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ABORIGINAL CHILDREN LEARNING TO TALK AND LEARNING THROUGH TALK

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Part 2

" USING ORAL LANGUAGE TO LEARN ACQUIRING AN UNDERSTANDING OF READING, WRITING, SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION ".

Many children come to school with a limited understanding of, and experience with, books and reading. Many do not have a clear idea of what 'words' are, nor of 'letters' and 'sounds' in words. Some of the Aboriginal children with whom we were working faced these difficulties. In addition, most of them pronounced certain sounds in nonstandard ways.

For these reasons we introduced a two-strand approach to help them develop concepts of reading, writing, spelling and punctuation. One strand, using experience reading techniques, focussed on reading as a meaning-making process. The second strand used a variety of techniques to help the children develop reading-related skills such as;

- the conventions of reading from left to right and from top to bottom of the page;
- the ability to identify significant visual similarities and differences, first in specially prepared pictures, and then in abstract symbols which shared characteristics with certain letter shapes; and
- the development of concepts of letters (and words) and of the association of various sounds with letters in words.

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Both strands relied heavily on oral language activities. At first the two strands operated in parallel, but as soon as the children began to see links between them, the teachers capitalised on these observations, quickly bringing the strands together.

Let me illustrate this by describing how puppets were used to link letters and sounds with reading and spelling (and writing and punctuation).

Because we believed that concepts such as 'word', 'letter' and 'sound' were too abstract, we introduced a team of puppets to help the children acquire these concepts in ways which were more meaningful for them. We decided that in the first year of schooling we would introduce only a limited range of letters and sounds;

- some which have a high level of consistency between sound and symbol and which are pronounced similarly by Aboriginal English and Standard English speakers;
- one which doesn't appear commonly in Aboriginal English usage (h), often leading to a stigmatisation of Aboriginal Speech;
- one other which doesn't appear commonly in Aboriginal English usage (s), but which is important in the formation of key Standard English structures (plural forms, verb forms, possessive forms).

Because we wanted a high level of consistency between sound and symbol, no vowels were introduced in the first year of schooling. Instead we focussed on a small number of consonants, developing a range of understandings, so that most children had few difficulties dealing with the remaining consonants, all of the vowels and some common blends when these were introduced during the second year of schooling. Each puppet was given a name that reinforced the letter/sound that was to be associated with it. In order, the puppets introduced in the first year were Henry (Hh), Susie Seasnake (Ss), Mumma Moo (Mm), Tottie Turtle (Tt), Googa Goanna (Gg), Pippo Possum (Pp), Willy Wombat (Ww), and Foofle (Ff). Puppets for the remaining consonants and all the vowels were introduced during the second year. The names given to the vowel puppets stressed the variety of sounds which could be represented by these letters. Abraham Ant (Aa), Ed the Emu (Ee), Iggy Ibis (Ii), Otto Oogloo (Oo), and Ug the U Bug (Uu) which

the children quickly renamed as "the ugly b*.*.*". Both upper and lower case letter forms were associated with each puppet. The puppets were introduced to the children (often in exciting ways) as members of the class and they soon developed personalities of their own. (We even had to call their names when we marked the roll and invariably some child would answer on their behalf, "I'm here".) Children played the game "Puppet name likes" eg. Mumma Moo likes milk (mud, money, munching, etc.) The children soon understood the convention that the puppet likes things or people whose names begin with its sound. Hence, "Mumma Moo likes munching." Before they understood this relationship, many children, working from their real world knowledge about cows, argued quite logically that Mumma Moo likes grass. (In fact, it was discussion of this particular item which often helped children first make a real link between puppet, letter and sound.) It became a ritual to "read" a puppet's book and to make a new, illustrated entry each day. Each puppet's book grew throughout the year, becoming a valuable adjunct to the experience reading program. Before long the words associated with puppets were also placed on illustrated lists, displayed around the room as a 'dictionary' which could be borrowed and copied from when a child wanted to write a particular word.

Norman: "Miss, how do you write the word 'pumpkin'?"

Teacher: (Looking up from working with another child) "Who likes 'pumpkin'?"

Norman: " Pippo"

Teacher: "Right. Pippo likes pumpkin. Have you looked on Pippo's list Norman?"

If Norman happened to have hit on a word which wasn't yet on the appropriate list, there would be great excitement, with the teacher often stopping the work of the whole class while the new word was added.

Teacher: "Norman's found a new word for Pippo. Pippo likes 'pumpkin'. Watch while I write the word (and draw a picture of a pumpkin) on Pippo's list."

And almost certainly a significant number of children would soon find their own reason for writing the word 'pumpkin'. The children often provided quite sophisticated statements.

Year One - November

Kristine: "Willy likes watering the garden Wednesday.
Willy likes watering the weeds."

Teacher: "How does Willy go along?"

Kristine: "Willy walks and waddles."

Teacher: "What colour does Willy like?"

