



# 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.

## Section A: Teaching and Learning

---

### Direction and Support for New non-Aboriginal Teachers in Remote Aboriginal Community Schools in the Northern Territory

**Megan Clarke**  
*Brinkin, NT*



#### Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide some direction and support to new non-Aboriginal teachers in remote Aboriginal community schools in the Northern Territory. It is intended to accompany the school-based induction, and will hopefully lead to the development of more relevant school-based documents. Many are not only new to Aboriginal community life, but may be in their first position in a classroom after graduating. I have found through my experiences as a teacher in the same situation and then as a mentor to new teachers, that the feeling of being totally overwhelmed, followed closely by distress and panic, is very common. These feelings may be acknowledged by other staff, but are frequently not put into perspective, identified and dealt with as a part of culture shock.

These views are my own, based on my own experiences and particular contexts. Other teachers may disagree with both my interpretation of situations and my suggestions, but I believe this will provide a good foundation for those with little or no knowledge of the situation. As your experience increases so will your understanding of the teaching environment. I would like to stress that each teacher has his/her strategies and style that work best. If you find something works, stick with it. The schools and communities vary greatly; thus some strategies are more effective and appropriate for particular situations than others. Like new teachers anywhere, there will be a lot of trial and error before you feel truly comfortable in the classroom.

This paper provides an insight into differences in culture and how these differences impact on teaching and personal and professional relationships with Aboriginal teaching assistants (an integral part of a successful experience). Finally, pedagogies appropriate for Aboriginal students and a selection of useful resources and references are listed.

## Culture Shock

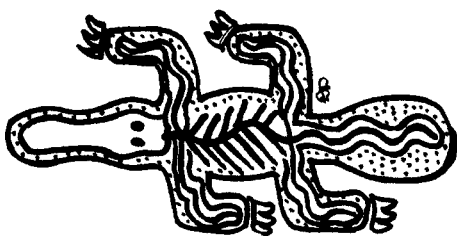
Culture shock occurs when a person spends a period of time in a foreign culture. It is caused by many factors. The following may be some of the many factors non-Aboriginal people may encounter when living in an Aboriginal community:

- they may not know anyone in the community
- the environment is new and unfamiliar
- housing may be a problem and your personal belongings may not have arrived
- language barriers
- there may be new and unfamiliar ways people relate to each other
- initial expectations may be unrealistic (sometimes romantic)
- there are difficulties in communicating.

Culture shock tends to manifest in the feeling that the novelty of the experience has worn off. The problems and issues become more pronounced and many people become, depressed, frustrated and easily irritated.

As a member of a minority (non-Aboriginal) in a foreign (Aboriginal) culture, you will at some stage suffer from culture shock. It is important to understand this reaction, and accept its impact on your life. The Northern Territory Department of Education has materials on this, but a particularly good document is *Aboriginal Store Training: Culture Shock*, compiled by Arnhemland Progress Association Inc. (1991) (see further reading and resources).

Be aware that it takes most people at least six months to settle in.



## Differences in Culture and How This Will Affect You and Your Teaching

The first and most important thing you need to understand is that every individual comes to any learning experience with their own understanding. Aboriginal children from remote communities have their own particular understandings based on their experiences, often within a traditional foundation. Rosalind Djuwandayngu Ruluminy (as cited in Deakin University, 1991: 83) states: 'The Balanda [non-Aboriginal people] do not understand Yolngu [Aboriginal] lifestyles, beliefs and we get involved in various ceremonies, and see the world differently'. These understandings will often be totally foreign to you. If you do not recognise and appreciate these differences, there will be confusion and inaccurate interpretations of what is occurring in the classroom. Accurate assessment and evaluation (as well as appropriate programming, activities and meeting the needs of the students) will be impossible.

This situation will be unlike anything you have ever experienced before, and you may feel as if you are re-learning how to teach. None of your teaching skills appear to be relevant to this situation. It is important to relax and take your time, for you will learn little if you are uptight and stressed.

It is important for you to get an understanding of the students, school, community and culture. Many non-Aboriginal staff members will give you valuable insights into community and school life, but it is important to make both personal and professional relationships with members of the community. This is how you will get real insight, and do most of your learning. It is important to remember that your understanding of life will be very different to any Aboriginal view, so be aware of this in all your discussions to avoid confusion. Most community members will appreciate the effort you are making to learn and understand their life, and will have an extraordinary amount of patience. Put yourself in their shoes. Would

you have the patience to explain what you identify as a simple concept over and over again?

