



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.

FORMAL EDUCATION AND ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

M.J. Christie

All children, black or white, learn a lot more outside the classroom than inside it. All normal children, by the time they go to school for the first time, have already learnt to speak their mother tongue, have learnt who they are and where they fit into their family or community, and have learnt a vast range of behaviours which are appropriate (and inappropriate) for members of their culture. They have learnt all these through the informal process of socialization which affects all members of every culture throughout their lives. In traditional Aboriginal society, for example, hunting and food preparation skills, the traditional law, patterns of land ownership and important stories from the past, were all learnt informally in the daily life of the family. Only some sacred knowledge would be transmitted formally in a ceremonial context.

In Western society, widespread formal education is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although its origins can be traced back through the ancient monasteries and universities, it is only in the last couple of hundred years that we have seen the introduction of free, compulsory and secular education for all children in our society.

Is this formal education necessary? How and why did it develop? Do children learn anything in their formal learning at school that they could not learn informally at home? At the time when formal education started to flourish in the Western world, other important things were also happening. The Industrial Revolution was under way. People were flocking to the cities, big industries were starting everywhere, capitalism and Western science were developing great strength and specialization was increasingly important. The common people, instead of being peasants, were now metal workers, shop owners and machine operators. They needed to know how to read and write, how to count and perform a variety of mathematical operations and, of course, the list of required knowledge grew and grew and is still growing. In a sense, formal education can be seen to have developed in response to the needs of a newly complex and ever expanding culture of technology and capital.

* Dr Michael Christie, formerly teacher/linguist, Milingimbi, N.T.

In order to understand some of the issues in Aboriginal education, it is important to understand the difference between informal and formal education. These two are directed towards quite different sorts of knowledge, and depend upon very different sorts of learning to achieve them. Some of the crucial distinctions between the two systems as I see them, are outlined in the table presented on p.42.

It is important to note that there is an inevitable connection between the abstract nature of the content of formal education and the abstract way in which it must be taught. (The word 'abstract' really means - taken out of real-life context.) In the classroom when we teach maths, for example, we need to teach the same skills in such a way that the farmer can do calculations about his animals, the metalworker can measure her work, the cook can weigh out and multiply his ingredients and the banker can calculate her profits. Mathematics is an abstract system and needs to be learnt as an abstract system before it can be applied. We cannot teach children how to deal with every one of the millions of mathematical situations they potentially come across. We have no choice but to teach them abstract principles and provide plenty of practice for them to apply them. In the same way as the classroom is somehow abstracted from 'real' society, the content of formal education is an abstraction from the everyday skills required by members of our society and the learning must take place through a very much context-reduced and language dependent learning process.

Summing up thus far, informal education is a universal phenomenon whereby children, through socialization processes, learn what they need to know to be acceptable members of their culture. Formal education, however, is a special form of teaching which has developed in some cultures to transmit learning which is too abstract, too complex, or too sacred to be communicated in the day-to-day home life of the child.

In a previous article (Christie, 1985), I have discussed in some detail the mode of behaviour which has developed in Western society and which I have called a particular kind of purposeful behaviour. It is a mode of behaviour associated with a capitalist economy, with technology, agriculture and industry, with Western science and politics, and with formal education. I contrasted purposeful behaviour with meaningful behaviour, which I see as the preferred mode of behaviour of most Aboriginal people, whether they live in the city, the country, or the outback. Neither mode of behaviour is better or worse than the other. Both seem to be necessary for modern human survival, and problems occur only when one is pursued to the exclusion of the other.

DIFFERENT BIASES OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

FORMAL EDUCATION

CONTEXT

Decontextualized. All learning takes place out of the setting of day-to-day life.

MEDIUM

Language is essential to all formal learning. Other modalities are usually irrelevant and sometimes impediments. Classroom language is decontextualized and cognitively demanding.

CONTENT

Formal learning is an act in itself. Much of formal education involves learning the codes of education - reading, writing & mathematics. Application of learnings is delayed, often for long periods.

STRUCTURE

Consciously planned and mediated to learners by agents specifically selected to fulfil the role of cultural transmission, i.e. teachers. Some kind of extrinsic motivator (status, competition, approval, reward) is generally employed. Learning is transmitted by teacher to groups of learners. Structured time constraints are employed.

PROCESS

Learning goal is set down by syllabus. Not immediately relevant to the learner's life. Must be communicated to and accepted by the learner.

Motivation must often be engendered artificially.

Learners must work with goals and feedback that are not derived from the immediate felt needs of day-to-day life. They must therefore be induced to exercise personal control over the learning process.

Feedback is encoded and communicated to the learners by the teacher. Learners must learn how to identify, interpret and apply it.

INFORMAL EDUCATION

Learning takes place in the context to which it relates.

