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ESTABLISHING POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILDREN IN THE EARLIEST YEARS OF SCHOOLING

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There is little doubt that the most effective teacher of Aboriginal and Islander children would be a person from the community in which the children live, or at least one who shares many of their life-ways. However, until Aboriginal and Islander children have access to teachers from their own cultural groups, it is important that what has been learned about how best to provoke a learning environment for them is readily available.

Research concerning what constitutes relevant education for Aboriginal and Islander children is constantly changing the perceptions and practices of committed mainstream teachers. There is currently a lot of information which is accessible to teachers of older children. It is the intention of this article to review some of the information available for the teachers and care providers of children in the very earliest years of the process of education and in what may well be their first contacts with mainstream adults.

The subject of relevant and directed education for mainstream children with whom teachers almost completely share a variety of language is one which has given rise to a vast literature. In the last two decades there has been an explosion of knowledge concerning the inter-relatedness of language and thought, of the ways in which children create their own first language in interaction with the significant persons in their environment, of the development of the cognitive abilities of very young children, and of the particular demands which the language of schooling requires of them. In addition, it is now clear that children need time, opportunity and engagement with language in thought-provoking situations and in relevant contexts to move from the less to the more cognitively demanding language and tasks of the upper school. From research, it has become apparent that children from middle-class homes are prepared in distinctive ways by their parents for engagement with the process of schooling and that they are supported in their learning by an environment which in many respects equips them to meet the demands of schooling.

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Some of the literature appears to suggest that there is a good "match" between the nature and quality of the interaction in the home, the kind of language used and the environment of the earliest years, and that of school. This is probably because both the home (i.e. parents and children) and the school (i.e. the teacher) share common ways of using language and also share much the same common daily experiences: they live in the same kind of houses, with a similar range of objects around them; their neighbourhoods share far more similarities than differences and they engage in the same daily routines for much the same reasons. So "natural" is this state of affairs that some urban dwellers accept it as the status quo and never need to question the possibility that things could ever be any different.

What of Aboriginal children coming into close contact with the schooling processes of mainstream society for the first time? For a start, the child's daily life experiences at home and in the community may be anything from vastly different to subtly different from that of the caregiver/teacher and other children in the group. The effects of prior experiences are far more obvious in a community following a quite traditional lifestyle than they are likely to be in rural or urban situations. The caregivers in such communities can hardly ignore or overlook that "differentness". But in urban and the not so remote rural areas for example, it is possible to overlook or to misinterpret the differences in life-styles and the measure to which their cultural patterns have significantly shaped the ways of behaving of children from these areas. In what follows, a study is made of some of the factors which may be different for a child coming from an other than middle-class home.

First, if s/he lives in an extended family environment, in all probability s/he will be used to having two or more older generations of people present. In some circumstances, it is the role of any teenage children to care for younger children, looking out for them, entertaining them, feeding and dressing them and keeping them out of trouble. When a small child steps out of line it is more than likely that the teenager will be disciplined for having failed to care adequately for the child.

Quite young children, particularly in communities which are still traditionally oriented, are given a great deal of personal freedom as a means of developing responsibility for their own behaviour. In not so distant times, this personal freedom served to develop in children those ways of behaving in keeping with a life-style lived on the move. If separated from the group while they were in transit, this personal responsibility was instrumental in providing that the child would have a better chance of surviving until relocated.

Today, children may still be permitted to decide when and where they will sleep, when they will wash or eat, who they choose to be with and where they want to go, as long as they are not endangered. They are, in effect, treated as small adults. The effect of such personal autonomy is that they may not have as much directing from adults as, for example, some mainstream children whose days are more-or-less organised by one adult, generally the mother. It could be expected that a child whose early years had been shaped in these methods of child-rearing would arrive at school with expectations considerably different from those of the mainstream child.

