



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 School Reading Support Program

** Kel Dummatt*

Indulkana Anangu school, on the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Lands S.A. has about 70 students. The classes are CPC (pre-school), Reception, Junior Primary, Middle Primary, Upper Primary and Secondary girls and boys. At a staff meeting early this year, I proposed a focus on reading, across the school, for one term, with a review at the end. This idea was accepted by the staff.

As a staff we decided to particularly focus on developing the children's skill at using initial letter sounds to help them read new words. I devised a simple assessment test to determine the children's knowledge of initial letter sounds, and set about assessing all the children from the Reception class up.

The test involved matching letter cards to picture cards and saying the sound. I included the digraphs 'th', 'ch' and 'sh'

I tested the children, individually, away from the class in a separate room, saying that it was a game rather than a test. The children enjoyed doing it and competed to be next.

All teachers undertook to do extra reading with their classes. As the ESL teacher I combined whole class reading activities with a reading 'withdrawal' program. Although withdrawal ESL teaching is out of favour, for various reasons, in mainstream schools, the objection that it stigmatises children is irrelevant if all children are withdrawn for reading sessions.

I also organised two staff T & D sessions on 'How children learn to read', run by our on-site Anangu Teacher Education Program (AnTEP) lecturer and the principal, looking at-

* Kel Dummatt is a ESL Key Teacher at the Indulkana - Anangu School - PMB 8 Alice Springs - 0871.

(1) The four reading cues, viz., syntactic, semantic, graphophonic, picture cues, and-

(2) Cambournes 'conditions of learning': immersion, engagement, demonstration, expectations, approximations, responsibility, response, use.

Concentrated Reading Sessions

I decided to trial withdrawal reading sessions with students from all classes except the Secondary girls, who preferred to work in a corner of their large classroom. I worked with small groups of up to three students of similar reading abilities. With some students I worked one-to-one. There was a small vacant room available so we could work without distractions.

Each session lasted about 20 minutes and consisted of a strict routine which the children got used to, knew what to expect, and felt comfortable with. I found that all the students enjoyed the sessions.

At first children only wanted to read books that they knew or felt comfortable with, but after a while many started asking for harder books. This was very encouraging for me, as it meant they wanted to be challenged and to extend their reading ability.

Session Outline

1. Re-reading a preciously read book of their choice, with no help from me unless requested. This was seen as the chance for them to show how well they could read and, as their word attack skills developed, they could decipher difficult words.

2. Reading together a book we had been reading last session, or a new book. I encouraged them to use all their word attack skills for unfamiliar words. If necessary I drew their attention to the initial letter sound, a picture cue or where we had seen that word before. (I had a letter chart, made at the school, with pictures of familiar objects, on the wall, and a small copy clear contacted to the desk. After a while, students referred to this regularly without a need for me to prompt them.)

3. Re-read the book together with less help from me. Sometimes the children read a page each. If it was a new book I then asked questions to determine and re-inforce comprehension.

For fiction books "who,s in the story?", "what happened to them?".

For non-fiction "what's the book about?", "what did you find out"?.

4. Asking questions after they'd read the book such as: "Can you show me a word beginning with 'b'? or "where is the word 'can'?" etc.
5. Sequencing the words of a sentence from the story.

First, I shared out the words and said the sentence and the children put the words on the table as I said them. Next I let each child try to sequence the sentence. Some groups liked playing a game where everyone, including me, closed our eyes until the child had finished. Then we co-operatively fixed any mistakes.

6. Filling in a worksheet, involved, depending on the reading ability.
 - (a) completing words from the story (ie. with initial letter sounds - digraph, or medial sounds, such as 'oo' or final sounds such as 'ing', 'er', 'sh' missing) or
 - (b) a cloze based on a sentence/s from the book.

NB.

- * We only changed books after each child had mastered the language in it, ie. could read it without my help, could recognise all the new vocab in it.
- * I encouraged children at an early reading stage to point to all the words as they were reading.
- * I kept a set of flash cards for all new words introduced and used this occasionally for revision.

Selecting Reading Material

For each reading level I made a graded collection of suitable books. When selecting books I kept the following criteria in mind -

1. correct reading level for the child
2. lots of repetition for beginner and early readers
3. interesting for those children
4. good picture cues
5. help to develop language concepts.

Observations

1. Children enjoyed the sessions and expected to learn to read, or to extend their reading ability.
2. Reading abilities of all the children improved dramatically, especially word attack skills, and, more importantly, confidence in their own ability developed markedly.
3. The combination of the in-class reading focus and the withdrawal sessions, resulted in a general raising of the standard of reading, and also writing, across the school.

Review

The program ran for two terms. At the end I did a report, in simple check-list form, on every student, looking at whether the child:

- (1) had a knowledge of initial letter sounds
- (2) used them independently to try to read new words
- (3) attempted to sound out difficult words
- (4) used picture cues
- (5) were developing a sight vocabulary
- (6) remembered new words that were repeated in the text
- (7) used punctuation while reading
- (8) used contextual cues
- (9) used syntactic cues
- (10) could answer simple questions about the text
- (11) could 'retell' the story/text in their own words.

At a staff meeting, I gave copies of these reports to the respective teachers, and asked for feedback on the program. All teachers said they had noticed an improvement in all students' reading. One teacher, who also worked across the school, commented that there was a great improvement in the confidence of all students, particularly those who had previously had low self-esteem and therefore lacked confidence in their ability.

Overall, I felt the whole process was undoubtably worthwhile, and very rewarding for me, as a teacher I intend to follow this reading focus with a writing focus next term.