



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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BASAL READERS IN THE LANGUAGE PROGRAM

JILL McDOUGALL*



Most educationalists now acknowledge the pedagogical power of the Whole Language or Language Experience approach to the teaching of reading and other language skills. This approach is particularly valuable in remote Aboriginal schools where teaching resources can be made culturally relevant by centering learning around local and community driven experiences. Once a theme has been selected (usually around a personal or mediated experience such as an excursion or other activity or a Big Book), the children are immersed in the oral and written language that arises from this experience. Activities may include creating a negotiated text, modelled writing, co-operative cloze and formulating a personal response to the experience. A thematic approach seeks to provide sufficient repetition of language structures and vocabulary for children to increase their fluency as readers and to generally expand their skills as language users.

The experience of the ESL teachers at Rawa School has been that while this method is indeed a powerful tool for teaching language, not all children make significant process as readers. One factor is that, as in most Aboriginal communities, the school plays host to a floating group of children whose families are very mobile. These children tend to access

several schools in the region and each school may see the child for only a few days every few weeks. It is evident that most of these children are not progressing. They do not remain at one school long enough for the repetitive nature of theme work to have an impact on their language skills and it is difficult for teachers to build on the child's existing skills with little background knowledge of each child's educational experiences. Most of these mobile children have very low literacy skills and are unable to work independently on open-ended tasks such as personal writing. Also as social outsiders, they find it difficult to engage in shared processes such as the construction of negotiated text.

There are also a few regular students who are not 'joiners' and therefore do not engage readily in group activities. These students don't always benefit academically from co-operative tasks and their skills development is slower. On any day there will also be students who would prefer to work alone on a structured task. Finally, all children enjoy seeing the tangible results of their own progress and this is not always evident in a classroom where attitudes, skills and processes are evaluated holistically.

With these factors in mind, it seemed to us that our language program did not suit the learning styles of all children at all times, and for this reason, we decided to expand the program to include a half-hour session a day using a basal reader. A major advantage of commercial readers is that vocabulary is presented step by step and consistently reinforced with each successive book so that children with low levels of

literacy can quickly experience success at reading independently. Also, each child can have his or her own copy.

We chose the Northern Territory Department of Education publication, *Tracks*. Although this series is not visually attractive and the text is slightly stilted, the little books tell stories that reflect the lives of isolated Aboriginal children and the illustrations are realistic and endearing. Most importantly, the children love them.

Different children began on different readers depending on their reading level and our initial teaching strategy was simply to present children with a book commensurate with their skills and suggest they read it. The children's response was enthusiastic and they became skilful at meeting their own learning needs by asking others for help and by forming little reading groups with children on a similar level. The children clearly enjoyed the feeling of success in reading a whole book and tended to read and re-read the same book several times to gain fluency.

The children from the *floating group* (the occasional attenders) were particularly buoyed by the notion of a discrete reading task through which they could experience success and they began to approach their readers with confidence. It became evident however, that these children had few decoding skills and their main strategy was to memorise the text. We then introduced work books to accompany each reader. The role of these workbooks is to reinforce the vocabulary in each *Tracks* reader by reintroducing it in a range of contexts. The workbooks require children to complete cloze activities, yes or no? responses, word puzzles, story maps and assorted phonics activities as well as to find the odd word in a concept cluster, make lists and categories (eg. "Which of these would you find at Punmu and which in Darwin?") and draw and label pictures of events. As the children progress, the activities become more open-ended and are designed to take the

children beyond the immediate experience of the book. For example, children may be required to write a different ending to the story or to speculate about details of the characters' lives. All activities are constructed so that there is little room for failure while, at the same time, the children engage with the sight vocabulary in a range of entertaining ways. We also made flashcards for each book and children are encouraged to arrange these to create new stories and to record these in their books.

When each workbook is completed it is marked in conjunction with the child. This requires the child to read back all the work he or she has completed and to explain or justify decisions where necessary. This process allows the teacher to check orally for comprehension, to do some impromptu teaching and to evaluate the effectiveness of different activities. The process is time-consuming and time must be found when the class is engaged in self-directed activities such as free reading.

As time goes on, the activities developed to accompany each *Tracks* reader have become more and more varied. Complementary tasks from commercial resources are included as well as books from the library which reinforce specific vocabulary. We have also introduced a computer activity for each *Tracks* reader. By combining the illustrative facilities of the Kidsworks software program with the frozen text capability of Bank Street Writer, we are able to produce colourful tasks on the computer such as labelling pictures and completing spelling activities.