For the first time, a child coming into a care situation, a pre-school or infants' class, may be in the control of a non-Aboriginal person whose notion of authority may be quite different from that of his/her own group. Mainstream children are socialised into behaving in certain ways in relation to adults other than their parents. It is probable that the behaviour one must practise toward teachers has been learned from a very young age, taught both by parents and older siblings. The children from minority groups have also been learning what is acceptable behaviour toward significant adults, but just who is a "significant adult" and what is acceptable behaviour, varies substantially across cultures. For this reason it is suggested that teachers attempt to explore the family networks of the children in their care, attempting to keep an open mind and not to make value judgments, as these may be counter-productive. Customary ways of behaving are firmly integrated into the values and belief systems of a culture for reasons which may not, however, always be immediately apparent to the novice.

The non-Aboriginal adult may be the first such adult with whom the Aboriginal child has been required to share intimate daily contact. It may confuse the child that this adult appears to have the right to organise him/her in unfamiliar ways, around relatively unfamiliar objects, using unfamiliar language in unfamiliar ways. The child may initially find it difficult to relate, but once s/he feels comfortable, s/he may feel s/he wants to express the same kind of affection and in the same manner, as s/he would to other familiar adults in her/his small world. This may take the form of patting or playing with the teacher's hair or hands, or touching or patting the face, or winding arms around the shoulders or cuddling close to the caregiver. This may make some white teachers uncomfortable, but it is the normal way of small children to show affection.

When children are in care, all of the children they are mixing with are of about the same age, with no mediating teenager or young

adults to look out for them and absorb some of the hardships of life. This is a good reason for having some older children, say Grade 7s, come to play, interact with and read to the children: a useful strategy, particularly if the older children share the life experiences of the younger ones.

Another factor which may induce stress is the insistence on routines. Mainstream teachers have internalised the effects of the ever-present clock in ways which must sometimes mystify children from groups who do not divide up the day as we do. Some children may not be used to having their activities controlled very much at all, so may find it difficult to adjust to the 'normal' routines which are a part of early education experiences.

If the child is in a group where s/he does not share a language, or a variety of language, or rules for interaction with a significant number of others in that group, s/he may initially be very quiet or shy as s/he struggles to make meaning of this new world through use of an unknown language. One researcher comments:

If children do not speak up in classrooms in ways that teachers expect we should assume that they have learned different speaking rules at home.

(Clay, 1985, p.34)

The advantage of having a parent or an aide who shares the child's language and who is familiar with the child's prior experiences is enormous. Only people who have had to try to make themselves understood in an unfamiliar language, talking about things they know little about, can understand the stress of small children trying to cope with a new language in an unknown situation.

The rules for interacting in this new environment may also cause confusion for the young child. The rule that "the numbers have it" does not apply in the school setting. Although the adult is in the minority she seems to have participation rights over the children. She can, and does, have far more turns in conversations than the children. She can break in at any time without fear of reproof. She can use language for many functions: asking for and giving information, controlling, praising, correcting, explaining, excluding. She can ask questions for which she already knows the answer - and expect a reply - even when she suspects that a child does not know the answer, or wasn't even listening. She can ask rhetorical questions of the children, such as, "Do you think I don't know what you are up to?" - questions which often don't require any reply at all, and can expect that the children will be able to identify these fine differences. She can ask questions

which are in reality oblique commands, such as, "Would you mind packing up now, children?" and expect that the children will share with her such fine-tuned socio-linguistic knowledge, which is of course, in common usage in middle-class homes. She can also often expect that the children, while sharing a room with her, will use only the language at which she excels. This expectation requires that speakers of a variety other than standard English will abandon the possibility of communication with others of their group, and struggle to express themselves in a language over which they have only the most basic command knowing there is the chance that their efforts will not be appreciated.

Mainstream children coming into care for the first time have to learn to modify previous behaviour by constantly monitoring the teacher's speech, each other's speech and their own. But to a certain extent they have been prepared in the home for this change, both by talking about what "teacher" will expect, and the very kind of language that their parents use with them. For children from minority groups, whose socialisation has taken a very different route, sometimes the new situation must appear as a rather intimidating experience.

