



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*.

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THE LEARNER-LEAD CURRICULUM IN ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS

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Background.

My students live in three remote Aboriginal community. It is my job to teach them English and the other Primary school subjects. My aim is to produce bi-lingual and bi-cultural individuals. By giving them the ways and means to access white Australian society, they are more able to make an informed decision about the life-style they want and feel confident to interact with white Australia. Many students rarely do more than one or two years at the high school in Alice Springs so there primary education is very important. Students from remote communities rarely do well academically. Some of the more valid reasons suggested for this are (see Harrison 1979 and Christie 1984 for a more detailed discussion of this):

- Low attendance rates: Areyonga has a very good attendance record. Ninety percent of children who are on the community come to school. However, most students are absent from the community for some part of the year, visiting relatives, going to ceremonies or sports weekends with their families. These absences last from a few days to a term.
- Cultural differences: The differences between the culture in which they live and that represented by the school environment are enormous. Even in a bi-lingual school such as Areyonga where an attempt is made to incorporate Pitjantjatjara and Aboriginal cultural activities, the situation and the learning styles are still predominantly Western.
- Limited need for their Western learning in their everyday lives. Most of what the students learn at school is used only at school. Once they finish school much of what they have learnt is forgotten. English is restricted to listening to the television, minimal shop exchanges in Alice Springs and filling in government forms. Maths is hardly ever employed. To budget your

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shopping money, you take the items you most need to the check out and see if you get any change. If you get a lot of change, then you go and buy something else. This is a very effective shopping strategy although non-western in its approach.

The problem of low school achievement must be seen as a problem perceived mostly by Westerners. The community wants their children to come to school. School meetings are well attended and often parents will come in to see what is happening at school. There is a belief however, that just by attending students will learn (Christie, 1984 p. 354). My term for this is "osmosis" schooling and in many ways it reflects cultural differences. In Aboriginal society children primarily learn by watching how things are done or listening to stories which pass on traditional knowledge (Ilyatjari, 1991 p.6). There is no need to interact with the knowledge as there is with Western learning.

Aboriginal students have a range of skills which are not often recognised by the teacher or the students as useful in classroom learning. One of these skills is an awareness of language and language learning. For many of them English is the third or fourth language they have learnt. By the time they reach the big-kids class, students know when to use what language to which people.

Students are also making major decisions about their lives. Decisions which in western society are usually not made by individuals until they are in their late teens, early twenties. By twelve they decide who they want to stay/live with, what they will eat and how to fill in their time. Parents or guardians will rarely tell them what to do or force them to eat three nutritional meals a day. Independence is encouraged from an early age. Students, however, do not see school as a place where they make decisions.

2. THE EXPERIMENT.

In the second semester of 1991 I tried to incorporate into their schooling experience some of those skills which I felt would make education more relevant. The students may then be able to transfer what they learnt at school to their interactions with white society.

Within the constraints of a primary school curriculum, I wanted to introduce some of the ideas of a learner-lead curriculum and in particular the process syllabus.

At the end of first semester, the parents decided to use some grant money to help send the students in the big-kids class to Adelaide. It seemed a perfect opportunity to have the students take the major decisions about the excursion and use their language-learning skills to identify the opportunities for improving their English.

A trip to Adelaide limited the types of decisions which needed to be made to ones which the students had knowledge about and previous experience with. If decisions which they had to make were too far away from the areas in which they usually used their decision-making skills, then the students opted out of making decisions.

I had previously tried to encourage students to think about what they wanted to study at school. They were broken into small groups and given a piece of paper on which was written the different subject areas. They were told to consider what we had done so far during the year in these areas and to think about movies or television programs which had interested them which might suggest something they would like to study at school. They were then supposed to discuss all the ideas in their groups and write down the best ones. All but one suggestion was to repeat things we had already studied in the year.

This activity failed because it was unlike anything they had been asked to do before in a school situation. Making decisions about their schooling was not like making decisions about their lives and they had too little interaction with white society to know what interested them and what was the sort of things they needed to know to interact with white society.

An excursion to Adelaide was certainly something which interested them and the decisions which had to be made about it were similar to those they already made daily. I hoped that the excursion would become a stepping stone to allow them to think that it was acceptable and expected for them to make decisions about their schooling, the same as it was alright and expected of them to make decisions in their dealings with white society.

