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DEVELOPING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE WITH YOUNG ABORIGINAL LITERACY LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Literacy theorists Freire and Macedo (1987) linked literacy success with the ability to 'read the world' before being able to 'read the word'. This ability is critical for young learners to navigate the transitional phase from their home culture into new education based settings. Such transitions are particularly difficult for young Aboriginal learners, who need to adjust to a range of different experiences, demands and expectations relating to their cultural, language and social skills. Research has clearly shown that Aboriginal learners are a group that generally, will not succeed in the area of literacy and who are at greatest risk of not achieving adequate literacy skills to pursue a career of their choice.

Before these learners can become adept with school literacy they need an understanding of how oral language works in the classroom. This paper will use examples from the Narang Guudha (Wiradjuri language meaning little child) research project to demonstrate ways in which young Aboriginal learners, when given the time and opportunities to actively explore, discover and engage with classroom language, attempt to do this and in the process become familiar with the expectations of school. It will conclude with a consideration of the implications of this kind of data in the development of classroom discourse that will support such learners.

Discourse is about making meanings - i.e. about creating, giving, receiving, and sharing meanings. At the same time

discourses are about making meaning (or meaningful activity and interaction) possible. Meaning is absolutely central to human life and human beings, as sociocultural phenomena. (Lankshear, et al 1997, p. 16)

INTRODUCTION

The Narang Guudha research, which follows on from work done in the Baiyai Project¹, takes its name from the Wiradjuri² language meaning little child. Its purpose is to identify why young Aboriginal³ learners, in urban/rural town settings who seem to begin their formal education with as much enthusiasm and readiness as any other group of children, are the ones who are at greatest risk of not achieving literacy skills, adequate to function effectively in today's society. It explores how the differentiation between acquisition of sociocultural practices and the learning of formal literacy impacts on young Aboriginal learners in early childhood settings. It is based on the thesis that **Aboriginal children will not succeed in the formal learning of literacy skills until such time as they have acquired the sociocultural practices to navigate the new setting.**

The research uses ethnographic methodologies and is based in a school⁴ setting. The research team comprises an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researcher. This combination came about through both researchers having shared experiences across a range of educational settings, as well as individual expertise in Aboriginal studies and literacy and a strong commitment to ensure the voices of both cultures are heard. This combination means that the battle of interpretation,

understanding, along with the right to question and dispute occurs between equal stakeholders rather than in the classroom where the stakeholders have unequal power.

The full project draws on the literature of critical literacy (Freire, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gilbert, 1993; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Knobel & Honan, 1998); transition from home to school (Ladd & Price, 1987; Howes, 1988; Foulks & Morrow, 1989; Ladd, 1990; Victorian Department of School Education, 1992; Eller, 1992; Maxwell & Eller, 1994; Woods, 1999; Howard, Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dockett, Perry, & Howard, 2000); early literacy, (Hill, 1997; Department of Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Hiebert & Raphael, 1998; Young, 1999); early Aboriginal literacy (Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1997; Dunn, 1999); and cultural practice (Durkheim, 1956; Chinoy, 1967; Heath, 1983; Gregory, 1993; Singh, 1993; Kook & Vedder, 1995; Gee, 1996), much of which has previously been linked in the paper - *Context & Literacy: Young Aboriginal Learners Navigating Early Childhood Settings* (Simpson & Clancy, 2000).

This paper however, focuses specifically on a group of young Aboriginal learners during the period of time that they are first navigating their way between the home and school cultures (usually referred to as the transition period). It explores the way in which the notion of discourse provides connections across literacy, oral language and early schooling and considers how educators can support young Aboriginal learners during this critical phase.

Similar to all non-Aboriginal children, Aboriginal children face the experiences of beginning school and making the necessary adjustments. It is a time when children begin to acquire the identity of 'pupil', a secondary socialisation that is not necessarily negotiated but dependent on the expectations of the system and those who

work within the system rather than the individual (Woods, Boyle & Hubbard, 1999, p. 117). Young children want to fit in, they want to be part of the group, but often, because the construction of the 'ideal' pupil is seen as one '*drawn primarily from the lifestyle and culture of the teacher concerned*' (Wright, 1993, p. 28), it is not an automatic or easy process, particularly when the child comes from a different culture.

