

## **Books and reading: Tools or toys?**

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*This paper explores the role of books and other texts in the teaching of reading in the early years with particular reference to teachers of Indigenous children. The value of engaging a young reader will be considered and explored as a vital aspect of the process of learning to read. The notion of learning to read, what that means, and how it is enacted in real life contexts at home and at school are also examined. The relationship of the community to the teacher and the school are also considered as part of the context in which young children learn to read. Some types of books commonly found in homes and schools and often associated with the teaching of reading are compared and contrasted to texts which may provide a bridge between the language of the home and the school.*

### **Introduction**

In a literate culture, we tend not to take the spoken language seriously. This is not surprising, since not only has writing taken over many of the high prestige functions of language in our society, but also our highly valued texts are now all written ones. Written records have replaced oral memories as the repositories of collective wisdom and verbal art. (Halliday, 1985)

Modern societies require literate workforces, and the ability to read and write is now regarded as a minimum requirement for even the most unskilled worker. There is now also an expectation that school students will begin to develop literacy at a very early age (DEST, 2005). This paper looks at the development of literacy at home and at school, with reference to the role of the local Indigenous community in this process and how the choice of texts for the teaching of reading relates to engagement and educational success.

It is argued that engagement with texts and the reading process, the relationship between students' homes, communities and the school setting in which the teaching of reading takes place, and the texts which students are reading are all factors which either impede or support the development of reading for every child. This is exemplified in the current discussion by reference to a multi-site case study, which is being undertaken to further explore the significance of text in the teaching of reading.

### **Engagement and success at school**

The continued failure of education systems in Australia to achieve success for Indigenous students has been recognised by all levels of government and has resulted in

a variety of responses. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Report (2000) Indigenous students were under-represented in the highest category of reading proficiency and over-represented in the lowest category (Lokan, 2001, p. xi). Under-achievement in literacy has been recognised as a barrier to educational success but it has not yet been adequately addressed for Indigenous communities. One response is to provide the type of local materials for teaching reading which both engage the young reader and reflect their lives and the language and lives of their local communities.

As Lokan (2001, p. xi) has noted, the PISA report also shows a correlation between engagement in reading and literacy achievement:

The engagement with reading scale was significantly related to reading literacy achievement. With a measure of attitudes, it is usually not possible to disentangle whether positive attitudes lead to better performance, or the other way around, or a mixture of both. Efforts to raise students' appreciation of books and motivation to spend time reading should surely be of benefit, irrespective of which of them causes the other.

Engaging young students in reading in the early years of schooling has repercussions for the whole of their education. Conclusions from recent research (DEST, 2005) show that, during the middle years of schooling, students with the lowest literacy levels make minimal progress and that this is compounded during the first two years of high school when there is a general decline in reading achievement. Poor and unmotivated readers spend less time reading as they grow older and therefore compound the problem (Lokan, 2001; Stanovich, 1986). It is therefore vital to engage and support emergent readers as a first step in educational success.

Indij Readers has attempted to address this issue by publishing books which reflect the lives and languages of contemporary Indigenous people. The books have all been written and illustrated by Indigenous people and are produced collaboratively with consultation and advice from elders (Ewing & Rushton, 2007). Margaret Cossey, over the last two decades, has personally worked with communities to develop three series of books.<sup>1</sup> This has now grown into the development of the Community Writers Kit which has resulted in a multi-site case study, which focuses on culturally relevant story development, being undertaken in communities spread across Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> The website for the readers can be found at <http://www.indijreaders.com.au/>

### **Learning to read at school and at home**

Marie Clay (1991) likens the development of reading to the development of oral language:

The child is provided with texts that relate to what he [sic] already knows about language and about the world. Then the teacher and child work together on the story. The child is required to problem-solve as much of the text as he [sic] can. (p. 202)

Clay suggests the real work in learning to read is problem solving with a competent reader as a support. This account of learning to read also incorporates the interaction of parents and children reading picture books together before the child is ever expected to read independently. This activity develops both oral language and knowledge about written texts (Clay, 1991; Painter, 1989), and may be undertaken with a child of any age and at any stage of literacy development. It is generally agreed that reading with children from a very young age can support the development of literacy and educational success because it develops engagement with the reading process (Lokan, 2001; Painter, 1989). The adult models successful reading strategies through interaction with the child around the text.

Young students are supported as they read if they are reading about a world they know described in familiar language (Clay, 1991). The stories published by Indij Readers are an authentic reflection of the lives and language of contemporary Indigenous communities because the process developed in their making leave all decisions about the content and wording to be worked out by the group or dictated by the individual Indigenous author and the local community. This process can be exemplified by reference to one site where Margaret Cossey introduced the idea of making an Indij reader about healthy food, *Good Tucker Bush Tucker*, as the Smith Family was keen to have a book that discussed that issue.