As reading time ballooned into a busy environment where everyone was involved in something different and yet everyone was on task, it became clear that we needed some process whereby students regulated and monitored their own activities. We then introduced individual work contracts whereby children tracked their completion of the set activities for each reader (see Appendix 1 for a sample contract).

The final requirement of each child before she moves onto a new book is that she be able to read the book (without prompting) to a classroom teacher. She is then awarded a star for her personal progress sheet before proceeding.

Since the reading program is individualised, children are always working at their own level and building on existing skills. They cannot fail to make progress on a day to day basis because they enjoy the books, the activities and their record of progress, every child is motivated. Individuals will often come into the classroom at odd times of the day (including weekends!) to resume their reading activities. Our more skilled readers have quickly advanced through the available readers and are now helping to author an advanced series which reflects individual interests. Current favourites are entitled *Ray and his Girlfriend* and *Anna gets Jealous*.

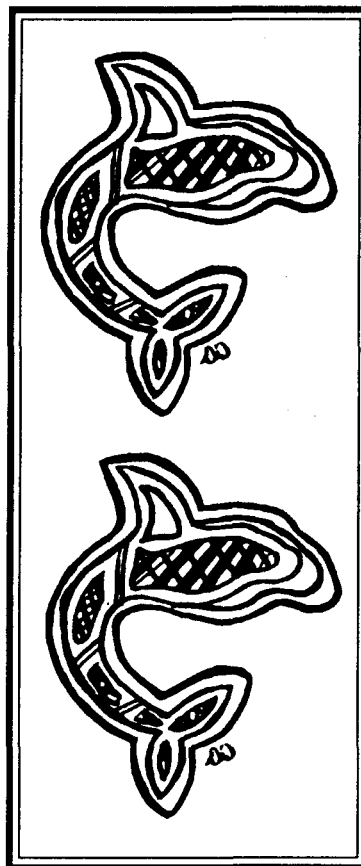
In some ways, we have come full circle in that a Whole Language approach has developed around the reading books. The difference however is that there is a built-in consistency in content and in the development of skills so that irregularly attending children are able to enter a reading world with familiar characters and accessible sight vocabulary each time they come to school. Another significant feature is that children can track their own progress. The value of this feature should not be underestimated as not all children inherently value reading but they do gain tremendous satisfaction from progressing through the series and this, coupled with an enjoyment of the stories, serves as a primary motivator.

An afterthought:

Since we began using *Tracks*, several teachers in Aboriginal schools have asked me where they can obtain a set and if they are still in print. We are an independent school in Western Australia but were able to purchase the series from the Northern Territory Department of

Education in Darwin. If teachers are interested, it may be worthwhile approaching the N.T. Department of Education to express support for continued publication of a reader for Aboriginal children. Ideally, *Tracks* could be updated with colourful illustrations and story ideas based on input from Aboriginal communities.

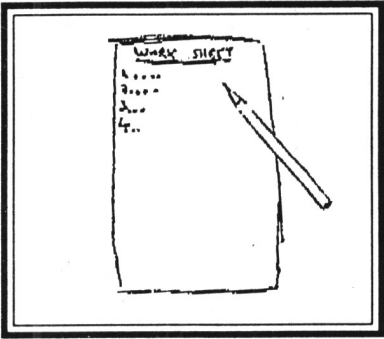
* ESL teacher and Teacher Linguist at Rawa Community School in Western Australia



See appendix 1 page 27

CONTRACT

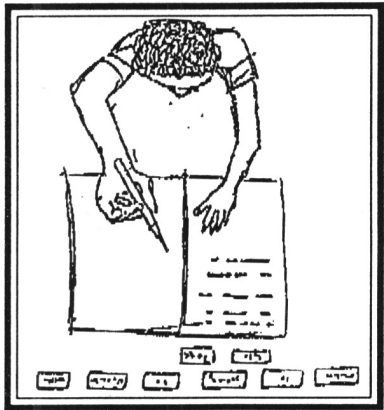
1. Read the book to yourself



2. Do the work book



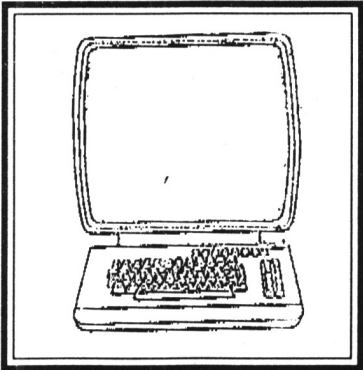
3. Read the book again



4. Make new stories with the flashcards.
Write these in your book



5. Do the computer work



6. Read the book to a teacher