The relationship between culture and schooling has been a key theme in both sociological and literacy research from the classic works of Durkheim, 1956; Freire and Macedo, 1987, through to the more recent works of Singh, 1993; Gee, 1996; Lankshear, 1996; Lankshear, Gee, Knobel and Searle, 1997; Luke and Freebody, 1997 and Woods, Boyle and Hubbard, 1999. It is significant that Singh (1993, p. 35) suggests that, '*Culture and education*' are *inter-related processes of social organization and social structure within society*. This relationship gives rise to the notions of the dominant culture and what is at stake when a child from a minority group is in transition between home and school. It means that there is actually another layer of transition involved, one from their own culture into the dominant culture as well as the transition from the home to the educational setting. Gee (1996, pp. 88-89) recognises that the cultural models of non-mainstream students, rooted in their homes and communities, can conflict seriously with those of mainstream culture... and that the values of mainstream culture are, in fact, often complicit with the oppression of non-mainstream students' home cultures and other social identities.

Literacy theorists Freire and Macedo (1987) linked literacy success with the ability to 'read the world' before being able to 'read the word'. This ability is critical for young learners to navigate the transitional phase from their home culture into new education based settings. Such transitions are particularly difficult for young

Aboriginal learners, who need to adjust to a range of different experiences, demands and expectations relating to their cultural, language and social skills. Research has clearly shown that Aboriginal learners are a group that generally, will struggle to succeed in the area of literacy and who are at greatest risk of not achieving the literacy skills required to pursue a career of their choice. Before these learners can become adept with school literacy they require an understanding of how classroom discourse works. Educators are the key in assisting the Aboriginal students to make meanings and to achieve smooth and adequate understandings in this unfamiliar environment.

Rather than use the term 'transition' which can imply a one way journey towards something better, we use the term 'fire stick'⁵ period to highlight the way in which Aboriginal culture is not something to be left behind in this process, but an integral part of it. If Aboriginal children are to succeed in the school context then they need to know that it is safe and acceptable to move backwards and forwards between home and school cultures. Likewise, educators need to be informed about ways in which they can support them in valuing their own culture while they are also developing a 'social identity kit' (Hill, 1997, p. 9) that will enable them to be full participants in this new social network. This concept of a 'social identity kit' links directly to theories that relate to discourse. These have been articulated extensively by Gee (1996), Lankshear, et al. (1997), Luke and Freebody (1997), with Lankshear (1996) defining discourse as 'agreed upon combinations of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours, values, goals, beliefs, assumptions and the like which social groups have evolved and which members share' (p. 21). It is only when young children know and understand about these, that they can develop a 'social identity kit' for the situation in which they find themselves.

The important links between discourse and early schooling become evident when we consider Gee's comment that 'Children from non-mainstream homes often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses - including those concerned with school - in their homes, due to their parents' lack of access to these discourses. At school they cannot practice what they haven't yet got and they are exposed mostly to a process of learning and not acquisition. Therefore, little acquisition goes on' (Gee, 1987, p. 9).

When identifying constructions of literacy Anstey and Bull (1996) recognise Gee's differentiation between the process of learning and acquiring secondary discourses. They identify the purely cognitive process consisting of a set of skills which rests on the belief that mastery of these skills relies on a set of internal mental processes. Alternatively they identify a sociocultural construction which focuses on 'the visible aspects of literacy and how they are manifested in various contexts' (Anstey & Bull, 1996, p.152). Such a construction has direct links with the notion of discourse, in that it relies not only on the language itself making sense, but also on how it is practised.

