Teaching Aboriginal children: Milingimbi and beyond

Michael Christie (Ed.)

Western Australian College of Advanced Education
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TEACHING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN
MILINGIMBI AND BEYOND

Edited by:
Michael Christie
Stephen Harris and
David McClay
Teaching Aboriginal Children: Milingimbi and Beyond, presents perspectives on aspects of Aboriginal education. Chapters cover themes and topics which include Aboriginal manners and learning styles, life and discipline in Aboriginal classrooms, the teaching of maths and reading to Aboriginal children and bilingual/bicultural education. Although it focuses mainly on the experiences of a talented and dedicated group of teachers in Arnhem Land in general and Milingimbi in particular, many of the articles are particularly useful for anyone who will be or is teaching in remote Aboriginal communities.
TEACHING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN:

MILINGIMBI AND BEYOND

Edited by

Michael Christie, Stephen Harris

and David McClay
The authors dedicate this book to
BEULAH LOWE
who gave years of unselfish service
to the yolngu people of North West Arnhem Land.
PREFACE

The original intention of the contributors was to write a book about their experiences as teachers at Milingimbi in Arnhem Land. Initially, articles were obtained from only those people who had actually taught at Milingimbi. However, theory and practice have changed a great deal since the original articles were put together in 1978. Some of those articles became dated; others were repetitious; some were simply not good enough to be printed.

The collection of articles now presented were all written by people who have taught in Arnhem Land - hence the use of the Arnhem Land words yolngu (Aboriginal) and balanda (non-Aboriginal). Now included are more recently written articles (Chapters 4, 6, 9 and 11) which were added to give the book more theoretical depth. The other chapters remain largely as they were written. The contributors acknowledge just how much their understandings and practices have altered since 1978. Aboriginal Education and the politics of Aboriginal Education too have changed considerably. The articles do not necessarily take these changes into account. So, some of the articles may not hold up in their entirety. Nevertheless they are still of interest and will be of value to teachers and other educators who will be, or are, in similar situations.

May O'Brien
Head, Schools and Community Relations Unit,
Ministry of Education
Western Australia
WRITER PROFILES

MICHAEL CHRISTIE is currently a teacher linguist at Yirrkala. Prior to that he was a teacher linguist at Milingimbi school. Michael has recently completed a Ph.D. on Aboriginal Education with field work conducted at Milingimbi.

NANCY DJAMBUTJ and GWEN WARMBIRRIRR are both qualified teachers who completed their training through Bachelor College. Nancy and Gwen have taught in the Milingimbi bilingual programme for many years.

BETH GRAHAM was a teacher linguist with the Yirrkala bilingual programme and has worked in Aboriginal education for ten years as a teacher and an early childhood adviser to the Northern Territory bilingual program. Beth has recently completed a Masters degree in teaching mathematics to Aboriginal children.

STEPHEN HARRIS has lived and worked in several Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land. In 1975-76 he studied Aboriginal learning styles at Milingimbi for his Ph.D thesis. Between 1978-85 Stephen worked as senior adviser and later head of the Northern Territory bilingual programme.

CHARLES MANYDJARRI retired from teaching in 1986 after more than thirty years of service at Milingimbi school where he was, for a time, the vice-principal. Charles helped to establish the bilingual programme at Milingimbi and appeared in the 1974 film, 'Not to lose you my language'.

DAVID McCLAY was a teacher, then principal of Milingimbi school where he was a pioneer of bilingual education. David is currently completing a Ph.D., with a study of adult Aboriginal education.

FAYE MATJARRA was for many years an Aboriginal literacy worker with the Milingimbi bilingual programme. Faye is a gifted linguist and writer who has been a key figure in the Gupapuyngu dictionary project.
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MILINGIMBI and NEIGHBOURING COMMUNITIES

Chapter 1

A history of Milingimbi *

I am going to tell you a story of Milingimbi, to whom it belongs and the meaning of some of the place names. Milingimbi is not the whole island; it is only one place - the well where the mission stands. There, in the bush camp, where the water is. We call the whole place Milingimbi, but really there are lots of small places, each with its own separate name. The Macassa well belongs to the Yirritja moiety. It was made by a snake called Mundukul. He came flashing lightning, from Worral. When he was at Worral, he was of the Balmawuy tribe. When he got here, he was of the Walamangu tribe.

