential background'. How familiar is the isolated community child with books. Many of these children have virtually nil personal experience of books before attending a pre-school. Clay comments on children from homes devoid of books. They won't have heard books read. Attitude to books and reading won't be supportive, even if it isn't negative. Pencils and paper are a rarity.

It is easy to believe that a child from such a background might take weeks to understand that the words spoken by children and teachers have anything at all to do with the marks on paper.

(Smith *et al.*, 1976, p.34)

Some research into the jargon words of printed language has indicated varying degrees of confusion (Ehri, 1979). This occurs for children who -

...growing up in literate societies begin to respond to print as language almost as early as they begin to talk. Traffic signs and commercial logos, the most functional and situationally embedded written language in the environment, are learned easily and early.

(Goodman, 1977, p.322)

So much more confusing for children with little or no experience of the written language forms. What are they to make of the jargon words: word, number, letter, sentence, page, story, reading, writing, drawing, sounding out, etc.? Classroom experience enables these to be learned, but this is just one more area of confusion for Aboriginal children which I am suggesting has tended to be overlooked.

A child who does not have books in his home (suitable books which are read with him) will have missed experiences with bookish kinds of language, with concepts that are found only in books, and with picture exploration.

(Clay, 1976, p.14)

One example of relevant research is that reported by Hudson. He examined the perception of pictorial depth among variously educated Africans and whites. He found that -

School going examples saw predominantly three-dimensionally, the others saw almost entirely two-dimensionally... Cultural isolation [black or white] was effective in preventing or retarding the process, even in candidates possessing formal education [limited to text book experience] of an advanced level.

(Hudson, 1963, p.426)

It is not unreasonable to infer that this finding and other bookish learning shortcomings may be extended to isolated Aboriginal communities.

Hudson's testees were misinterpreting the pictures because of lack of experience with such illustrations. They were not getting the meaning. Similarly a reader has to get meaning from print. The other main point made by the Torrey case study was that the boy read for meaning, not word by word.

Goodman comments that "miscue research has led us away from a word focus to a comprehension focus". Three kinds of information are available to the reader: graphic, syntactic and semantic, but

it is meaning which makes the system go.

(Goodman, 1977, p.9)

A TEACHING APPROACH

At the beginning of the last section it was indicated that meaning is achieved through ability to use 'cue systems' effectively.

Readers, using their background of knowledge and experience, compose meaning from the text.

(Butter & Turbill, 1984, p.11)

These cues focus in the child's experience and in his language. If the child's language varies from that of the reading matter, then his cueing will be inefficient. For example, the Aboriginal creole dialects tend to lack the inflections 'd', 'ed', 's', 'es'. An approach to the teaching of reading which can take account of dialectal features of the learner is the Language Experience Approach -

...it uses and extends the child's experiences to develop a good oral vocabulary and language expression, which become the basis of the reading materials developed, and used by the child.

(South Australia, 1976, p.148)

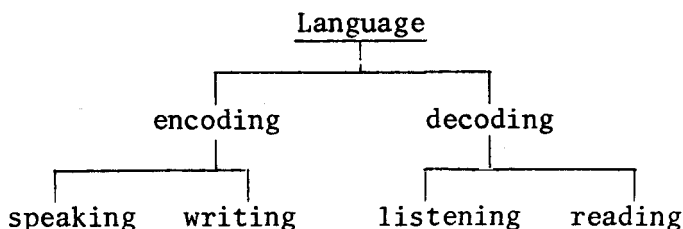
Once the child makes the link between language and print, then teaching of reading must focus upon and extend the meaningfulness of print, not upon fragmentation of the written form of language.

Language is learned from whole to part... Only after a child has learned many utterances does he begin to sort out elements. And only after he has acquired a modicum of literacy does he begin to know and use the norms for recognising where one word leaves off and another begins.

(Smith *et al.*, 1976, p.270)

Using whole sentences puts the focus on meaning.

Rubin, along with other authors (e.g., Butler and Turbill) stress the need to recognise the interrelatedness of language. Communication involves an exchange of ideas through encoding and decoding.



Hence teachers must recognize and children be enabled to recognize that writing and reading are just another way of speaking and listening (receiving).