When the group was ready to write she introduced the idea of high frequency words and explained that small children didn't have to be able to read the book independently. She then asked the group to think about 'bush tucker' and what it might mean in their urban setting. The group included the authors: Aunty Jan Brown, Daphne Bell, Debbie Lewis, Debra Hinton, Michelle Harrison, Narelle Trist and

Sandra Burke.<sup>2</sup> They discussed the totems of the Dharug, possum and bat that would not have been eaten, and then went on to talk about plants like lillipilli that would have been eaten. They opened a basket of produce made from indigenous plants and began to discuss lemon myrtle, then the discussion moved to setting the book in a supermarket and bringing in bush tucker.

In the first session the group outlined the story and the characters were chosen and based on one of the authors and her grandchildren. Some of the written text was completed, but the details of the layout, written text in speech bubbles and thought clouds, and the pictures were completed in other sessions. The group dictated the text and decided on the names and personalities of the three main characters and this was recorded in double pages on a whiteboard and then photographed ready for compiling in the actual book (Doonside transcript, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

In the case of many Indigenous students who speak Aboriginal languages, creoles or dialects in the home, texts which reflect familiar subject matter or language will support the development of reading. If the discourse of the school is not congruent with the discourse of the home community, young students will require time to develop understandings about the new discourse of the school (Smith, 1999). One way of developing this familiarity is with texts which reflect the linguistic patterns of the oral or written texts with which the child is familiar in the home context, such as those being developed by the authors and illustrators of Indij Readers.

### **The relationship between the community and the school**

*I'm from Nambucca. Our totem is the dolphin so the people that's goin' to tell you stories here are going to tell you about fishin' ... so different areas ... have got different stories...you're going to have a beautiful collection it's just that you've got to have training there.*  
(Aunty Jan Brown, Doonside transcript, 2006)

The social and linguistic resources of the students' local community may provide important support to young readers, as these are the same resources a young reader will

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<sup>2</sup>All names are used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are taken from transcripts of interviews and discussions with participants in the research I am conducting for my PhD, *The significance of text in the teaching of reading: A case study of the development of an Indigenous Community Writers Resource*.

bring to a text. School can be a natural or unnatural setting for learning (Bernstein, 1990), and this strongly correlates to the oral language development of the child.

Although an individual child's *skills* as an emergent reader can be assessed (Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007), the relationship of the young reader's community to the school also provides vital information about how the child will approach texts and what challenges particular texts may provide (Bernstein, 1990; Clay, 1991; Painter, 1989). In developing Indij Readers' texts, listening to the local Elders and community members has been a hallmark of the process, as Cossey (unpublished interview, 2006) has stated: *... listen, if they want to modify it ... if they think that we can do it, but do it so that they have input ... so that's how we do it.* When interviewed about how she is developing the Community Writers Kit, Cossey has confirmed this process, saying that at first she does the protocols, organising to meet with elders and with Aboriginal Education Workers/Officers. She may also attend Land Council or Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group (AECG) meetings in the community to talk about what she wants to do: *I tell them what I'd like to do, ask them what they think about that, ask them if they think it's a good idea, ask them can I do it on their country.*

When developing the stories, Cossey has worked with groups of Aboriginal Education Workers/Officers and has included training in the use of computer software and hardware, digital cameras and video recorders to support the production of the materials. When the process of professional learning is fully developed and the Community Writers Kit is widely available, it is hoped that all Indigenous communities who undertake the professional learning will be able to produce their own materials which reflect their own local situations.

In all cases this local decision making resulted in the use of Aboriginal English and sometimes the use of words from Indigenous languages in the stories. 'Bridging the gap' is a phrase that can be usefully employed to describe this process, which has as its focus the development of resources which emphasise participation, engagement and relevance for the whole community. This is a focus which should be taken very seriously when attempting to develop links between home and school, especially for emergent readers.

## Conclusion

Without due regard for an individual's speech and social community, it is impossible to make the school an inclusive and natural place of learning for all children, especially Indigenous children. Inviting the young reader into the world of the school, and the wider world, by firstly reflecting their own world in their own words may begin a lifelong engagement with books and learning.

Developing literacy for young readers by using the linguistic and social resources of their local community can only strengthen the congruence between home and school and between the Indigenous community's values and the values of the wider Australian society. Kelli McIntosh, one of the authors of *Indij Readers*, explained:

*It's not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition but it's about us using our language as a platform to say well we're going to make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture... This is not the end it's only the beginning ... we look forward to what comes next!* (quoted in Ewing & Rushton, 2007, p.6)

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