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## \*SPECIAL NEEDS OF ABORIGINALS IN THE TEACHING OF READING

\*Kathy McEvoy

*Success in teaching reading does not depend simply on materials and schemes. Locked into our own cultural norms as we are, we may overlook other fundamental influences.*

The reason why some children take longer to talk to you is because they want to know you properly before they start talking. I know white people talk a lot to each other before they know each other properly.

(Ungunmerr 1976, p.4)

This quotation from Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr's booklet *The Nature of Aboriginal Children* suggests differences in ways of knowing between the Aboriginal and Euro-Australian groups which I, as a Euro-Australian teacher of reading, must recognise.

Knowing can only happen when information is assimilated into our own frame of reference, our framework of categorisation. Our culture provides us with that framework into which we assimilate information. It also provides us with a basis for organising experience, and our language reflects the way we organise this experience in our particular culture (Smith 1978, p.60). So, to be Aboriginal, implies an organisation of experience, of knowing, in a manner which will be different from that of other cultures. Goodman, Goodman and Burke indicate very clearly the importance of this categorising of experience when they say -

If a reader is not able to draw a relationship between something already known and understood and the author's message or is uninterested in doing so, reading cannot occur.

(Goodman, Goodman and Burke, 1978, p.22)

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In any consideration of the teaching of reading this quotation must surely provide a cornerstone. If we fail to acknowledge cultural factors which influence a pupil's way of knowing then our efforts will achieve only limited success.

## DIFFERENT ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the habits of thinking of the Aboriginal people are primarily influenced by the oral nature of their culture. It is equally reasonable to suppose that the written word has an effect on the habits of thinking and categorising knowledge in a way in which the spoken word does not. The process of communication which is reading can be hindered in many ways and I would suggest that for Aboriginals as a group the very fact of their identity as a minority group constitutes *noise* in that process. That noise may be the result of any or all of the following:

- the use of materials based on values and attitudes different from their own;
- a lack of relational resources between white teacher and Aboriginal pupil;
- a poor language environment;
- a lack of reading models;
- failure to understand the nature of the reading process;
- school structures which do not meet the needs of Aboriginal students;
- negative self-esteem which is consonant with membership of a depressed minority group that has a negative view of its heritage and chances for success.

We expect of minorities such as Aboriginals the attitudes and values held by the average Euro-Australian groups in our society, even though many of these are not part of the Aboriginal culture. These include an emphasis on individual success above group welfare and on the values and benefits of competition rather than cooperation. We are aware of Euro-Australian moral standards, codes of behaviour and etiquette and belief in the puritan work ethic but these are not so evident to all members of Australian society. We expect a value to be placed on the acquisition of material possessions and their individual ownership (Lines 1976, p.39). If our teaching of reading (or of anything else) is against a background of these expectations, then we will fail to meet the needs of a group who do not hold these expectations. Aboriginal ways of knowing are inevitably different.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

The Aboriginal culture, an oral culture, is one in which reading is not part of everyday life. Therefore, many of the normal assumptions we make about the children we teach are not valid. The very nature of reading as a communication process may not be understood. Its use as such must be emphasised again and again - even in the most simple ways, for example, by the teacher reading aloud written messages that have been given to her.

As the home is unlikely to provide a strong reading environment then a compensatory effort should be made at creating such an environment in the classroom. Teachers should read to children and children read to children; class libraries should be well stocked and class books should be written; the *lap* technique and the neurological impress method may be employed. All of these can help build an emotional conditioning to books. We need to build in and continually work at the acceptance of the value of books through the *hidden curriculum* of classrooms.

Research shows that the Aboriginal culture emphasises learning through visual observation rather than verbal instruction. Therefore showing rather than explanation should be more effective in teaching of Aboriginal children. In reading we should utilise that visual ability by developing a large number of sight words, phrases and even sentences. Whereas a white child would analyse and discuss in the learning process, an Aboriginal child will watch and remember (Harris 1980, p.77). The use of the language experience approach is vital in teaching Aboriginal children to read.