Cambourne (1979) makes a plea for the teaching of reading in a way similar to the way children initially learn language. Children learn to talk by being immersed in the meanings of a language per medium of sounds. Children ought then to be immersed in books and literature experiences to motivate a desire to interpret print (Holdaway, 1979). Maintaining a Whole Language approach was being practised in Turkey 20 years ago.

From the first lessons reading, spelling, handwriting and written expression are practised simultaneously. These skills are learned and used for purposes genuinely related to the children's interests and behaviour. No material is used in the beginning reading lessons that is not familiar to the pupils as oral expression; all words and phrases represent familiar ideas.

(Hildreth, 1963, p.431)

STRATEGIES/ACTIVITIES TO LINK PRINT WITH LANGUAGE

A teacher's responsibility is not to teach children to read but to make it possible for them to learn to read.

(Smith, 1978, p.5)

A first step in this enabling is to bring meaning to what books and literature are all about.

...One of the more out-of-date ways to approach the teaching of reading was to emphasise the teaching of letters first, then words, then comprehension skills, then later to expose the learner to lots of easy reading practice. More recently, the tendency is to reverse this emphasis; to expose the child to lots of reading first and foremost (which is done by reading a great deal to and with children), and only then to teach smaller parts in a more formal way in the context of meaningful material. The theory is that although children do need to be taught word-attack skills, it is more important to realise that children learn to read by reading.

(Harris, 1984, p.7)

1. ENTHUSIASM FOR LITERATURE

A teacher who is enthusiastic about books will infect her students with that enthusiasm.

(Rubin, 1975, p.187)

The teacher needs to model her love of books. Read to the children every day! Develop acting abilities to interpret the story. Look for material with life lifting language. The atmosphere should be relaxed. Learn to read well and let the children see that you enjoy reading.

When you read aloud to children you are depositing various sentence patterns in the children's linguistic storehouse for a lifetime of use.

(Martin, 1972, p.74)

Because of the cultural situation, selections must take cognisance of this factor as well as the usual good literature criteria.

Regardless of the group to which a child belongs, the book he reads [or has read to him or her] must help him to feel good about himself.

(Rubin, 1975, p.193)

The essence of this activity is enthusiasm.

If you don't believe that reading and writing are important human activities, your students will know it and tend to feel the same way as you do.

(Kohl, 1976, p.146)

1.a

As a teacher 'tells' a story from a book, can it be assumed Aboriginal children will make the leap - that the story is in the book. Most of them are familiar with oral story telling. The interpretation may be that teachers always hold on to and wave about an artifact when they tell a story. So ensure that the children comprehend the source of the story (eventually that someone far off wrote it and per medium of print and reading we can enjoy this story or poem.)

Later this develops to shared book experience - and reading indicated print together.

2. EXPECTATIONS

Parents expect their children to talk so let us behave as though we expect children to read. Much classroom behaviour conveys the message that learning to read will be difficult.

3. READING CORNER

A reading corner should be established from the beginning. It should be bright, and attractively set up, with good lighting, small chairs, large chairs, bean bags. Provide a plant to add atmosphere. A range of books should be provided within the current capabilities and interests. The set of books should be changed regularly to maintain stimulus. The use of the reading corner should not be restricted to use after the completion of set tasks.

3a

The very first books in an Aboriginal classroom could be local photos books. Such booklets with photos of local people, places, familiar community activities etc., will draw these children to their first book handling experiences. With these they could be introduced to front, back, page, page turning from right to left, etc.

Such books should be freely available in the corner for handling and promoting interaction. Children could even be involved in the preparation of these first photo books. The photos would provide meaningful content and their own involvement would introduce the idea of their own communication through books.

One who is exposed to many pleasurable experiences with books even before he is able to read for himself will probably develop into a better reader than one who has not had these experiences.

(Petty, *et al.*, 1976, p.361)

4. QUESTIONING

Questioning should be open ended so as to encourage children to think, comment, make their offering. Answers are concerned with supplying meanings not directly stated in the text. It involves higher interpretational skills on the part of the children:- making generalizations, reasoning cause and effect, anticipating endings (introduces the idea of predicting which will be needed to gain meaning from text later), sensing motives, etc. (South Australia, 1976, p.80). This must be determinedly pursued with the

Aboriginal children who are much concerned with school experience as being right or wrong.

