



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.

A WRITING PROGRAM: RAWA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

** Jill McDougall*

Background

Rawa School is an Aboriginal community school at Punmu in the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia. The community has a population of around 150 people whose first language is Manyjiljarra. The children have limited access to English as there is no television or radio and the community is over 800 kilometres from the nearest service town of Port Hedland.

Rawa School is independent and all major administrative decisions including the format and implementation of educational programs are referred to the school's governing body (i.e. all members of the community).

The school follows a bilingual/bicultural model and, until recently, initial literacy was taught solely in Manyjiljarra until the students' third or fourth years of school. During 1993, the vernacular literacy program was supplemented with an introduction to English literacy for all primary school students.

The following case study documents a successful writing program undertaken at Rawa School in the latter half of 1993.

The Writing Program

This program was introduced to a group of up to twelve beginning writers aged from seven to ten. While no formal assessment of the program has been undertaken at this stage, the enthusiasm of the students for writing and their individual progress over a short period is indicative of the strengths of the method used.

* Jill McDougall - teacher at Rawa Community School - Punmu,
P.O.Box 316 Port Hedland W.A. 6721

Modelled writing

For a number of reasons, this group of children all had limited literacy skills (some had none) and, concomitantly, they had limited knowledge of written English language structures. For this reason, each writing session has begun with modelled writing, usually following on from a shared experience. It is important that modelled writing be presented in an atmosphere of shared intimacy so the students are seated on a mat close to the teacher who sits on a low chair with access to an easel for writing .

The modelled writing sessions have two main goals:

1. To expose young writers to different genres.

I have found that the children will internalise the different characteristics of genres if each format is presented contextually rather than drawing attention to each specific component. For example, after we had shared the experience of making apple juice, I encouraged children to negotiate a procedural genre with questions such as, "What do you have to do first?" This sentence structure invited the appropriate response, "You get the apples and the juicer..." and so on.

Care is taken to model text which requires a range of language devices.

During the past three months, the modelled writing sessions have included such activities as: a) the teacher sharing a letter from a friend and modelling a reply, b) the teacher writing some directions for a computer game the children were keen to try, and c) the recount of a favourite story which was written by the teacher and children together (negotiated text). Recount of literature is particularly powerful as it offers immediate reinforcement of "good" language structures and new vocabulary. I have been impressed with the facility of children with very little English to understand and use quite sophisticated vocabulary in their own retelling.

2. To exposure new writers to appropriate "writing behaviour".

Before and during the writing of a text, the teacher demonstrates the thinking behaviour that characterises a writer. For example, giving some thought to subject matter (this is linked with determining who the audience will be), exploring different ways to begin a piece of writing, being prepared to change chunks of text and to cross words out and so on.

The finished writing is read and reread by the children and left on the writing easel as the children will often refer to the text later for spelling or when attempting a similar genre such as writing a letter.

The strategy of choice

At the completion of the modelled writing session, the children return to their desks and choose their paper and pencils from a range provided. This element of choice is an integral component of this writing program and seems to suit the highly individualistic and independent nature of Punmu children. They are able to choose not only where they write (on the floor, on a separate table or at their desk), but what they write and why (i.e. target audience) but also what they write with. Often, but not always, children are inspired to do something along the lines of the writing they have just seen modelled. If a child doesn't feel like writing, she is given a range of choices including drawing a picture and adding dialogue or a caption. Writing is always a voluntary activity and 90% of the time the children want to write.

From the beginning, the children have overwhelmingly chosen to write on blank white paper and after the initial one or two sessions, all were ruling their own lines to suit their personal requirements for length and spacing. As the length of the stories is increasing, the lines are becoming more closely spaced.

Peer group learning

A lot of the learning that happens is gained by the children from watching others. In the first session, many children simply wrote words (or their equivalent) at random over the page but they were quick to copy the writing conventions adopted by more advanced writers as they became aware of them. The informal seating arrangements have enhanced this process and often little writing circles develop where children help each other out with spelling or, for some, letter formation.

From the beginning, the children were reluctant to make 'mistakes' in their writing, especially in relation to spelling. We also found that parents (who regularly drop in on lessons) were not keen to see children include misspelt words in their writing. My own observation is

that children will “learn” wrong spellings if the word is not corrected fairly quickly, as opposed to being edited by a teacher in a subsequent draft. Consequently, children are now encouraged to explore a variety of venues to find a correct spelling (e.g. from a picture dictionary, from a classmate and so on) and to approach the teacher when all else fails. This seems to work quite well as long as the child’s search for a word does not interrupt her writing flow and, needless to say, the blackboard is covered with words by the end of a writing session.