Kristine: "White-Willy likes white.
Willy Wombat likes walking on white wool.
Willy Wombat is a winner."

Henry (Hh) played a number of special roles. First, he encouraged the children to use a sound which they did not normally use. Second, as the first puppet presented to the class, he helped with introductions, especially when these were linked with the structures 'I'm' and 'I am'.

Hello Henry. I'm Lorraine.

Hello Henry. I'm Kurt.

The children often took it in turns to carry (and be) Henry and to respond for him.

Hello Lorraine. I'm Henry.

Third, although he was used for introductions he was very shy and he often hid in his house. Sometimes he hid under the house, or beside the house, or inside the house, or below the floor, or above the ceiling (the roof of his house lifted off to let him do this). So Henry helped us introduce all of these spatial terms. Henry often hid outside his house. A daily activity was to find where Henry was hiding. The rule was that his hiding place had to be identified by questioning before looking.

Teacher: "Today, Henry is hiding under something."

Russell: "Is Henry hiding under the book?" (Teacher directs Russell to look.)

Class/Russell: "No. Henry is not hiding under the book."

And so on until someone was successful, thus winning the right to hide Henry the next time. Of course, it wasn't long before children started hiding Henry on their own initiative and sometimes he stayed hidden for a week. I remember one particularly sad day when a tearful child appeared at my office and told me, "Mrs S says you're to come to our room straight away." I rushed to the room to find all the children in tears. Even Mrs S looked a little redehyed. It turned out that, on the day before, someone had hidden Henry in the waste paper basket - and he had been cremated!!! I had to hurry back to the office to order another Henry who, thankfully, was rushed to the school by - helicopter. (Well that's what we told the children.) The daily writing of a page in a puppet's book was usually accompanied by a lot of talk. Usually, it also involved the use of punctuation conventions.

Year One - March

Teacher: "Well, we've had a lot of good ideas for Henry today.
Let's write Michael's story,

Henry said, 'I can jump over my hammock.'

Watch as I write.

(Writing) Henry - said - now we put the comma and
his talking marks -

What did Henry say, Michael?"

Michael: "I can jump over my hammock."

Teacher: "That's right. (Writing) I - can - jump - over - my hammock.
Now the full stop and his other talking marks. "

Lorelle: (Excitedly) "Look". There's three mumma moos."

Teacher: "Yes. You're right. (pointing to my hammock)
And what about here?" (pointing to jump).

Lorelle had make the link between puppet and letter and sound and word as elements of reading.

Once this understanding was achieved the children quickly used it to link writing and spelling and reading.

Year One - July

(The teacher is writing Brian's sentence, I can put some chips in my wheelbarrow.)

Teacher: (Writing 'Brian') "Brian - watch this one" (pointing to the letter r).

Norman: " henry's "

Teacher: "Yes. It's like Henry's little letter but henry's goes up higher.

Teacher: (continues writing) "Brian said - There's his talking marks. What does he say?"

All: "I can put some chips in my wheelbarrow."

Teacher: "Yes. (Writing) You can make 'I' straight down can - put (there's tottie's letter) - some (children call out 'Susy's') - chips - in - the (we know that word don't we?) - wheelbarrow. What does that one start with?"

Faith: "Willy Wombat's. Like Wednesday."

Faith had not only made the link with this text but had generalised beyond it.

Year One - November

Teacher: "Tell me about something you might be going to do or something you might be going to make."

Jacky: "After school I'm going to make a hat."

Teacher: (Writing). "What letter does Jacky start with?"

Children: "J "

Teacher: "Yes. J - like jumping. What about said?"

Children: "Susy's sound."

Teacher: "And what's at the end of it?"

Children: "Dudley's - d."

Teacher: "Jacky said, 'After school I'm doing to make a hat.'

(Writing) Let's write after - We've learnt that word before
What about school?"

Teacher and Children "Susy's sound and Katy's (c) (Katy Cockatoo has two letters (k, c) which often sound the same) and Henry's.

What says 'oo' in the middle of the word?

Yes Otto's double sound, and what's at the end of school ?

Lallo lamb -1 .

I - straight down.

am - Abraham Ant and Mumma Moo.

going to - go and ing, Tottie's and 'o',

make - Mumma's and a, and Katie's sound.

There's a long 'a' sound so we have to put e at the end.

a - Abraham's on his own.

hat - Henry, Abraham and Tottie. Yes. It's got 'at' on the end."

By now, many of the children are using letter names, some are using a combination of letter and puppet names, some are still using puppet names only; but all are making links between letters, sounds, writing, spelling and reading - links that have been negotiated through talk.

Part 3:

INTEGRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH MULTIPLE OUTCOMES

Many talking activities lead to writing and reading and to activities in other curriculum areas.

A typical example is a cooking lesson. The decision to cook pikelets leads children to guess what ingredients will be needed.

Will we need ...?

Further discussion leads to the formulation and recording of a recipe.

We will need two cups of flour.

We will need some milk. (and so on)