In addition to this understanding, it is important to know the history of the community. There is often documentation of the history of the community from a non-Aboriginal perspective, but an Aboriginal perspective gained from talking to Elders will give you an understanding of why people feel a particular way about something. For instance, apathy towards education may be a result of racist teachers in the past.

It is also important to recognise local Aboriginal culture not just in the world view and life experiences (often referred to as positioning), but in the content and focus in schools and classrooms. Teachers often rely on Aboriginal teaching assistants to translate lesson content into the vernacular, as well as applying the unfamiliar to concepts with which the children are familiar. The children are more likely to understand a foreign concept if it is related to something they know. Ask where it is appropriate to integrate cultural contexts into learning. (This will be discussed in more detail later in this article).

It is also important to understand what the community wants the school's role to be. This may be available in vision statements, policy documents, bilingual appraisal reports (where appropriate), minutes from school council meetings or personal research including discussions with community members. You will need to check whether these documents reflect current thinking in the school and community (i.e. are they up-to-date) and that they were written by people who would be in a position to express the community's view. If the school is bilingual, bicultural or both ways (Harris, 1990) it will need to be reflected in classroom practice and programming.

As in Western (or 'mainstream') classrooms, parents in Aboriginal communities 'want their children to have a knowledge of, and respect

for their own culture' (Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, as cited in Deakin University, 1991: 52). Sometimes you may feel the parents don't care about schooling at all. This is *not* accurate. Parents may not be visibly involved in the school. This may be due to a number of factors. Often local community members are intimidated by the school (often in an unintentional way, but on occasions it is intentional – it is often easier for staff not to deal with community issues).

Be willing to recognise the following difficult issue: that we, often without intention, are racist, if for no other reason than the inability to recognise that Aboriginal people have different understandings to non-Aboriginal people, and that the way our society operates is typically based on and for a white, middle-class, male society. Be aware of how your perspective affects your teaching when evaluating your students; it may provide you with alternative and sometimes startling interpretations.

As a member of the group with the power in the community (even as a member of the non-Aboriginal minority), it will be easy to disempower not only your students but also the Aboriginal teacher. It is important to step back and allow the Aboriginal members of your class to take control of their learning, making it more appropriate for them.

Be willing to open your mind not only to new experiences and culture, but to a completely different way of looking at the world.

'Curriculum can be mapped out and shaped in a way which places importance on Yolngu [Aboriginal] knowledge and values.' (Bakamana (Mandawuy) Yunupingu cited in Deakin University, 1991: 101). Your interpretation and use of the curriculum documents should reflect your current context.

Yolngu children have difficulties in learning areas of Balanda [non-Aboriginal] knowledge, this is not because Yolngu cannot think, it is because the curriculum in the schools is not relevant for

Yolngu children and often these curriculum documents are ethnocentric (Bakamana (Mandawuy) Yunupingu (cited in Deakin University, 1991: 102) ).

This is something we as non-Aboriginal teachers tend to forget. There is an assumption that the children will be able to grasp concepts in other learning areas if the content is translated into the vernacular. However, these concepts and in most cases whole learning areas, may be foreign to the children. For example, in mathematics, Helen Verran states (Yirrkala Community Education Centre, 1991: 5) 'there was the view that mathematics was somehow culture free, just pure cognition and reasoning'. It is important not only to recognise the differences between the curriculum and the children's experiences, but also to learn to integrate Aboriginal knowledge into the non-Aboriginal curriculum.

Because schools are organised in Munanga [non-Aboriginal/western], ways conducted in Munanga language, and the education practice is essentially Munanga, Blekbala [Aboriginal] teachers feel threatened by their Munanga counterparts (Bindarriy, Yangarriny, Mingalpa and Warlkunji (cited in Deakin University, 1991: 163).

This reinforces the statement that you should step back to allow others to participate in the education process.

It is obvious from some of my statements that Aboriginal education is political. Decisions about what, how and who is taught in schools are still made by the powerful non-Aboriginal community. While this situation remains, do not be surprised if education in Aboriginal communities motivates a wide range of feeling, from apathy to rage. For example, Shirley Nirrpuranydji (cited in Deakin University, 1991) states that many schools practise cultural oppression through the use of a monocultural hidden curriculum. That is, a curriculum which supports the values and attitudes of the majority, white society.