Writing drafts

The issue of writing a series of drafts is still being experimented with for this group. Most children are now happy to do a rough first draft and a good one on the computer after a conference with the teacher. We are lucky to have the use of the software “Kidsworks” (compatible with Macintosh) which will read the children’s stories back to them and thus help them to analyse their work for clarity of expression and mechanical errors (to say nothing of the tremendous thrill this facility provides!) Consequently, much of the final re-drafting is done on the computer. For some children, the process of laboriously searching the keyboard letter by letter is far too tedious and they will type a few lines and then allow a more competent typist to finish the job. Computer time is a good opportunity to teach individuals about capital letters and other useful mechanical details as they are ready. As with the teaching of genre, I have found that Punmu children learn mechanical skills best, not by explanation, but by example. That is, by reading a piece aloud with the child and indicating where full-stops (for example) are needed with the barest of explanations. Through lots of examples, the children seem to internalise the rules for a particular device while by-passing the medium of an oral explanation. I think that for children with limited English, the use of oral explanations can sometimes increase their perplexity as they are forced not only to grapple with a new concept but one that is couched in unfamiliar language structures and terminology.

The Writers’ Circle

The first time I introduced a writers’ circle with this group, I was staggered by the outcome. In an activity related to our reading program (which preceded the introduction of the writing program), the children

had been given a worksheet activity which required them to put some dialogue into the speech balloons of two characters we had been reading about. In the past, completed worksheets had been displayed on the wall in the hope that they would be read by others (they seldom were) or stapled into folders to be taken home. On this occasion, the children were invited to bring their work with them to a circle on the mat. When they were settled, I explained that they would have an opportunity to share what they had written with the others. I had barely finished talking, when the circle disintegrated in front of me as children hurried back to their seats to either rewrite their piece or colour the pictures or add more dialogue. What had been a fairly mundane activity minutes before, had now become alive with the reality of an audience and was tinged with an element of personal risk which provided sufficient motivation to enhance individual performance.

The introduction of a writers' circle as part of the writing program was done gently as children gained the confidence to take risks. I needed to occupy the rest of the class with something absorbing (often a taped story) to allow a group of four or five to read to one another without embarrassment or interruptions. Stories were initially whispered by most young writers so that the audience virtually had to climb onto the reader's lap to hear anything. Children gained confidence by practising their stories onto a tape first and sometimes they needed to read to another adult or older student beforehand so they could remember what they had written. The idea of giving positive feedback after each reading is still being trialed with this group. Initially, I would model a response such as, "I really like your story Jeremy because I love swimming," and then ask other students to comment. The most frequent response was a rather lame, "That was nice," and, if pushed for clarification, the children would repeat what I had said. I felt that the children could sense that this part of the process was a little artificial (which, indeed, it sometimes was), and so now feedback is only given if it flows naturally.

The concept of a target audience is also central to the writing program and each child is asked whom she is writing for as part of the prewriting stage. Many a script has since made its way across the sandhills in dusty Toyotas to be read by cousins and brothers in neighbouring communities.

This writing program has only been in place for three months and it is staggering to witness the leaps and bounds in the children's writing over this period. Some children moved from a few isolated words to a page of sequenced and grammatically sound text within a few sessions of the program being introduced.

I am going to Broome
I am going Fishing
I am going swimming

18 - 8 - 93

I am going to Broome
I am going Fishing
I am going swimming

In the Broome
saw plane we bin go in
the little white car
big trailer in the
AIRPORT

9 - 9 - 93

In the Broome we saw plane we bin go in little white cart
(with a) big trailer in the Airport

The ugly Duckling
the duck was
sitting on ^{the} nest
and egg was hatching
and one was not
hatching. He was in
the nest. He was
hatching.

The little ducks was
growling, "you are
ugly." The ugly duckling
was crying. He went
to the creek

28 - 10 - 93

The ugly Duckling

the duck was sitting on nest and egg was hatching and one was not hatching. He was in the nest. He was hatching. The little ducks was growling, "you are ugly." ugly duck was crying. He went to the creek.