The teacher then has to pay attention to his questioning skills. If appropriately thought out beforehand and constructed a teacher's

...comprehension questions about a story will trigger off a whole hierarchy of meanings ranging from gross understanding to precise verbalizing, from a simple restatement of story meanings to a complex conjecture about the whole realm of living.

(Martin, 1972, p.108)

MECHANICS

Some of the mechanics of reading print are to be introduced (extending Activity 3). Lines of print are shown; where to begin reading on a page; line sequence, how to proceed down the page. Each time you read to the children ask where to start? - front of the book, top of the page. Children should physically indicate positions using books - not just verbalize.

5a

Write sentences on cards as children watch. Use large print, clear spaces between words, so that they become aware of the integrity of word units. These can be clearly pointed from left to right.

5b

Single, individual word vocabulary will eventually follow.

6. BULLETIN BOARD

A bulletin board has also to be established and there must be regular interaction with it. It could draw the children to it, initially, with local community photos. Pictures, selected by children from magazines could be readily displayed. Teacher could put up a new picture every day and expect the children to investigate it by themselves as they arrive each day. This is to make habitual the behaviour of checking the bulletin board each day.

Matching activities can then be introduced. For example, match book dust covers to a picture of the main character; match words to pictures. Favourite poems, extracts from stories can be displayed on charts, from which the teacher can read, while demonstrating the mechanics of reading. Eventually the children's own class sentences, then class stories written co-operatively

after an exciting learning experience, can be displayed, 'read', and discussed by the children. Directions or local news could be put on the board for that first early morning check. Notices about community events introduce the functionality of print as a means of communicating. As children are able to interpret these they will be getting some of their first communication from print.

6a

Print in the community should be discovered by class excursions - school signs, street signs, name of the community sign and store notices. These could be brought to the children's attention, as could also a local newsletter if there is one.

7. REWARD

Reward children for gaining MEANING/comprehension rather than just for reading.

8. CREATE A STORY

A story created by the teacher incorporating the local environment could act as a strong stimulus. It could be written, week by week, a page at a time, and presented serially; each episode ending upon some exciting and frustrating issue. Note that such a story should be presented in book form, if it is to achieve the purposes with which this article is concerned.

9. DRAMATIZE

Dramatize stories that the teacher reads. Eventually children can demonstrate their comprehension of print by performing what it says. For example, 'open' and 'shut' doors to illustrate the meaning of the words. Later reading material can be retold in the child's own words (or dramatized).

10. TRANSFORMING SENTENCES

Transforming sentences can be introduced once sentences are being displayed on the notice board. Alternative nouns, verbs, etc., can be suggested. Once a listing has been prepared under the original sentence parts, the class can create new sentences on the structure of the original sentence. For example -

*Johnny chased the goanna.
Lyndon hunted the wallaby.
My uncle caught a snake.
Dad grabbed a fish.
My little auntie cooked a brolga.*

Via this means the wonderful facility of language, including its written form, can be displayed. The awareness of various concepts (sentence, word, meaning) can be enhanced (Martin, 1972, p.78).

11. PUPPET

A puppet who is trying to cope with books and print could be utilized.

These activities should also contribute to overcoming the passivity of Aboriginal children in their school experience. This should assist the development of active learning.

EVALUATION

Evaluation at this point should be affective as well as objective. Are children asking for stories to be read? Do they listen attentively? Are they responding to the reading corner? How are individuals responding to the notice board? Are they asking about pictures? Do they comment on or inquire about newly displayed materials? In other words, the teacher is checking for motivation. Is motivation improving?

To record this, the teacher could utilize a check list that focuses its statements on the activities enumerated. For example -

- Sets a book down correctly - (front up, and in position to be opened from right to left - child doesn't have to know these terms).
- Indicates the beginning of a word card sentence.
- Comments on the notice board.
- Goes to the reading corner independently.
- Shows interest in print.
- 'Reads' class stories or sentences for meaning.

As children attain an affection for books and link their language with the printed form they can move into the adventure, rather than the expedition, of learning to read.

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