2. 1 PREPARATION FOR THE EXCURSION

The preparation could be broken down into three activities where the students were given the major decision-making role.

Activity 1.

Students were given a range of brochures, divided into small groups and told to decide where they wanted to go in Adelaide. Although the groups were mostly free choice, I ensured that the younger children and the poorer readers were in groups with good readers. Once they had decided where they wanted to go they had to write down the names of the places. When this was done we came back as a large group and tried to put it altogether into a timetable.

As we were only in Adelaide for five nights, we could not do everything they wanted to do. They worked that activities outside Adelaide would require too much time travelling. Other activities were rejected because when they read the brochure completely, the activities turned out to be advertising gimmicks for shops. My only suggestion was a trip to the museum to see the fossils and dinosaurs. All the students had enjoyed studying dinosaurs earlier in the year and had not realised they could actually see some bones if they went to the museum. They accepted the suggestion and it was put into the timetable.

Activity 2.

Choice of the menu for the trip was achieved in a similar way. We were to stay at the Adelaide Youth Hostel and would be on a tight budget, so cooking for ourselves was essential. We had done quite a lot of cooking at school and so they had some idea of what western cooking involved (in the community, cooking is done on an open fire outside; which was not an option at the Adelaide Youth Hostel). The students were divided into small groups again, given a recipe books and asked to choose what they wanted to eat. They began by choosing things with appetising pictures. When they were asked to consider what ingredients were needed and the how complicated the recipe was, they choose more realistic menus. Having written down their suggestions, we came back as a big group and tried to organise their ideas into a basic menu. This was also done quite well and we organised a fairly well balanced diet which seemed to suit most people. The school would supply three meals a day, including a drink. Anything else they wanted, they would have to buy themselves. (As it turned out, although the Youth Hostel had cooking facilities, they did not have enough cutlery and crockery to cater for as large a group as ours. Although we followed the essence of the menu we ate out much more frequently than we had expected.)

Proposed Itinerary for Adelaide Trip (25/10/91 - 1/11/91)

- Friday:** Depart Areyonga
Depart Alice Springs.(on the Ghan)
- Saturday:** Arrive Adelaide 3:00 p.m.
Settle into Youth Hostel
- Sunday:** Attend Lutheran Church Service
River Torrens (and ride on the paddle boats)
Festival Centre
Museum
- Monday:** Zoo
Movie
- Tuesday:** Cleland Wildlife Park
Mt. Lofty (to see the city lights at night)
- Wednesday:** Shopping
Beach
- Thursday:** Depart Adelaide (1:00 on the Ghan)
- Friday:** Arrive Alice Springs
Arrive Areyonga

Proposed Menu

- Friday:** Lunch Sandwiches, fruit and juice
Dinner Bar-be-que chickens, rolls, fruit and juice
- Saturday:** Breakfast. Sandwiches, juice
Lunch Sandwiches, fruit, chips and juice
Dinner Pies (and veg), Fruit Salad and Ice-cream Cordial
- Sunday:** Breakfast Eggs and Bacon, tea.
Lunch Sandwiches, fruit, juice
Dinner Fried Rice and Sweet and Sour Pork
- Monday:** Breakfast Toast with jam, tea
Lunch Sandwiches, fruit and juice
Dinner Hungry Jacks
- Tuesday:** Breakfast Omelette, tea
Lunch Sandwiches, fruit and juice
Dinner Picnic on Mt. Lofty

Wednesday: Breakfast Toast with jam, tea
 Lunch Fish and Chips
 Dinner Spaghetti Bolognese

Thursday: Breakfast Eggs and bacon, tea
 Lunch Sandwiches, fruit and juice
 Dinner Chickens, rolls and juice

Friday: Breakfast Sandwiches, fruit and juice

Activity 3.

This was done over several sessions and involved the students identifying the situations in which they would have to use English and then practising these situations in role play. Situations were identified in a number of ways. Initially in discussion as a large group.

Then they were given a questionnaire which had a range of questions on what were they most looking forward to, and why we were going and whether they thought their English was adequate. The students had previously filled in a questionnaire for the mining industry which had been an excellent awareness raising activity.