Now where Djawa sleeps at Rulkungura, the snake wasn't shining and flashing there. That's where the giant barramundi snapped at fish. The barramundi made that place where Djawa sleeps. And we Gupapuyngu people are really strangers. We belong to a far away place.

Now, at the stockyards, where the big rock is, is the spirit of a giant creating stingray. That place belongs to the Gamalanga clan and Gorryindi people. We have the Gorryindi clan outstation at Bodiya. The stingray went up there and at Bodiya he bit into the land and the water bubbled up. The billabong at Nalitjirriwa belongs to the Gorryindi too. It landed, he picked it up, threw it and it smacked down at Nalitjirriwa. Now we have a big billabong out there.

Djawa

Of course, Wodhal and many of the creator beings are still around the area today. People see them quite often. One of the local Gorryindi men, whose name also happens to be Wodhal (he was from the same tribe) came across him a few years ago. The man was fishing at the other end of the island.

* The story by Djoma was translated by B. M. Lowe. The story by Manydjarri was written in English. All the other stories were recorded on tape by old yolngu people and translated by Michael Christie.
He caught some fish and brought them to land. Wodhal was there, hiding in the tamarind trees. The man came up and sat down. He took his fire sticks, broke them, and made fire. He picked up the smouldering paper bark and began to blow on it. And as he was looking up, he saw Wodhal coming towards him. 'Wa_y!' Off he ran. He left the fish and took off empty-handed. Round and round the trees Wodhal chased Wodhal. All the way down to Gadjaw. They were still running, around and in and out of the trees. Bodhaby and I were there at the water hole. We were getting water and we looked up. 'Uncle, who's chasing you?' 'A devil. A devil is chasing me! It's Wodhal!' 'Where?' 'Here! Let's hide!'

Off we went. We ran to the river at Gatjaw and waited with some other people. They waited only a moment when, 'Agh! Here it is! Here it is! Here it is! Here it is! Here it is!' Up we got, 'Quick, quick, quick, quick, spear him!' There were many people, they would chase him. He'd run off and come back, then run away, then back again. Then we got up and saw a light, it was him. And he was covered in cotton plant (a sacred ceremonial design) so that the women had to cover their eyes and not look. Lots of men waited with spears. Off we went, back up to Balma, and then back down to Gadjaw, then he saw the spears and ran off again. We saw him go back and forwards until the light died out and he was lost. 'That was Wodhal that was chasing me. I came across him at Balma. Both of us named Wodhal. And all my fish are still there!' The fish went rotten. We were too frightened to get them.

Djarrga

The yolngu weren't the only people to meet spirit beings. When the Macassans, from part of what is now Indonesia, came to the Arnhem Land coast two or three hundred years ago, they came across them too.

A long time ago, a man came to the mainland. He was a Macassan man. He came quickly in his prau to the place called Bambalngur, where he landed. He went ashore and made a house and planted rice.

Well, he sat there and a spirit dog came up to him and they were talking together. 'There, I've given you some matches. 'And the dog turned around and the man said again, 'Here, these matches are for you. 'And the dog replied,' These are yours! These are mine - fire sticks.'

They sat there and the Macassan saw smoke in the sky above his home back in Indonesia. He cried, 'Oh________, my home, Murrunydjurra, Guwallinga, Dhangarrpura! I'm going back to the sea to return to my home.' And he pulled out the uprights of his home and threw them down. And went off back to his home. The holes that he dug are still there and the piles of rice have turned into piles of shell middens.