What I think about I can talk about. What I talk about  
can be expressed in other ways. Anything I write can  
be read. I can read what I write and what other people  
write. What I say and write is as important to me as  
what other people have written for me to read.

(Rogers 1976, p.29)

The last line expresses the extra value of the language experience approach in the teaching of Aboriginals. The use of language experience indicates a respect for what the person has to say and for the views he or she has. This *hidden curriculum* strengthens the whole reading process. From a language point of view there is obviously a very strong case for using the language experience approach. Language experience utilises the child's own language background to reinforce the idea of reading for meaning and enjoyment. The basic techniques such as left to right eye progression and one-to-one correspondence of words are also developed.

The relationship between sound and letters should be taught, but separately from reading, in anticipation of the day when the light dawns and the value of this knowledge in the reading process is recognised.

## CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In the interests of developing self-esteem there is a need to tap the minority culture. It is there we will find a reflection of the child's experiences and it is there we will gain an understanding of his or her environment, family and community. Knowing the child's culture ascribes a value to him or her as a member of an important group in Australian society.

Programs have been developed which are interesting examples of using the Aboriginal culture in the teaching of reading. One of these is the Woolah program in Queensland where a possible loss of cultural heritage with the aging of the Aboriginal elders was used as a motivational force with teenagers of the Nyoongar people (Chesson and Hayward 1978, p.41).

Other influences on Aboriginal learning are such things as the virtual absence of the word *why* in Aboriginal languages (Harris 1980, p.153). The cultural norms of accepting the laws of nature, the social customs and the decisions of elders without question may have led to this. Language, after all, reflects the needs of the group using it. In a formal test situation in the Northern Territory, Aboriginals asked fewer questions than white students. This may confirm the values of a society where knowledge was not freely accessible but restricted and controlled; the prerogative of age rather than youth. It also reflects a favoured method of teaching in Aboriginal society where children are taught in small steps at a time and do not try things until the possibility of error is at a minimum and the need to ask questions is small. If a white teacher fails to understand this background then real conflict may result.

## HOME AND FAMILY

The person most likely to teach, or perhaps more accurately, the person from whom the Aboriginal was most likely to learn, was a close relative. Thus the Aboriginal child responds well to a warm person in a trusting relationship. If the child values a teacher then the learning will be valued learning. The relationship is important. The teacher must have a sympathetic, non-condescending understanding of the culture.

Involvement with the home is an important element in the teaching of Aborigines. This relationship provides a mechanism for change, a reassurance that the child is not in an environment of alien attitudes, and it breaks down the barriers of ignorance which lead to conflict. If the parent is respected then the child feels his or her values and attitudes are respected and can feel secure in the school environment.

From a practical point of view, Aboriginal parents may benefit from guidance in the constructive ways in which they can contribute towards their children's schooling. Many parents simply do not understand the relationship between school attendance, motivation and achievement in white society. The need to do homework, the provision of a quiet area and basic writing materials may simply not occur to them. Home visits and a good relationship with parents may build up a reading environment and an awareness of the value of reading.

There are many other issues I have not discussed. I have only scratched the surface of the special needs of Aborigines in the teaching of reading. The use of basal readers, extension material and the identification of the extent to which the child has acquired the Euro-Australian culture are just some points left untouched. One point to remember is that it would be wrong to assume that because a child has acquired the material goods of white society, he or she has therefore acquired that culture. The only way to progress is to be prepared to look carefully at each individual and perhaps bear in mind this quotation from Carl Rogers-

If I accept the other person is something fixed, already diagnosed and classified, already shaped by his past, then I am doing my part to confirm this limited hypothesis.

If I accept him as a process of becoming, then I am doing what I can to confirm or make real his potentialities.

(Rogers 1961, p.55)

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4. Firm, consistent and fair.
5. Professional and wise.
6. Supportive to the community.
7. A good husband/wife and father/mother.
8. Easily contented.
9. Moderate in behaviour.

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