The questionnaire on Adelaide was not well done. Questions on why we were going to Adelaide and what we were going to learn while there, were not understood by the students. "Why" questions are particularly hard for Aboriginal students to answer. Meaningfulness for an activity usually comes from immediate feedback (Harris, 1980 p. 87). This reinforces the Aboriginal Child's perception that school activities are useful for school and nowhere else. These questions were then tied into what sort of learning they would need in Adelaide; what maths would they need in shop encounters, what English would they need in shops, on the train, at the Youth Hostel and at the zoo. Students were then asked to take their questionnaires home as homework so they could discuss the questions with their parents and relatives who may have visited Adelaide. We then came back together to discuss the answers. Overall, the only situations identified were shop encounters and it took a lot more direction from me to think about other situations in which they would need to use their English. At a later time a variety of situations (although shop encounters were still the most popular) were role played. The students enjoyed these role play but a lot of Pitjantjara still seemed to be incorporated into their conversations.

They were also videoed talking about themselves. They would be asked about themselves especially at the Youth Hostel. We only did this once and we certainly needed to do it more often. The majority of students either whispered or did not say anything at all even though we had gone through a discussion about what they could say and they were encouraged to write down their spiel.

2. 2 Other Activities

A large portion of activities which we did in the second half of third term and the beginning of fourth term was aimed at Adelaide. Maps of Adelaide and the zoo were used to orientate students. There were also spelling and comprehension activities. In maths, we worked on the budget for the trip as well as working out prices and change needed in the canteen which the teachers ran to raise funds for Adelaide. In the October school holidays I took the students into Alice Springs on two separate occasions (girls one day, boys another) to purchase their clothes and bags for Adelaide. This was a preparation for the shopping that the students wanted to do in Adelaide.

3. Results and Discussion

The students thought that the Adelaide trip was absolutely marvellous and had a terrific time. However as a learning activity about western culture, it was not successful. In many ways it was like taking a group of Japanese tourists who came to see but not to interact with the culture of Adelaide. In shop encounters they used minimal language to purchase what they wanted. However, no one seemed dissatisfied with what they bought and most students seemed confident in their interactions. The woman working in the cafeteria on the train even commented on how the students knew the cost of their purchase and what change they needed.

In all other situations most students refused to talk. At the Youth Hostel and other places some students began to make monosyllabic replies to enquiries towards the end of our stay. With hindsight, I might have aggravated this by being too ready to talk on their behalf because I did not want people to think they were rude or stupid. Perhaps if they had been left to answer, they may have become more willing. However, we did meet up with some white people who had spent time in Areyonga in the past but who the majority of students remembered. Even with these people they were shy and hesitant.

We needed to do much more role playing and videoing of student interactions. If the school owned its own video camera then students could not only record themselves and their role plays but could become used to replaying the videos and discussing how good (or realistic) they were.

At the zoo, the wildlife sanctuary and the museum, the teachers were understood by most students. The visual clues helped but when the lessons were discussed later most students seemed to understand all of what had been said although once again they did not interact with the teachers.

It had been many years since Areyonga students had been away on an excursion. Only one of these students had ever been further than Alice Springs so it could be that my expectations were too high. If another trip is organised for 1992, they will be better able to make decisions about what they want to do and what they will need to know so they can interact more freely. They would have to agree that this was one of their aims.

Once the trip was over, it was very difficult to get the students to discuss the trip and what they had done. I had hoped that the students would write a report about Adelaide. I had introduced them to report writing before we had gone away and we had written one jointly. Very few students even made an attempt at a report, instead they retold the trip with lots of 'and's and 'then's. Most of what they wrote was not as good as their usual standard. In trying to make them reflect on Adelaide as a learning experience, I tried to start a discussion. They were not really interested in such a discussion and the results (set out below) were not very enlightening

When we went to Adelaide, what did we learn?

- * about slippery slides
- * about fish and shells which live in the sea
- * about reading, sleeping, eating and colouring on trains
- * about how to ask for things from shops
- * about what to do on planes
- * about different types of transport
- * about animals
 - where they lived
 - made lots of noises
 - what they eat

They also felt that their English was better in reading, writing, listening and maybe talking.

