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REPORT OF A 'BOOKFLOOD' IN AN OUTSTATION SCHOOL

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In the Northern Territory there are an estimated 400 Outstation or Homeland Centre communities, 63 of which have requested some form of schooling. These are family groups ranging from approximately 12 to 35 in size who, since the 1970's, have been returning to live on land with which they have a traditional affiliation. Typically, the families are small groups consisting of the clan leader or traditional landowner and members of his immediate and extended family.

In spite of their chosen isolation, many of these Outstation communities value schooling as a means of negotiating their future and their children's future and as a way of taking control of their own lives. They can request the Department of Education to provide some form of schooling.

When schooling is requested an appropriate member of the group is selected, in co-operation with a representative of the Department of Education, to be the 'teacher', and that person conducts a program set out in specially written curriculum booklets. The program is designed to teach the children the basic skills of English, literacy and numeracy, as requested by the communities. Both teachers and children therefore must learn to read in English, and read English to learn.

Many difficulties face educators and curriculum planners in teaching literacy skills in Outstation schools.

- 1, The very real perception of literacy as a threat to a highly valued language and culture, creates an ambivalent attitude towards it.
2. Necessary understandings about books, print, text and context are not being fully developed and brought to the task.
3. The essentially active role of the reader is not yet understood.

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4. Aboriginal adults, and therefore children, do not generally perceive reading as a useful or entertaining skill out of the school setting.
5. For useful schemata to be formulated about literacy, sufficient data must be presented. In Outstation schools especially, the input of data about books, print and the process of reading has been severely limited. The sparse material which is available is too far removed from the readers' experience to allow them to utilise whatever schemata they have developed.
6. Books are not generally available for familiarisation over an extended period of time, which would allow for practice and consolidation of skills.
7. There are few reading models for the learners to observe and even those are in the early stages of reading/literacy development themselves. In the past there has been a heavy emphasis on phonics as the main decoding strategy. As a result the emphasis has been placed on small units rather than on overall meaning. Inconsistency of methodology and frequent changes among support personnel further compound all of these factors.

The education service which is being provided for these isolated communities is unique. Some of the hurdles along the way to literacy seem insurmountable. There are no precedents to assist the educator. The task confronting him or her is to employ a strategy which will address as many as possible, at any one time. One of the several ideas considered by the researcher was to expose the teacher and children to a much greater amount of books than usual, to literally 'flood' the school with books. A bookflood would provide a much greater opportunity for the children and the teacher to form schemata about books and print, especially if a variety of genres, prints and layouts was included. A bookflood would motivate the children and the teacher to read more, especially if careful thought was given to the selection criteria. A bookflood would demand that the children make choices about which books to read and become familiar with, thereby giving them a little more control over their learning. They could be further asked to select those they wished to keep in their school and those they wished to return. Because these books would stay permanently at the school there would be opportunity to read and reread favourites, experiencing success over and over again, and to build up positive feelings towards reading. A bookflood would repeatedly put the task of making meaning in the hands of the learners but this could be done in their own time and

at their own pace. A bookflood would hopefully stimulate the Outstation teacher to read more to the children, especially if she was encouraged and supported in doing so. For example, if some of the stories were accompanied by tapes either commercially produced or preferably read by the visiting teacher. In both cases a correct model would be provided for the teacher to follow.

A previous bookflood in the South Pacific undertaken by Warwick Elley in 1981, focused upon improvement in the children's English and reading comprehension skills. The Northern Territory study looked primarily for any improvement in (English) literacy skills. The program was carried out in two small Outstation schools one of which, Outstation A was the experimental group, the other, Outstation B was the control group. The bookflood was implemented with assistance from the visiting teacher, who supports these schools.

BOOKFLOOD

1. It was considered of prime importance to assess at the outset what concepts about print the teachers and children had already developed. A test was devised which was modelled on both the 'Sand' *1 test of Marie Clay and 'A Peculiar Book' *2, a Max Kemp test. The visiting teacher went through it page by page, completing the appropriate items on the checklist. This is normally the type of test given to five or six year olds, because in a literate culture it is assumed that children of that age are already well on their way to becoming literate. However, it was felt that the same assumptions could not be made about testees from a non-literature culture, even adults.
2. It was considered important to monitor the children's reading behaviour and attitude to books. A questionnaire was drawn up for the Outstation teachers to complete, assisted where necessary by the visiting teacher.
3. It was considered wise to include at least one standardised test to lend credibility to the results and the Burt Word Recognition Test was chosen. This test has not been designed for Aboriginal testees, but in the absence of one that has, it was selected.
4. A series of sentence completion tests and cloze passages of increasing difficulty, the Australian Cooperative Assessment Project, were administered to the Outstation teachers as a

pre and post test of their reading comprehension skills. These again were not designed for Aboriginal testees but were selected as the least culturally biased of their type.