It is widely accepted now that Aborigines have successfully maintained an intricate creative life-style over many thousands of years, in the course of which they have developed a culture based on and interwoven with high levels of oracy. Literacy as we know it did not develop. Aboriginal civilization, renowned world-wide for the creative genius of its art forms, never felt the need of symbols to represent language in the way in which literacy was brought to birth in other civilizations. For this reason, some Aboriginal homes may not have collections of books to the extent that middle-class homes do. Research conducted in America indicated that children needed to be exposed to a wide variety of print materials in the home in order to be able to learn to read. Now, however, research from New Zealand indicates that what is important is not the amount and variety of literature in the home, but the way in which literacy is made to become functionally relevant in the life of a small child (Clay, 1976).

Those Aboriginal homes where children see parents doing cross-words, looking up and writing down phone numbers, writing letters to relatives, reading TV guides and form guides and the football pages, are providing children with evidence of the relevance of literacy, and it is important that we do not undervalue this level of functional literacy. However, as we have seen, the literacy required of children in school moves very quickly from the experiential to the very abstract. For this reason, any involvement

with books that we promote in the early years of schooling, both of mainstream and minority children, will build on what they have learned in the home, and will assist them to develop enjoyment of reading, and engagement with the processes of functional literacy.

The value of self-selection and self-direction in relation to the activities and materials available in care centres or pre-schools is well known. Many of the materials and experiences provided in the preschools and care centres are, for mainstream children, familiar ground. Even so, teachers and caregivers encourage them to explore novel ways of interacting with the materials by providing an environment where their problem-posing and -solving potential may be further developed. However, sometimes children need to be gently led to understand the potential of a learning experience. This is probably something of which we need to be more aware in the case of Aboriginal children. It is possible that the range and quality of toys and materials in the care centres and preschools may not be in evidence in some Aboriginal homes. It is also possible that the children will have toys of various kinds available to them. But even in homes where other necessities take precedence over buying toys, the non-availability of toys and materials in their homes does not indicate that these children are deprived - many millions of children over the world have grown up in surroundings which have not had large numbers of things - toys, books and other objects to interest and entertain, and they seem to have managed very well. As with mainstream children, they may need to be encouraged to engage in exploratory behaviour since some of the objects, and ways of using such objects, may be unfamiliar or unknown to them. They may need the opportunity to discuss what they will do, how they will do it, and why it is important to them. After all, if they are only there to "play", they might well ask why they couldn't have stayed home and played in their familiar, comfortable environment and not to have put themselves at such risk.

It is probable that we are now aware of how important it is to give small children the opportunity to discuss the activities in which they are engaged in as much detail as they can give. This involves the use of open-ended questioning which seeks to draw out the child's ideas and aids the problem-solving processes of the maturing mind. It is hypothesised that this involvement with thinking and "languageing" raises to a conscious level a heightened awareness of what they are doing, as it supports and provides the context for the expansion of the child's language to discuss the concepts involved. One-to-one conversations leading to the development of problem-solving behaviour is a useful servant of both language and conceptual development. An effort to determine the minority child's dominant language or dialect will help in

deciding whether these conversations would best be in the first or second language/dialect, and form the basis of strategies designed to assist the child to develop the thinking processes required of schooling in both the available languages. For the development of the mother tongue, parents and teacher aides may be able to play a very useful role.

Above all else, our attitudes to the children, their language or dialect, their homes and the community from which they come, will help to decide our usefulness in providing them with educational experiences of value to their developing minds and abilities. It is accepted that the "teacher factor" is of greater significance than the best-designed curriculum materials and well-planned programs. Our positive attitudes may make it possible for the children to engage with the processes of schooling without having to give up anything that is central to their own personality and culture, as they accept the very heavy demands of an imposed system of schooling.

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