Rraying
Near Elcho Island a yolngu named Bunggathuwa was camped, with his sacred net hanging near him. The Macassan men came and landed and one of the men slashed at his net. When he saw this he sent word for revenge. 'Why did they cut up my net? That net I called my mother.' So many men came and they killed that Macassan man. During that fight a young Macassan boy had run and hidden in the jungle. He walked for about fifteen miles where two men found him and they looked after him. Well, some time after that, many Macassans arrived at the Elcho beach so the two men sent the Macassan boy down to meet them. He told them his story. 'No, there aren't any of us left here! We're all finished. Bunggathuwa, their leader, speared our people and there's none of us left. 'Well, after that fighters arrived; by boat, by boat, by boat, by boat, by boat blocking up the whole beach. Out came the two men who had cared for the boy, but the Macassans ran up to stab them, But the boy ran up and stopped them. 'No, these two people have been here all the time. They have looked after me.'

So they all returned together and at the beach the Macassans gave the two men, our predecessors, presents of knives and calico and lots of other things - we don't know the names of all of them.

Banhdharrawuy

Later, Europeans began to arrive and the yolngu gathered impressions of what balanda were like.

A boat came, yes, a long time ago. It came, landed and someone got out. He was looking around, 'This is a good place for me, I'll make myself a house and some food.' So he got to work, cut down some bushes, dug a hole for water and planted food for himself.

And he just sat there at the place called Worrall. Then two yolngu women came into the house. he looked at them and decided to keep them. Other people saw the two women and started passing the story around. It wasn't too long that they waited, then went to get him. They hit him and beat him until he was quite weak, then took the two women and went off home. But the news was taken to Yumaynga (where the white men live) by Dorrng and Dawidi, 'Come with us, someone's been fighting one of your white people, come with us.' So they went and caught the men who had done it, and tied them up. And went and put them in gaol. And they sat, a long time, right until their hair turned white, and they came back here. And they saw me - quite grown up.

Yanba

While the people along the coast were dealing with the Macassans, around the end of the last century, the people inland of Millingimbi were beginning to meet pastoralists.
The stockmen had cattle and horses. And the yolngu saw the animals and the wire and they speared the animals and cut down the wire fences for the cattle. The cattle were to eat. The wire was for making spears for fishing and hunting. They did that and they waited.

So the stockmen searched for the cattle and they searched everywhere. They were riding along when they saw a big hole where the wire had been cut away, and they saw all the footprints. And they tracked down the yolngu, found them and killed them.

Dhawadanygulili

'Hey, old man! Who are you?' Like that. Up they galloped. 'Hey, who are you?' they said. 'I'm me.'

'Oh! Your people are the ones who steal our horses, right?'

'Yes.'

'Cattle, you steal them too?'

'Yes.'

'Okay. How many at a time do you eat?'

'Lots and lots and lots. We always spear your cattle.'

'Okay. Where are you going now?'

'I'm going over there to Mirki,' said the man. (His son is still alive.) One of the stockmen said, 'Okay, off you go.' And this is what they did. He turned around and those stockmen shot him in the back with their guns. Right away, dead, with those guns. Well, he was just stretched out on the plains and they left him.

'Come on, let's go back.' So they went back to Murwangi. They arrived. 'We've killed one Aboriginal. He's lying out there somewhere.'

'Serves him right,' said the boss. 'Serves him right.'

Later that night the yolngu at Mirki were feeling rather uneasy so they sent someone out to keep watch. But when they went they saw all the horses surrounding them completely.

'What are we going to do? How are we going to escape?'

'We can't escape, we're just going to have to wait here and see what happens. They will soon come upon us,' said an old man. 'Maybe we can climb up into the trees and sleep there.'

'And the children?'

'All the children will be put up into a tree too. We can all stay up in the trees. We'll make a shelter.'

Later the white men arrived and went into the thick jungle area. They entered and stood there.

'This is their camp. Where did they go?'

'Ah, there they are.'

'Ah, yes!'
One stood there, one stood there and one stood there. Think about the noise those guns made shooting up into the trees. Shooting, shooting, shooting, up into the trees. They all fell down onto the ground and lay there all over the place. One man escaped. His name was Djitarama. (The same one who died the other day at Nangalala. Yes, that old man.)