5. It was decided to collect a piece of writing from each child early in the Bookflood, and again at the end to see if there were any indications of an increased understanding of the functions and conventions of print. Testing was to be carried out in March and October.

SELECTION OF THE BOOKS

In the Fiji Bookflood, Elley points out that "the typical book bought cost only \$1.50 and the cheaper paperbacks were often more popular than the more expensive hardbacks." He noted that most children preferred and spent most time with the traditional favourites of Western children, "The Three Pigs", "Jack and the Beanstalk" and so on, especially in the "Ladybird" series. So it was not considered necessary to spend large sums of money. In fact, the cost of the Northern Territory Bookflood, shared by the Community themselves, was about \$350 .

A small scale informal study of favourite reading material conducted among Aboriginal children at Jigalong School in Western Australia in 1982, also yielded relevant information.

The most popular classifications of books were in order of preference:

- Aboriginal legends
- fairy tales and traditional stories
- children's stories with photographs or unusual, humorous or colourful illustrations
- 'Beginner Books' series
- animal or bird books
- comic like books
- books about cars and motorbikes
- PM Instant Readers
- books about families
- National Geographic Magazines
- books about Walt Disney characters already familiar to children from comics and films
- natural science books
- books about North American Indians
- books with visual puzzles to solve
- any novelty books with pop-up pictures, cut-outs
- monsters, ghosts and scary things.

With all of the above in mind, the researcher and the visiting teacher purchased 270 books from local book stores. The majority of these were then covered with clear plastic and reinforced with extra stapling so that they would have a better chance of surviving in the harsh conditions. A further 130 books were generously donated by Library Services. They were all listed and sorted into packages containing 25 books in each. Each package contained a variety of titles to cater for the different interest groups, age groups and reading ability groups. This included picture books only, basic readers, animal books and books about the environment, some fiction and at least one cassette to accompany one of the books in the package, which was either commercially produced or made by the visiting teacher. Care of the books was discussed with the school and the community and the value of them, in educational terms, was stressed. The teacher was asked to allow the children time each day to read and she was encouraged to read to them from the books as frequently as possible. The children were to decide which books they wished to keep in their school and which to hand back. The visiting teacher would also read from the books on her regular visits, thus providing a model for the Outstation teacher.

IMPLEMENTATION

The pre-tests were administered as scheduled and the first package of books was taken to Outstation A on the visit of March 14, 1985. The children were very excited by the new books and, in fact, continued to be so throughout the project. Outstation B continued to receive the regular (small) supply of reading material from the central school.

In April both Outstation teachers were in-serviced briefly in "Shared Book" methodology. In June the visiting teacher became aware that some books from Outstation A were being returned unread. After discussion with the Outstation teacher it was decided to reduce the number of books in each package. The researcher paid a visit to both Outstations in August to observe the bookflood in operation.

Post-testing was delayed by various factors and it was only possible in the end to complete the post-testing for Outstation A. This meant that a comparison of results was no longer possible and that the study had to take the form of a case study. While this is rather disappointing, it accurately reflects the difficulties of working and researching in the area of Outstation education.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The hypothesis upon which this research was initiated was that a Bookflood would produce improvement in the literacy skills (notably reading) of Aboriginal children and their teacher in the Northern Territory Outstation school. The tests devised, or selected, were to detect:

- . evidence of development of word attack skills
- . evidence of greater understanding about books and print
- . evidence of greater interest and motivation to read
- . evidence of development in reading ability
- . evidence of the application of the above in written work.

Table 1 - The Burt Word Recognition Test

Number of Children	Age	Score Mar 1985	Score Oct 1985
1	15	25	38
2	13	14	13
3	9	4	5
4	8	2	6
5	10	1	0
6	12	0	0
7	6	Pre-reader not tested	2
8	8	Pre-reader not tested	Not tested

This test was administered by presenting each child with the five words in each line written on cards. The child then picked up any card he/she could read, read it then handed the card back to the teacher. Scores were very low. The majority of the children clearly had few effective word attack skills. They were also hampered by lack of familiarity with the sounds and letter patterns of English words. To compound their difficulty, the words in the test were out of any context. The teacher commented:

- . "says initial sounds only"
- . "named letters"
- . "uses initial sounds, some endings".