This range of views relating to language and literacy learning as a shared process of making meaning or constructing discourse is further explicated through the work of Heath (1983), Wells (1986), Bruner (1990) and McNaughton (1995) who acknowledge that literacy learning, language and knowing is enculturated, it is embedded and shaped in a particular and specific culture. 'Our culturally adopted way of life depends on shared meanings and shared concepts, and on shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretations' (Hilton, 1996, p. 7), so as Luke suggests we need to consider that 'competence in literacy [therefore] not only entails how to read and write identifiable genres of texts, but it also requires strategic knowledge of how to read social situations and institutional rule

systems... Literacy is about cultural knowledge and social power' (Emmitt & Pollack, 1997, p.196).

This concept of literacy has critical implications for the discourse that emerges in the classroom for young Aboriginal learners. If as Gee (1990, p.143) suggests that in order to identify as part of a social network, learners need to acquire the socially accepted ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and of acting, then it is imperative that they are able to access the required social networks in a school context so they are positioned succeed.

Discourse Analysis

The sets of discourse analysed for this paper occurred in a classroom with fourteen Aboriginal children. This class was set up through special funding from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training during Term Four, in an unused classroom next to the kindergarten classes in a public primary school in an urban setting. The purpose of the preschool is to assist young Aboriginal learners with their transition from home to school. It is also to familiarise and assist the parents to become comfortable within the school setting. The preschool is in its second year of operation and is staffed by a non-Aboriginal teacher and two part time Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA)⁶. The Aboriginal Education Assistants continue to work with the children in their kindergarten classes during Term One.

To analyse the classroom discourse for this paper a sociolinguistic approach which relates to 'the effect of the particular patterns of interaction and the school/home differences on students and their learning' (Bull & Anstey, 1996, p. 110) has been used. Such an approach helps to understand how the school as a social setting advantages some students and disadvantages others.

The analysis has been organised, using the criteria from Lankshear's, (1996, p. 21) definition of discourse which includes aspects of linguistic behaviours, non-linguistic behaviours, values, goals, beliefs and assumptions

While we recognise that the vignettes used in this paper are complex and multifaceted in the ways discourse is being evolved and that a range of the criteria from Lankshear's definition are often evident we have endeavoured to take a major focus for each and to concentrate mainly on this.

Linguistic Behaviours

Table 1

'I know all those'
 Joanne goes over to chat with the researcher who is sitting at the back of the room.
 Joanne: 'I know all those.' (she points to a chart with pictures, colours and words)
 Researcher: 'Do you? Can you tell me about them?'
 Joanne points to each and gives the appropriate word – shoe, comb etc. When she gets to the cup she stops and points.
 Joanne: 'What's that?'
 Researcher: 'I'd probably call it a cup, what would you call it?'
 Joanne: ' I call it a mug, but you can call it a cup if you want.'

This example demonstrates the way in which linguistic behaviours are used by the both the researcher and the child to extend vocabulary but also to clarify, develop and negotiate meanings, that are appropriate for this setting.

All young children enjoy playing with words, and Aboriginal children are no exception. They are happy to experiment with words, and equally happy for others to do the same. In this classroom, the child was given the freedom to work with new vocabulary in her own way. While positive modelling of 'correct' forms was given and meaning negotiated the child's responses were also accepted, and considered to be an integral part of her language development.

Non-linguistic Behaviours

Table 2

‘Look what Linda did’
Jenny and Linda are two four-year-old Aboriginal children in a school setting. Jenny has been attending for five weeks and Linda has been there two. Linda attempts a puzzle and works quietly with minimal success. Jenny happens by and watches. She notices Linda is struggling, so she moves in close and begins to pick up pieces and put them in the correct places. Linda watches. Jenny completes the puzzle and smiles at Linda. Linda smiles back, then she turns the wooden puzzle over and begins again. Jenny stands close while Linda again attempts the puzzle. Although she assists Linda with a few verbal cues she does not help her place any of the pieces into the correct positions. When it is completed Jenny looks at Linda and they smile at each other. After Jenny leaves, Linda tries the puzzle on her own. About half way through Jenny comes over again and watches without speaking a word or providing any assistance. When Linda has finished Jenny picks it up and takes it over to one of the researchers saying ‘Look what Linda did’.