Back at Murwangi they told their boss. 'I think I'll go and see them,' he said. Maybe he was feeling sorry, but then again, maybe he wasn't. Off he went, by himself and when he got there he saw a lot of children, just like the ones we've got at Milingimbi school. 'Hey, it's me! Like that. 'Come on, come on, come on. Gather around me. I'm a nice man. I'm just like you are,' he said. 'How many of you are there? Line up. Two straight lines, like this. Now just watch me. Watch carefully and look at this. It's my spear.' You see he had a repeater rifle with lots of bullets. 'You watch me carefully. Just watch me. Watch me carefully and look at this. Don't look anywhere, keep your eyes on me.' And he must have pulled the trigger. And they all just went falling on to the ground. Every one of them, just lying there, and not only a few, lots of them. Children just like we have here at Milingimbi school, girls and boys. All those children. Just like the ones at Milingimbi school.

Djawa

'We're going to kill them all! ' That's what the boss said, ' because they're big thieves, we'll kill them all, ' he said. Good. So off they went from their cattle station, looking for a fight. But when they found them they said to the yolngu, ' When we first got here, we said we would teach you how to build houses. We will teach you, but first you must agree not to steal any more cattle. '

An old yolngu man said, 'No, no. You're simply not staying here at all. We are going to drive you off. We will repel you and spear you. You, and your horses too for good measure, and the cattle. We'll steal them and spear them. We're starting a big battle so we can all spear each other backwards and forwards, all of us, everyone. We yolngu people are angry now. You carry guns and kill us with one hand. But we are a lot of people and the lot of us can kill you white people. '

Djawa

The Chief Protector of Aborigines recommended the establishment of a mission at Milingimbi in 1920, partly as a response to deteriorating relationships with cattlemen, Macassans and Japanese pearlers. When the mission started, several hundred Aborigines arrived, mostly from the areas where trouble with foreigners had been greatest. Most of the people at Milingimbi have
their traditional land elsewhere.

You and I, we really are strangers, we belong to a faraway place. I think the mission brought us here and we stayed here, and had children and we want to go back to our places but seem unable to do so because we would go and then long to come back to Milingimbi. That is because we would think, 'That is the place where we were born and had our children.'

Djawa

Even after the establishment of the mission, the yolngu came into very little contact with the balandas and their culture. The situation stayed like that until the war.

I'm going to tell you a story about the war, when balanda enemies came here. We had gone to church on the Sunday to sing hymns and hear a message, when Bapa (the minister) received news from Darwin for the balanda. Bapa Kolinio (the Fijian Minister) heard the news and took it to the camp. He told us about it when we came out of the service. 'My children, collect your food and go. The Japanese are on their way.' The older people said, 'No, no, no! We'll just send our wives and children over to the other side, and we'll stay here.' So they collected their spears - shovel spears, stone knives and cane spears - for we really didn't understand; we thought it would be like when yolngu fight. That's what my father and the other older people thought.

Waltjimirri (my father) called his nephew Charlie. That was his European name, but his Aboriginal name was Miyanggila. He said, 'Hey, nephew, come on! We'd better run!' But Miyanggila said, 'No, I'm going to spear them.' He thought it would be like the old yolngu way of fighting. But balanda fight a different way. He fights from way up above. He drops bombs from ever so far up in the sky. So they waited and got ready. They waited for the enemy with spears in their hands. Some people ran away. We left Milingimbi and went into the thick bush at Garki. We took to the bush as the enemy were dropping bombs. How many yolngu were wounded? Three. Murr'ilil, Burrumarra and Madangala. One was killed. His name was Galmata. He died because bombs fell near him. So there were the Japanese and we were all in the thick bush. We spotted one of our planes, a little one, fighting with a Japanese plane.

So we left Milingimbi, all of us and went to Dhabila, then to Gopini, Gilinggarri and Manigurrmmili. There were yolngu at all of these places, but there were no yolngu at Milingimbi. Only balanda - air force and army personnel together.

As the enemy planes flew over they looked like grasshoppers with wings outspread, all joined together. They came on the Sunday, Monday and maybe the Tuesday also. How many yolngu were wounded? Probably three. The man
who eventually was killed at Garki, Ngalmakarra's father and Burrumarra. And one person died. He was Djunmal's young brother. We returned in the evening and buried him.