You should ensure that local culture is an integral part of programs. It provides students with familiar and non-threatening content

and contexts, and is more likely to keep the children's interest.

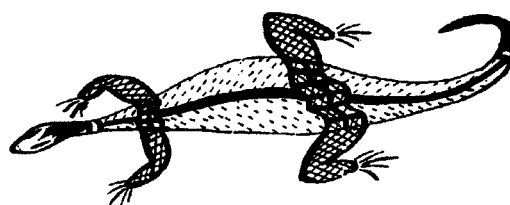
The more common experiences you have with your students, the more meanings you will share. This will lead to the ability to communicate about a wide range of topics. To reach this common ground you will need to participate in cultural activities.

You will quickly recognise that attendance (or lack of it) is, for a number of reasons, a major issue in most Aboriginal community schools (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). 'One reason is that school is irrelevant to the students' (Peggy Dawson and Valda Shannon, as cited in Deakin University, 1991: 66). This will cause you many frustrations, not the least being the inability to provide continuity through your program. You may need to trial many different strategies in an attempt to get better attendance. Remember to seek out Aboriginal staff for ideas.

It is not a good idea to use the vernacular when teaching. Graham (1986) is more direct – she says don't do it at all. The children need to be exposed to separate and correct models of each language to avoid confusion.

The children's language skills may not be at a level to enable them to meet the demands of the classroom. The Aboriginal teacher may have to spend a lot of time translating to overcome this barrier.

You will now be aware that many of the challenges you will face will be based on differences in culture and language. These differences are not insurmountable and if you are keen to learn about them it will not only add to common understandings, but may lead to enduring friendships.



## Team Teaching

Most Aboriginal schools operate with an Aboriginal teaching assistant working alongside each non-Aboriginal teacher. An Aboriginal teaching assistant is an assistant in name only. This person will be a teacher to both the children and you, an adviser, a counsellor, and the key to your success in the school and possibly the community. Remember both of you come to the classroom with particular skills and insights – it is important to recognise this and use these skills most effectively.

Empowerment of students and teachers involves planning being completed with Aboriginal input (at least 50%); the Aboriginal teacher is vital to this role. The working relationship will need to be built up over time, but it will be much easier if you start on an equal footing. It is difficult to change a team teaching dynamic once it is in place.

Beth Graham (1986) has identified a model (see Figure 1) which identifies the three main components of team teaching with an Aboriginal teacher:

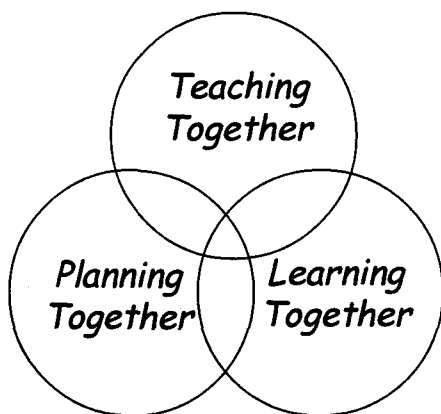


Figure 1: Team teaching

Each of these components is as important as the other, and success depends on give and take by both parties. Teaching and planning together are self-explanatory, but will take a lot of work to be truly successful. Learning

together is based on the concept of reaching mutual understandings through shared experiences and is most successful if it involves a number of teaching teams, and is led by different members of staff each session. Learning together may be about culture – lifestyle, history, family relationships, language ceremonies and appropriate behaviour, and education – what works well, resources, activities and strategies, learning about the prescribed curricula and traditional methods of learning and teaching.

A point you should be aware of is that Aboriginal teachers may be too polite to suggest possible classroom changes to suit themselves and the children, particularly if they think you will take offence or that you will see it as a criticism. Seek out their advice, or give them the opportunity and freedom to develop their own methods and strategies.

Paulo Freire (as cited in Graham, 1986) states that a relationship built on trust will lead to real learning, and that two-way communication is also a key (as identified in Figure 2).