During this interaction there is minimal use of spoken language yet powerful messages are being conveyed through the non-linguistic behaviour. Jenny is supportive of Linda without removing her independence, by using processes of demonstrating, checking, approving and congratulating. By giving Linda all the credit for the final product Jenny enables Linda to stay in control and to maintain her feeling of self worth.

The modelling that Jenny provides is useful in two ways. It shows Linda how she might help other children in the class (which she did in fact demonstrate some time later) and it suggests strategies that educators could incorporate into their practice to support young Aboriginal learners. Non-linguistic behaviour, as

being shown here, is often not noticed in the busy classroom, but it is a key component in the way young Indigenous students work and is strongly based around particular cultural understandings and learning styles. When teachers are able to recognise and value the importance of such non-linguistic behaviours it enables them to respond to their students in a more informed manner.

Values

Table 3

‘My car’s going along the road’
A small group of children are playing with large construction blocks and cars. The teacher sits on the floor with them and begins to play too. At first she listens to what they are saying then joins in.
Steven: ‘My car’s going along the road.’
Teacher: ‘My red car’s going along this straight part of the road but now (she adds a curved block to the road) it has to go round a curve before I get to the bridge (she adds a bridge to the construction then asks the child). Is your car going to go across the bridge? Where are you off to today?’

In this scenario the teacher demonstrates that she values where the child is at with his oral language. She does this by listening carefully then actively engaging as a participant in the play with him and extending the vocabulary in a concrete manner as she goes, instead of standing on the outside and making suggestions.

This example of extending the linguistic behaviours shows that the teacher not only values what the child has to offer but also recognises the value of verbalising one’s actions. Such behaviour is based on the theoretical assumption by the teacher that verbalisation is important in cognitive development.

This process of contributing to the discourse as a participant rather than observer provides the child with the opportunity to feel supported and valued as he negotiates how to operate in this setting.

Goals

Table 4

‘Who wants to come for a ride in my Holden car?’
 Some of the preschool students are sitting on a mat in the front of the class where the teacher is reading a book. The teacher asks some of the children who are busy at other activities if they want to listen to a story. They answer no. Meanwhile the Aboriginal Education Assistant Sandy, is arranging rows of chairs, two by four and putting a small reader onto each. She says to the children ‘Who wants to come for a ride in my Holden car?’ All the students come to where she is. Sandy says ‘hop in’ The children do so, picking up the readers from their seats. They follow along while Sandy reads the book. She then plays a tape of the same story and they act it out as they sing along.

This interaction is based around a central assumption that reading is a valued skill. Both Sandy and the teacher share the goal of wanting to have the children read. There is however a fundamental difference in their perceptions of how this might be made enjoyable.

The goal for both educators is to engage the children in reading. The teacher plans to use the formal and commonly used structure of having the children gathered around sitting still and listening while she reads a story. This is not what interested this group of children. When the story involved participation, they were very keen to become involved. They all sat in the Holden, which was just two rows of chairs and participated in the reading activity by holding the book the correct way, looking at the text, turning the pages and making attempts to read the words with Sandy. It is worth noting that we should always be considering how we can involve children in the learning process. This often requires moving from passive to more active formats. We need to be creative in delivering lessons so they are enjoyable, interesting as well as educative. Both

these adults had similar goals but the assumptions about, and the discourse generated around the process were quite different.

Beliefs

Table 5

‘That’s me!’
 The children are sitting on the floor to hear the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. As the teacher opens to the first page with the sun on it Yolony calls out, ‘That’s Yolony!’ (his Aboriginal name means sun). The teacher grins and says ‘Yes it certainly is, your name means sun.’

Yolony joined the class considerably later than the other children. He was new to the district and he didn’t know anyone else there. Usually he preferred to sit apart from the others, and mostly he wanted to play with the blocks. He didn’t really want to join the group for the story and had to be persuaded by the Aboriginal Education Assistant to do so. As soon as Yolony made the connection between his name and the book, he became an active participant and remained so for the rest of the story. Although when the teacher chose the book she was unaware of the impact it would make, she was quick to use the opportunity to provide positive affirmation of Yolony’s belief that he had a special connection with this story.