Djoma

The yolngu tried their best to assist the missionaries during the war, but their understanding of what was happening was very limited.

This is a story about war, except that these warriors are Germans. The Germans came from far away and the Japanese took sides with them and they fought together. And a big boat arrived at Yirrkala. They began to build an airstrip. They went there. They tried to hide the army at Yirrkala.

They came in a big boat through the deep water. They arrived at Martjanba (Wessel Island) and Mr. Kentish, the missionary, was standing on the bow. And when they were at the point of one of the Wessel islands, the Japanese arrived. The Japanese followed the boat. There were many soldiers and they followed the boat's steam. And Mr. Kentish hid down inside the boat. Then the shock came. The boat was smashed to smithereens with one bomb from a Japanese seaplane. And Paddy from Milingimbi and Mr. Kentish jumped into the water and grabbed some pieces of the boat. The boat sank and the other people floated, holding onto the pieces. They all swam. One of the Japanese seaplanes landed in the water - not close to the smashed boat, but further off. Mr. Kentish was swimming with three other men, but he had to leave them. Two of them were okay, one had been wounded by the flying pieces when the bomb dropped. There were three yolngu but Mr. Kentish was taken away in a Japanese seaplane to Japan.

They took him away and they didn't release him. And many balanda were very upset that our minister had been taken away. They radioed from Darwin. 'Where is Mr. Kentish?' 'We don't know,' the Japanese said. 'No. You must find him.' 'We don't know where he is.' 'You people bombed that boat yesterday.' 'No. We don't know. Who is this Mr. Kentish?' they said. 'He's a missionary.' And they argued over the radio, our Government and the Japanese Government. 'We don't know.' And from this end they said, 'Okay, you'd better look out for yourselves. That was a missionary you killed. You should have left him. You should have just taken him prisoner and returned him to us later. But because you killed him we will send our big bombs and drop them on you.' And the balanda went and dropped huge bombs which split up the land - no houses, no children, just water. That's what Japan is like because the Japanese killed our missionary and we were upset. That's the end.

Djawa

The early missionaries are still remembered today.
My mother had been hunting and had come back with yams. She lit a fire but she didn't clear the grass around the fire. She lit the fire and left it. Off she went and sat over there somewhere. She got her tobacco and her pipe and had a smoke. And a spark set the grass alight.

Well, we were playing, my brother and I. The fire was burning and suddenly it was out of control. We were playing and had climbed up a tree. Not noticing what was happening, we didn't see the fire. We had climbed right up the tree and were sitting at the very top. We were sitting up there when we noticed the fire burning towards us, and climbing higher. The tongues of the flames were leaping up. And when we saw the fire, we began to yell. 'Help! Father! Help! Help! We are going to burn!' Well Rarrtji and Mirratja were there. 'Hey, who lit that fire?' and Mirrarminawuy said, 'I did, accidently. I didn't see those children.'

So Mirratja and Rarrtji ran down and rescued us. Down we came. Mother was crying for us. First she cried and then she quietened down and gave us some food. Then it was night and we all went to sleep.

Dad was sleeping - and he dreamt. He dreamt about the old missionary, Mr. Wells. This is what he said. 'Hey there! Why were you so worried about those two kids? Did you forget about me? I was looking after those children all the time. Yes, me. Mr. Wells.' Well, Dad jumped up. He thought he had really heard him speak. He jumped up and looked around, but he saw nothing. And he said, 'Oh yes, thank you. Oh thank you so much. It was so good of you to look after them.' That's how he thanked him.

Mawukuwuy

In 1951 and 1952 I was a young boy. And I've seen a lot of things happening in these past years. In those years I have seen a very, very small school. It's called a mission school. There weren't very many teachers or yolngu teachers either and there weren't good classrooms. I hadn't seen a good hospital in those years. It was a small hospital called a dispensary. And there were many yolngu people in those years living here at Milingimbi. All of the tribes I believe would stick together because of the missionaries. In the first place, the missionaries had gathered all the tribal people. In those years I was going to school. There was a lot of dancing and fighting nearly every week. And the missionaries were trying to help the people. The missionaries came in those years to save people from fighting. They came in to make people settle down and make their homes. That is why people settled down. The first thing the missionaries brought was the gospel. The name of Jesus - that's what he's got in his hand. The gospel teachers went around the islands and the bush to try to bring people into the mission. And I'm sure of this - in the first place when the gospel reached this island people used to come in and fill the church - not the good church we have now - it was just a shack and also the church was made out of bark, and then there was a bit of building made by the missionaries for a church. That's the way I have seen the
development of the community.