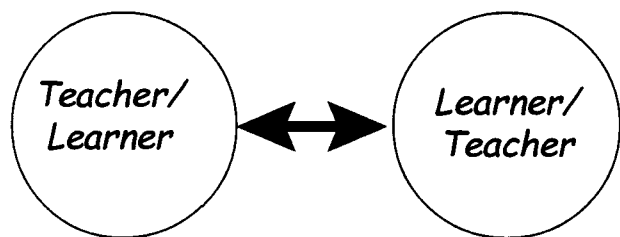


Figure 2: Two-way communication

This diagram supports the statement by Graham (1986) that non-Aboriginal teachers need to be learners as well as teachers.

## Pedagogies and Teaching Strategies

It is useful to remember that you may come to this teaching situation with knowledge of Western pedagogies, but you will have little (if any) understanding of Aboriginal pedagogies. Recognise your limitations and defer major

decisions on appropriate Aboriginal pedagogy to the experts, the Aboriginal teachers.

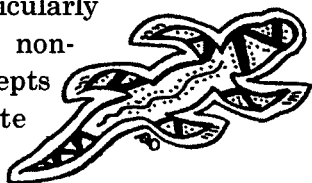
Mousley and Sullivan (1996: 45) identify six components of a quality mathematics lesson. These components are:

1. building understanding
2. communicating
3. engaging
4. problem-solving
5. nurturing and
6. organising for learning.

These components can be applied to all Key Learning Areas, and can be used in all teaching situations. These components can be applied to teaching in remote Aboriginal schools, but there are some further understandings of the environment that affect the way these components are used in the classroom.

Examples of how these components affect and may be applied to your classroom are given below.

- ◆ **Building understanding** – participate in and encourage activities familiar to the children (or based on their own understandings), e.g. hunting for crabs as a basis for study of the mangroves.
- ◆ **Communicating** – the younger the student the more likely the majority of this will occur in the vernacular through and with the Aboriginal teacher. Effective communication needs to be based on the previous component (building understanding).
- ◆ **Engaging** – This is an important part of educating Aboriginal students as they can apply the understandings they have gained to activities rather than depending on speech (particularly when applying non-Aboriginal concepts to concrete experiences).



- ◆ **Problem-solving** – there are obvious limitations on this component as a result of language barriers, but this is still an important and useful tool. It incorporates the important strategy of two-way learning, and will involve cross-cultural understandings. The most effective means is to apply problem solving to familiar situations.
- ◆ **Nurturing** – Aboriginal children often suffer from poor self-esteem in the classroom, a result of being immersed in a foreign environment. Nurturing is vital if the students are to feel successful. Success leads to more risk-taking in learning, an integral part of developing new understandings and knowledge. Be ready to praise all efforts made by students as a way of encouraging development of the student's school self-esteem, which is often separate to the child's self-esteem out of the classroom.
- ◆ **Organising for learning** – it is important that the children experience as little upheaval as possible when entering a classroom. This may include changing the learning environment (e.g. sitting on the floor with the children when teaching, instead of at desks) and the use of local knowledge and resources (including people/elders) in lessons. The aim is to make the environment as familiar as possible.

Traditional Aboriginal pedagogy (pre-Western pedagogy) is based on observing the world. Life is filled with stories. 'Education was real and meaningful... The education process ... was naturally motivated for survival' (Deakin University, 1991: 53).

Aboriginal children learn principally through observation and imitation and this should be applied alongside the familiar Western pedagogies (the enquiry approach) as stated in Evans (1992). Aboriginal children will acquire an ability to understand English well before they are able to speak it. It will take many years for the children to become

competent and confident speakers. It is important for you to understand that Aboriginal children may understand the concepts being taught, even though they are not speaking. This is often reflected in a silent period where they watch but don't participate. Don't assume this means a lack of skill.

Evans (1992: 2) states that:

Most Aboriginal children can learn effectively through:

1. Observing and imitating aided by a highly developed visual memory
2. Practising skills through observation and imitation, 'trial and error' and 'persistence and repetition'
3. Actively participating in real-life happenings rather than interacting with information
4. Problem solving based on reality. Intrinsic motivation stimulates the desire to learn
5. Regularly using concrete materials
6. Learning activities that are viewed as ends in themselves. (Skills are tackled as 'whole' rather than as a series of sequential parts.)
7. Exploring
8. Experimenting

You should discuss these learning strategies with the Aboriginal member of the teaching team, to identify the most appropriate and effective ones for the students in your class, and how best to apply them.