Table 2 - Concepts of Print Test
(Special version of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" used)

Understandings developed	Pretest Mar 1985	Post test Oct 1985
	Percentage of group	Percentage of group
1. Basic conventions of books: cover, beginning, end, left page before right page, direction of print. (Items 1 - 5)	87.5	97.5
2. The written words represent the spoken words (Items 6 - 8)	54.0	70.8
3. The written word matches the spoken word exactly (Items 9 - 14)	54.1	56.2
4. Sentences can be identified by a capital letter at the beginning and full stop at the end. (Item 15)	25.0	12.5
5. A word is a unit of meaning. (Items 16 - 17)	25.0	18.8
6. Print has a right way up (Items 18 - 20)	45.7	58.3
7. Using the illustrations and the next text together, confirms the meaning. (Item 21)	37.5	62.5
8. There is a predictable order for words in an (English) sentence (Item 22 - 24)	8.0	16.6
9. There is a predictable order for letters in an English word. (Items 25 - 27)	12.5	12.5
10. Words are composed of single units of sound. (Items 28 - 31)	87.3	75.0
11. Print has convention		
(a) Quotation marks denote the speech or thought of a character. (Item 32)	0	12.5
(b) Question marks denote an interrogative statement. (Item 34)	37.5	25.0
(c) There are capital letters and small letters. (Item 34)	12.5	0

Here we see a strategy of employing knowledge of phonics to decipher words, but a strategy which on its own does not produce success and is probably not perceived as a strategy, but rather as an end in itself. This was also potentially the most threatening of test situations. Teacher support was removed, whereas in the "Concepts of Print" test teacher and testee appeared to be sharing the task.

When the pre and post test scores were compared it was found that 50% of the total sample (8) showed an improved score and furthermore in 50% of these cases the difference was quite substantial. It appeared that the reader whose understanding and skills were already best established benefitted most from the greater opportunity to put them into practice. With greater practice they built up their confidence and developed the skill to work out and predict less familiar material. However, the overall improvement of the group was not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney U test $z = -.3833$).

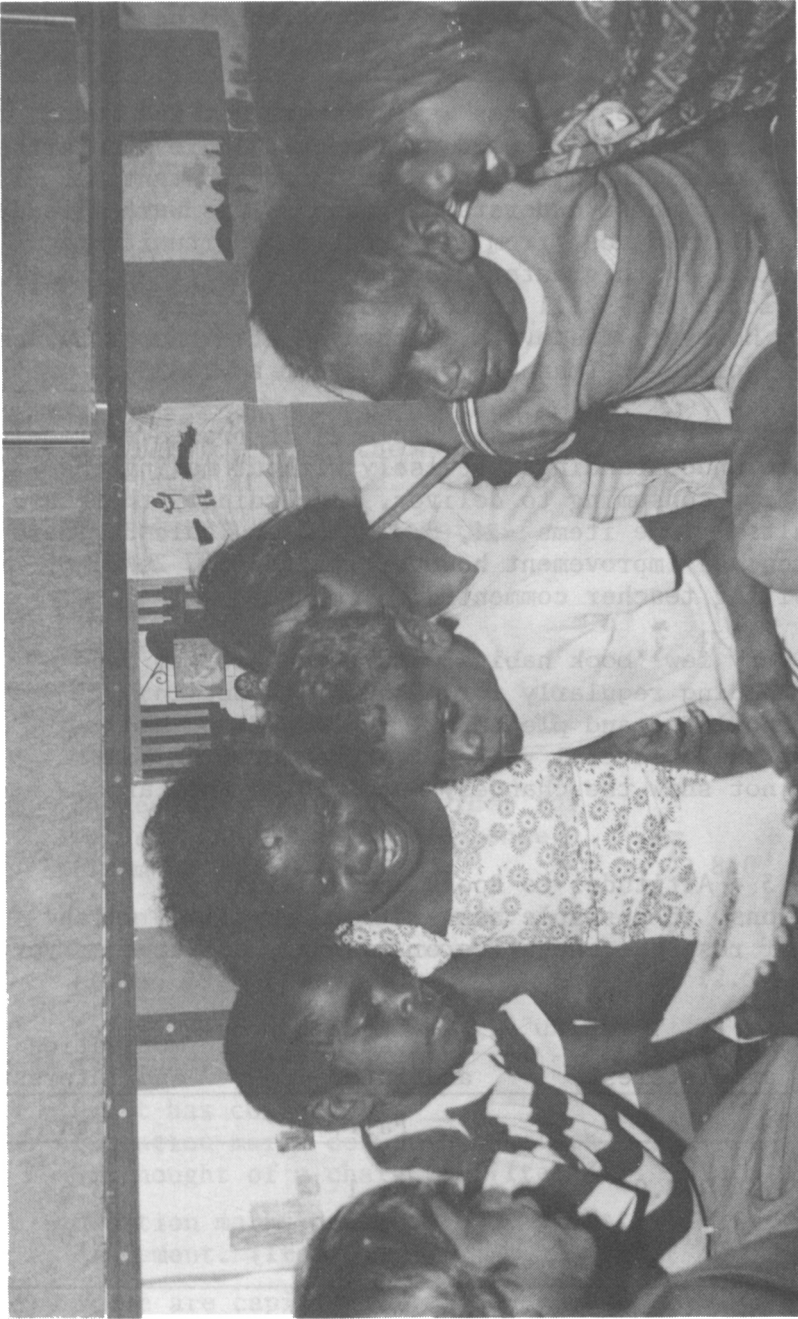
On the Concepts of Print Test (see Table 2) it proved extremely difficult to measure understandings precisely without making the test too long and time consuming to deliver. Accordingly there are some puzzling results - some items - 4, 5, 10, 12 in Table 3. There are clear indications of improvement however in items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 11. The visiting teacher commented:

...There are very few 'book habits' and these need to be developed by reading regularly for meaning, to obtain information, knowledge and pleasure. The Bookflood has gone well, but needs several years of exposure. The test results might not show the changes, but I think they are there...

Table 3 - Attitudes to Books and Reading

There were 9 questions. 3 possible answers were supplied, which indicated degrees of response: negative or minimal, positive or very positive.

Date of test	Motivation and interest	Motivation and interest	Motivation and interest
	Low	Fair	High
March 1985	13.9	61.1	23.6
October 1985	11.1	44.7	43.0



A shared reading experience

(Photo by courtesy of Mr. M. Heaven
Principal, La Grange School, W.A.)

There are clear indications that the children's interest and motivation increased. According to the teachers' ratings they are now more attentive when stories are read. They sit down by themselves more often to look at/read books. Their understanding of stories has increased. The actual reading skills of a small percentage of children has improved. The visiting teacher commented during the Bookflood:

...The children clearly love to receive the books. Any spare moment is spent trying to get a sneak preview of the new books. They ask me to read three or four of them and sometimes more. They read them to each other and talk in Yolngu Matha (vernacular) at great length about the pictures and the sequence...

...The books are taken home, read by the adults and read and looked at after school hours. The well read and liked books are rarely seen back in the school, but can be seen around the camp in houses.

M___ (teacher) reads more to the children. She has drawn in some of the family members. Other adults sometimes read to the children too. I have noticed adults select new books and take them away to read to the children too, at greater leisure. They may not actually read these to the children, but positive indirect message about books and reading comes across to the children nevertheless...

...The teacher and children have difficulty in 'our' concept of care, i.e. taking things out, using them and putting them away again. So often the cupboard is out of bounds to the children - a rule they rarely take notice of, but it does mean there is a pile of books that have been sitting there for a long time...This is how the build up occurs.

...The children have clear preferences about books. The Dick Roughsey books are by far the favourites. Then Hunting and Bush stories (e.g. 'The Girl Who Danced with Brolgas'). Then animals.

Then Humour - 'Bears in the Night', 'Mrs Wishy Washy'.

Then Picture books of unfamiliar concepts - cars, shops, men on the moon, cities, etc. (The older children show interest in the print.) Then festivals, ceremonies, both Aboriginal and other nationalities.

Then Others. ...

Table 4 - the ACAP Test

(There are 5 tests in this series, graded in difficulty. It was left open to the testee, the teacher in Outstation A, how many of these she wished to attempt).

Number of correct completions by Teacher A

Test No.	March 1985	October 1985
1	12	17
2	7	9

On both occasions she completed the first 2, increasing her score on each one, the first one by quite a significant amount. This is a very encouraging result.

WRITING

The motivation to write is not strong. The children and teachers see little or no purpose in it. The visiting teacher's time at the Outstation is short and crowded. Getting the children to write, when each student requires a great deal of individual assistance and motivation is not high, is time consuming. Accordingly, insufficient writing is done in Outstation schools.

Each child was involved in the production of four pieces of writing over the period of the Bookflood.

1. A caption for a photograph.
2. A hunting story.
3. A holiday story ('published' as part of a letter to the researcher after the July visit).
4. A short Christmas story/letter.

It is difficult to see any improvement in the children's or teacher's writing as a result of the Bookflood at this stage. The children are reluctant to take risks. They want what they write to be correct. There is no evidence of creative spelling or attempts to solve a writing problem within the child's own resources.