In 1969, the N.T. Welfare Department took over the Milingimbi school. Then there were big changes taking place. When the Government teachers came to Milingimbi, things got better. The school was getting better for the kids. You can imagine how hard it has been, the people having a difficult time to get their schooling, like myself. Between 1954 and 1968 that was the mission school. The missionaries tried very hard to get a better school, better equipment. In 1969, it changed. The Government brought in a lot of things - buildings going up, more balanda teachers and today it's a lot different. Most of the children you see now have got the knowledge of education. Now, with bilingual education, this school is getting much better. Big changes have happened and are still happening.

What will Milingimbi be like in the future? I believe everything is going to be completely changed, maybe. About fishing rights, land rights, mining and uranium, people need to think. I believe that this future is going on to get hard for the yolngu people. I see that things are going to be getting very tough. That's what I believe. If we don't look to our future, our future is going to be taken away. But yolngu people are going to win with victory.

Manydjarri
Chapter 2

Have your manners*
Stephen Harris

Most of us overestimate the role of words in communication between people. Other factors (sometimes called paralinguistic features) strongly influence what kind of message passes between people during conversations. These are features such as tone and loudness of voice, facial expression, body posture and, perhaps most important, all the experiences that the speaker and the listener have previously shared. A good example of the way communication is more than words is that terms of abuse can be expressions both of extreme anger and of close affection. However, when members of two cultures are trying to communicate, there are all these same factors present, except that the 'same' factors may mean something different in the second culture. Different cultural values and a different range of attitudes about personal rights may all be expressed through speech and the behaviour which supplements speech.

The format of introducing each item of 'manners' in the form of a question or an imagined 'real-life' episode is designed to help teachers in Aboriginal schools imagine themselves in situations of potential misunderstanding. If a balanda's contact with yolngu is almost all within the balanda domain (which at Milingimbi is mainly the world of the balanda's work and operates from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday to Friday) and with the most westernised yolngu, then much of what follows will appear biased observation. But if the balanda is trying to relate to yolngu in both their world and his own, then the observations are valid and meaningful. That these experiences implied or mentioned below still happen at a place like Milingimbi, which was first settled by balanda over fifty years ago reflects the fact that Aboriginal values and behaviour patterns are strong survivors. Those behaviours associated with verbal communication described in

* This is an expanded version of the paper, 'Yolngu Rules of Interpersonal Communication', Developing Education, 4, 5, April 1977. The title comes from a common expression used by yolngu children exhorting their peers to act 'appropriately' towards balanda.
this paper are part of the cultural background with which yolngu children enter school at Milingimbi, and which continue to be very real for all their school experience. Therefore, balanda teachers can hardly ignore the reality of the children's expectations about verbal behaviour as they seek to relate to the children's expectations and, possibly, help them to become bicultural people.

How many of you have been in a situation in which an outsider comes into your home and expects you to speak his or her language?

Very few, and you would consider it bad-mannered. Yet this is the situation under which most Australians expect tribally oriented Aboriginal groups to live. I deal with this element of manners first because, in a sense, all the other breakdowns in communication and understanding discussed later arise from the failure of the majority of balanda living in Aboriginal communities to make any effort to learn a local Aboriginal language. The most obvious reasons for this attitude are that learning a second language is a big investment, the small number of speakers of any one Aboriginal language and the expected short stay in an Aboriginal community make such effort seem not worth the return. I said, 'most obvious reasons' not 'most valid reasons', because these reasons do not allow school teachers to escape their basic professional commitment, which, stated superficially, is 'to teach', but which, stated in deeper terms, is 'to teach through communication'. There are a number of reasons why learning the main local Aboriginal language should be considered worthwhile:

* it is polite, shows respect, demonstrates commitment, demonstrates lack of arrogance and proves intent to 'invest' in the local community;
* it's important for teachers to know the children well, so that they can communicate through personal rapport and through having a better understanding of their behaviour;
* it produces humility and tolerance, because the teacher joins the local yolngu in the ranks of awkward second language learners;
* effectiveness as a teacher partly depends on what yolngu outside the school think of teachers as people.