In so doing she recognised her power in the relationship, and the value of developing inclusive practices in her classroom. Yolony is also satisfied in that he perceives himself to be recognised in terms of his own understandings of the situation, and this in turn makes him a more willing participant.

Assumptions

Table 6

‘My mum doesn’t want me to go’
 A visiting nurse came to the classroom to take the new children for an otitis media⁷ check. It was assumed that the children understood what a hearing test

was. Yolony and Joanne did not want to go. 'My mum doesn't want me to go' he said, while Joanne simply burst into tears. The nurse looked puzzled as she had permission notes for both children to attend.

Both the children and the nurse enter this situation with assumptions about appropriate behaviours. Because these assumptions are consequences of socio-cultural understandings there is a communication problem.

Yolony had only just started school, and although his mum had signed the permission note she had not had a chance to talk to him about it. Yolony's mum normally explained very carefully what her expectations of him were and he respected her wishes. Joanne's mum had been sick and in and out of hospital. Joanne was missing her mother and finding even day to day routines difficult. When required to go with a stranger she felt completely overwhelmed. It also appeared that the children did not know what a hearing test was, and so were also afraid of the unknown.

The nurse assumed that the children would understand she was providing a health service and because the permission notes were signed, they would simply go with her. The children assumed that because they had not been told specifically by their mums that it was alright to have the tests, they shouldn't go.

CONCLUSION

The examples of discourse developing in this classroom illustrate some of the complexities that exist when young learners from a minority group move from the comfort of their home environment into the school culture of a dominant group. The concept of power in this process is critical. The power resides with the system which is controlled by the dominant culture and in the classroom it is with the teacher. With this power comes

responsibility, in this case, a responsibility to meet the needs of Aboriginal children.

These examples from the data clearly demonstrate that Aboriginal children are as capable of participating in the school context as well as any other children, particularly when educators begin to recognise and understand the cultural layers embedded in the discourse. All the participants in the classroom have a role to play in developing the discourse, the children, the AEA's, the teachers and the researchers. If this discourse is to be supportive of young Aboriginal learners then the complexities of the interactions need to be documented, articulated and disseminated through sharing and discussion.

In the classroom and in the school where this research is being carried out, the school and the community are rising to the challenge, but even with the best intentions there remain gaps. At a national level much more research is required as well as, a systemic recognition of the complexities involved and the crucial roles Aboriginal people have in helping to inform practice.

At a local level schools and communities need to work together in a proactive manner to develop a conscious awareness of the kinds of things that impact on young Aboriginal learners and to support them as, they develop 'social identity kits' that will enable them to be part of this new 'social network' during this crucial stage of their life.

When both communities and educators can be informed about the complexities embedded in the 'fire stick' period for young Aboriginal learners then supportive practices can be built not just on good intentions, but also on culturally informed knowledge.

Notes

¹Baiyai Project established a model for Pedagogical Literacy Relationships (PLR),

which highlights relationships that have important bearings on the ways in which Aboriginal children relate to school. It makes links across Aboriginal learning and cultural practices in order to find a 'meeting place' for Aboriginal people and educational communities. (Munns, Simpson & Clancy, 1999)

²Wiradjuri is the local Aboriginal people of the region in which the Narang Guudha research project is being conducted.

³We recognise that Indigenous people of Australia comprise both Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people. However, the focus for the research from which this paper is drawn is on Aboriginal students and communities in urban/rural New South Wales.

⁴In this research 'school' is being used as a generic term to describe the place where children first encounter a formally recognised educational setting.

⁵'Fire stick' in traditional Aboriginal culture is a stick that is kept alight to ensure the availability of fire when needed.

⁶Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA) are Aboriginal people employed in some NSW public schools that have significant Aboriginal enrolments. Their role includes community liaison, student welfare and classroom support for Aboriginal students and their teachers. Similar positions have different names in other states.

⁷Otitis media is commonly known as glue ear. It is a medical condition affecting the middle ear which can cause intermittent hearing loss. Statistics indicate that otitis media affects up to eight out of ten Aboriginal children.

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