In trying to incorporate a negotiated curriculum into classrooms with remote Aboriginal students, it is the reflection stage which needs the most development. If students are not able to think about what they are learning and why they are learning, what is taught at school, will be imposed

by the white Education authorities whether in the form of the teacher or in the form of the Department's curriculum. However, it will remain classroom bound and never be useful in interactions with white society. A negotiated curriculum would have a better chance of improving western learning in the classroom as well as providing insights into how western society negotiates, something which is not achieved at present.

In developing the reflection stage, there are two steps which need to be developed. Both steps involve making what is often implicit, explicit to students. Neither step is easy and it will take some time for the students to develop the necessary skills.

- The first is increasing interest and knowledge about western society. The advent of modern technology such as television, telephone and computers could help although the students will need to learn information retrieval and analysis skills. If this is not done then it will still be up to the teacher to provide all the input for lessons.
- The second is to make students aware of the purpose of the learning and how they learn. Discussing these issues only touches the surface. The results from such a discussion I held with my students, are outlined below.

Why do you come to school?

- * Learn Pitjantjatjara (speaking)
- * Maths
- * English (speaking)
- * Sports (like cricket)
- * Singing
- * Homework
- * Handwriting
- * Cooking
- * Painting
- * Christmas presents

(one child said she came to school to sticky beak, which at least showed she understood what the discussion was about)

How do you learn?

- * Teacher telling
- * Writing
- * Thinking about it

What skills from school will you need when you finish school?

- * learn about money
- * writing in English and Pitjantjara
- * talking in English

4. Conclusion

At the present time, the education for remote Aboriginal students is not very effective in teaching literacy and numeracy skills, yet alone providing them with enough skills to negotiate with white Australia. There are no magic overnight solutions.

However, developing the skills so that a negotiated curriculum can be implemented would be useful. You are then making students aware from the start of the purpose of their learning and allowing them to define for themselves the purpose of their learning. These students are only at primary school yet many of them are making decisions which in western society are those of adults. It is only appropriate then that at school they be respected as adults and not treated as young children who are unable to understand why they are at school. By helping students develop these skills early on should help strengthen the role of their own culture at school because they rather than the white teachers are making the decisions about what should be incorporate. There have been concentrated calls in the last few years to have more community interaction in what goes on in the local schools. It follows on from there that students themselves should also be included in the decision making process.

In developing the skills needed for a negotiated curriculum, an excursion such as the one we made to Adelaide could be used as a starting point. However, it can be limiting in the type of decisions which can be made. Many of the activities which I undertook were nothing more than awareness-raising activities and did not allow them to interact for effectively with white Australia. There is hope that if similar activities were run in 1992, students could build on these awareness activities.

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SISTER SCHOOLS

In April 1991 the National Reconciliation and Schooling Strategy was established by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The National Reconciliation and Schooling Strategy is a component of the broader Reconciliation Process whose aim it is to educate non-Aboriginal Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the contemporary situation. It is the aim of the present Australian Government to achieve reconciliation by the year 2000.

Lois O'Donohue (Chairperson of ATSIC) says that:

Reconciliation is two complementary processes to be undertaken by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Non-Aboriginal Australians need to extend dramatically their understanding of Aboriginal realities. They need to understand what we have contributed to this nation and what we can and do contribute.

The National Reconciliation and Schooling Strategy aims to achieve the objectives of the reconciliation process throughout Australia's schools; To teach non-Aboriginal Australian children from kindergarten through to secondary school and beyond to understand Aboriginal culture and contemporary issues.

The Strategy is made up of four components

- Aboriginal studies curriculum development
- Teacher education (pre-service and in-service)
- Development of Local Aboriginal History Kits
- Sister Schools Scheme

The Sister Schools scheme involves the establishment of an Australia wide communication network between schools with few or no Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students and schools with more than 20 Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students. All primary and secondary government and non-government schools are invited to participate. Schools can link up with another school anywhere in Australia. Schools will form penpal relationships with their sister school, however it is anticipated that the scheme will reach beyond this. The implementation of the Sister Schools Scheme will be the responsibility of the schools involved. Any enquiries on the Sister Schools Scheme can be directed to Sister Schools Co-ordinators located in DEET offices in each state.