## Conclusion

As I have mentioned repeatedly in this article, probably the most valuable resources you will find will be the members of the community where you will be based. Be prepared to 'hear' everything they have to tell you – it will lead to a more successful and fulfilling experience. You will probably learn more than you will teach.

There will be difficulties and issues arising all the time, including the inability to connect Aboriginal knowledge, concepts and pedagogies to the non-Aboriginal curriculum. Just do what you can and ask Aboriginal teaching staff for help.

Unfortunately, teaching in remote Aboriginal schools is not recognised by mainstream educators as the challenging but rewarding task it is. It is important that more recognition and support is given to the dedicated staff working in these communities.

## Further Reading and Resources

The following are readings and resources, which are suitable and useful for your teaching situation:

- ◆ Evans, J. (1992). *Teachers' Guide for Remote Schools*. Perth: Ministry of Education, Western Australia

This is a great resource. It provides teachers with many insights into how Aboriginal schools (and communities) function. It is very detailed, but you must avoid assuming that it provides you with all the answers. Don't fall into the trap of ignoring the best resources, the people around you, particularly the Aboriginal teacher working with you.

- ◆ Harris, S. (1990). *Two-way Aboriginal Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

This book is the basis for many policies on Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory. It is heavy going, but worth the read, if you want a true picture of how Aboriginal education should and could work.

- ◆ Northern Territory Department of Education (1999). *Learning Lessons: An Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

This document will provide you with a detailed look at issues which impact Indigenous education. As with all reviews, it is long and often depressing (Indigenous education is in a terrible state), but definitely worth a read.



- ◆ Northern Territory Department of Education (1986). *Handbook for Aboriginal Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

If you are teaching in a bilingual school, this document will provide answers to all the general questions. Find your school's appraisal/accreditation document for specifics relating to your school (there should be an appraisal every three years and a document is produced by the school each time).

- ◆ Arnhemland Progress Association Inc. (1984). *Aboriginal Store Training: Culture Shock*. Galiwin'ku, NT: Aboriginal Store Training School.

This is a very valuable book. It is an easy read, and covers all the aspects of culture shock. It will help you to become aware of the effects and impact culture shock has on your life.

- ◆ Deakin University (1991). *Aboriginal Pedagogy: Aboriginal Teachers Speak Out*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.

This is a book which all teachers involved in any form of Aboriginal education should read. It gives you the Aboriginal perspective by successful Aboriginal educators. It will change the way you look at education and possibly the way you think and behave.

- ◆ Graham, B. (1986). *Team Teaching in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

If you are involved in a team teaching situation with an Aboriginal teacher (even if it is intermittent) you should read this book from cover to cover. It is recognised as the team teaching 'bible' in the Northern Territory.

Deakin University (1991). *Aboriginal Pedagogy: Aboriginal teachers speak out*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Evans, J. (1992). *Teachers' Guide for Remote Schools*. Perth: Ministry of Education, Western Australia

Graham, B. (1986). *Team Teaching in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

Harris, S. (1990). *Two-way Aboriginal Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press

Mousley, J., Sullivan, P. and Mousley, P. (1996). *Learning About Teaching*. Geelong: Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers, Deakin University and The Australian Catholic University.

Northern Territory Department of Education (1986). *Handbook for Aboriginal Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

Northern Territory Department of Education (1999). *Learning Lessons: An Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Department of Education.

Yirrkala Community Education Centre (1991). *Garma Mathematics Curriculum Workshop: Preparing Some Curriculum Documents*. Yirrkala, N.: Yirrkala Literacy Production Centre.

Megan Clarke has been a teacher for nine years, seven of which were spent teaching in remote Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory. She taught for three years in Wadeye (Port Keats) and four years in Milingimbi (a small island off Arnhemland). She was a mentor for graduate Aboriginal teachers for two years, during which she identified the lack of written support provided for all graduates, but in particular those non-Aboriginal teachers, who often knew nothing about teaching in these situations. She believes that all graduate teachers require a mentor, but in the absence of this, a support document should be provided which identifies many of the issues unique to this situation. □

## References

- Arnhemland Progress Association Inc. (1984). *Aboriginal Store Training: Culture Shock*. Galiwin'ku, N.T.: Aboriginal Store Training School.