A variety of modalities is employed. Language is relatively unimportant.

Informal education emphasises social and physical skills and to some extent facts and ideas. Learning content is immediately applicable to everyday life.

Learning takes place incidentally during the socialization of an individual into the culture. Learners are motivated by their desire to fulfil adult roles in society. No specialized office of teacher. Proficient adults provide models, often unconsciously. Flexible time constraints exist.

No conscious learning goal. Product goal derived from learner's immediate felt needs. Learning may be incidental to the activity.

Motivation to live out more fully the day-to-day activities of the group.

Learning is taking place as a result of self-motivated day-to-day experiences. The exercise of conscious personal control over learning behaviour is less important.

Feedback is immediately available to learners as they attempt to live out adult roles. Feedback is inherent in the learning setting. It is not encoded (therefore easily identified), usually not delivered by human agents (therefore not easily misinterpreted), and usually directly applicable to on-going learning experiences (therefore not usually misapplied).

The main point that I wish to make in this paper, then, is that formal education is a particular way of teaching some particular skills which are required specifically in the Western culture which is now dominant in Australia. Aboriginal children are not going to school simply to learn. They are going to school specifically to learn those skills which they require for empowerment in the white Australian political and economic system. This system depends upon the purposeful behaviour of millions of individuals. These purposeful behaviours (mathematics, literacy, complex manual skills, etc.) are learnt largely inside formal education institutions. The skills learnt are abstract, decontextualised, and language based (mathematics is a language), and for this very reason, cannot be learnt informally.

A good deal of the fuzzy thinking in Aboriginal education can be cleared away if we look at what we are doing in schools as preparation for the specific skills which are required in Western life. (There are other important things which we may teach in schools, things which are related to more meaningful modes of behaviour, like cooperation and caring for others, but our concern here is academic learning which must be purposeful.) When we see academic learning as purposeful preparation for purposeful skills, we can appreciate the important but limited usefulness of informal learning in the classroom. There has recently been much talk, for example, of employing traditional Aboriginal learning styles in the classroom to teach basic academic skills like the three Rs. But, as argued above, literacy and mathematics are ultimately abstract skills learnt in school and then applied to the wide range of settings in modern life. Somewhere along the line the children are going to have to apply their reading skills purposefully to new material or they will not be real readers. The planned informal teaching of reading (language experience, shared book experience, etc.) where meaning is embedded in the day-to-day experience of the child, is useful then, in the initial stages only. Informal methods can be used to teach children what reading is, how enjoyable it can be, what it feels like to read, and what sounds the different letters can make. Teaching these to Aboriginal children is not difficult because they have superb informal learning abilities. However, the real task of reading - the purposeful side - involves identifying situations where reading will be useful, such as gaining access to information, searching out meaning, critically examining and evaluating what is read. These things are much harder to teach, they are the very things which Aboriginal children find most difficult, and this is simply because they are purposeful skills which must be learnt purposefully. The classroom learning process must begin with the familiar experience of everyday life, and end with the purposeful application of learning to everyday experience.

This requires that the pupils learn a variety of abstract skills and they have experience in applying them purposefully. These are the two central concerns of the academic education of Aboriginal children.

Some Aboriginal children are coping well with formal education. These are often the children whose families are in closest contact with the white Australian culture. Other children are performing very poorly at their academic work while their Aboriginal home life is healthy and normal. The schools are failing these children. The solution is not to water down the academic curriculum and "Aboriginalize" everything that happens in schools (although this idea is important in early childhood education.) The solution lies rather in identifying and carefully teaching those specific purposeful academic behaviours which are the goal of formal education and providing plenty of practice for the implementation of these learnings in meaningful out-of-school situations.

REFERENCE

M.J. Christie (1985): Aboriginal modes of behaviour in white Australia. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 13:5.

.....

ABORIGINAL SOCIETY AND NON-ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

There are very marked differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values and lifestyles. Aboriginal society in the main is structured around the community. Very strong kinship ties exist within each of the communities and within each of the categories. These kinship ties overlap the various categories, thus forming very strong relationships among all Aboriginal people of this country. In a general sense, Aboriginal society tends not to be materialistic or competitive but rather practices the sharing of resources and co-operation. In terms of time, traditional Aboriginal society is more concerned about coming to grips with the present and the gaining of group consensus in decision making. Because of the many differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society, it is essential that many teachers of Aboriginal children should come from the same type of background as their students, whether traditionally oriented, rural non-traditional, urban or urban dispersed.

This is necessary to understand the values, lifestyles, language and cultural methods of those children and their community, and to teach effectively.

(National Aboriginal Education Committee: *Philosophy, aims and policy guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education*. AGPS, Canberra 1985)