Only one child, the most able reader, had the confidence and motivation to write his own story. The others needed constant assistance and reassurance. Only one child showed obvious enjoyment of print, by writing nonsense, spaced out in 'words' like a story. Nevertheless, the most able student used an arrow as an editing

device to insert two words which may be a reflection of some writing 'modelling' being introduced by the visiting teacher. Two of the children have recently introduced direct speech into their stories. This may well be an outcome of exposure to greater story reading, especially of texts which feature direct speech. In general however, the children are happier to dictate their ideas to the visiting teacher and have her write it or type it, then copy some of it themselves. One such example proves that some are in fact quite capable of composing lively texts.

SUMMARY

When considering the data, it appears that at least some of the objectives of the Bookflood were realised. The Burt Word Recognition test showed that two of the better readers made significant gains when given greater opportunity to practise their emerging skills.

The children do seem to have developed concepts about print. The children's attitude to books has become very positive and reading a more enjoyable part of the school day.

Disappointingly, any gains in reading have not been realised in written work, at least up until the end of the project. This area needs much more attention, as writing and reading are completely interdependent. There does seem to be, however, a greater understanding of story form.

The wider community has been sufficiently attracted by the project to become reading models for the children in a very natural way.

Perhaps the most pleasing result of all is that the Outstation teacher's own reading skills improved significantly.

CONCLUSION

Concepts about books were expanded. Not only were the teacher and children exposed to a much greater number of books, but to a much greater variety. They experienced the different functions of books - books as word banks, sources of information, stories, laughter, books as a visual delight and as a novel experience to push, pull, pop up, put fingers through etc. Important ideas about the handling of books and their care and maintenance were developed.

Certain broad concepts about books and reading behaviour were developed. The Outstation teacher was alerted through completion of the attitude survey to the kind of behaviour she should be looking

for and actively encouraging in the children. The children heard more stories read both by the Outstation teacher and the visiting teacher. Some of the adults in the community were also drawn to read the books, thus providing some of the modelling necessary for the children's eventual success.

These gains are not reflected fully in the statistics. The loss of the Control Group was a disappointment, but demonstrates fluidity and unpredictability of the situation in many Outstation communities. The tests were devised by non-Aboriginal personnel and in a foreign language. All testing under such circumstances is not conducive to producing fair and equitable results.

There were two clearly demonstrated gains. The jump from 25 to 38 in one child's word recognition score and a good improvement in the Outstation teacher's score on the ACAP test were significant. It appears that those whose concepts about books and reading are already most developed, stand to gain most from greater exposure to print.

The lack of improvement in writing is disappointing but perhaps understandable. Writing has generally been seen as a later development than reading and has been comparatively neglected. In reality of course the two are complementary. Being a 'writer' illumines much of the reading process. This is an area which needs greater emphasis in the Outstation situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Outstation A in this study, it is recommended that the level of books going into the school continues to be as high as possible. Since it appears that the number of books originally planned proved rather overwhelming, this supply does not require to be a 'flood', rather a steady flow.

On the premise that a longer period of exposure to a Bookflood would produce more dramatic results, it is further recommended that this study be duplicated in another centre, to provide support for the findings of this study and perhaps confirm them more convincingly. To do this it is suggested that the period of the Bookflood be over a period of 18 months - 2 years.

For this purpose the Concepts of Print Test should be improved, and a list of words from the children's reading scheme could be substituted for the Burt Word Recognition Test, so that the initial scores would not be so low.

I would further recommend that the focus of a future research project might be writing, and the effect greater attention to writing development has upon reading skills. To what extent do children learn to read by writing?

However, it is still undoubtedly true, and has been the premise underlying this research project, that children also 'learn to read by reading'. If Outstation children are to be given a chance to succeed in mastering this far reaching skill, books must find their way, in sufficient quantity, into Outstation schools. The findings of this study are, that over a period of eight months, a group of Outstation children and their teacher developed a more positive attitude to books, learned to handle and take care of them and made some gains in understandings about the reading process and in reading skills.

ADDENDUM

In June 1986 the Burt Word Recognition test was administered again. The scores are as follows:

Number of child	Age	Score March 1985	Score October 1985	Score June 1986
1	15	25	38	42
2	13	14	13	17
3	9	4	5	19
4	8	2	6	21
5	10	1	0	0
6	12	0	0	2
7	6	Pre reader not tested	2	Not tested
8	8	Pre reader not tested	Not tested	Not tested
9	15	Not tested	0	7
Teacher		36	36	46

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