Perhaps at this point I should anticipate the common objection that, 'They'll have to learn English anyway', by saying that this argument has been used for fifty years and many yolngu still speak very little English, so the results of our failure to meet them halfway in terms of language should tell us something. Furthermore, I should say that I am fully aware of the importance of English to Aboriginal people, and I believe that a teacher who speaks the Aboriginal language can be much more effective as a teacher of English. Before leaving this subject, I suggest to new teachers that because one of the basic ways to avoid being bad-mannered is to communicate effectively, they shouldn't be afraid to switch to English when their level of the Aboriginal vernacular is poorer than the
level of English of the yolngu to whom they are speaking.

Why can't the yolngu person conform to my balanda rules of verbal behaviour sometimes? Aren't you implying that in modern Aboriginal communities, outsiders should always try to conform to traditional Aboriginal manners?

Believe me, no matter how hard you try to meet yolngu people at least halfway, there will be enough occasions in which they are expected to conform wholly to balanda patterns of good manners. For example, there will always be a number of visitors, or a number of the more colonialistic balanda who feel no obligation to modify their behavioural patterns to fit in with yolngu expectations; and furthermore, Aborigines get exposure to balanda manners when they go to town or a residential college. On a more formal teaching level, balanda manners should be part of the oral English lessons (preferably as role playing in various simulated situations). This is a much less hurtful way of allowing yolngu to learn balanda manners than for them to learn through a series of misunderstandings.

Another answer to this question is, yes. Yes, it is reasonable to expect yolngu to conform to balanda manners sometimes, but you should choose your situations sensibly. For example, if yolngu visit your home, it would seem to be reasonable that they conform a good deal to your normal system of doing things. In fact, the yolngu will probably expect this. Then of course, the reverse would also operate: the more obviously you are on yolngu ground (such as in the camp or at a ceremony) the more it should be thought reasonable for you to conform to their patterns of behaviour.

Whose 'ground' is the school is a subject beyond the scope of this chapter. In general, however, if you are expecting yolngu, especially children, to conform to balanda manners, make sure that they really do understand what is expected of them. What may seem quite obvious to you may seem rather odd to them.

The old attitude always seems to keep coming up: 'But won't they eventually have to learn balanda manners?' The answer is probably 'yes', but some European people learning Aboriginal manners will not stop yolngu from learning balanda manners. (Two questions come to mind: 'Why are we balanda so resistant to conforming to a few of a host's basic behavioural patterns?' and 'Why are we balanda more intent on teaching yolngu without at least demonstrating that we are prepared to treat them as equal?') The first step for a teacher is to try to establish meaningful relationships, and some decent manners help this greatly. After establishing such relationships with yolngu, then we should worry about teaching them.

Bill was a very efficient, fast moving, hard working chap who was always on time and was extremely conscientious about getting a certain amount of work done each day. He believed he was behaving
this way because he was right and because he was 'keeping the standards up' for the sake of the yolngu. He felt sure that they would respect his 'obvious sincerity', but gradually became discouraged because so many yolngu appeared to be not taking life very seriously, and even appeared to be irresponsible.

In western society we would accept Bill, provided he behaved like this during work hours and was able to relax and take things a bit easy outside work hours. In an Aboriginal community, Bill is up against some difficulties if he is not willing to learn to discern when to relax and take things a bit easy during work hours. His difficulties arise from the fact that if his interest appears to be centred on his job all the time, rather than on people, yolngu will not learn to respect him for 'obvious sincerity' and will at best only partially accept him, but not as a real person because he is like so many other balanda they have observed before. When I say 'all the time' that really meant 'all the time during work time', because work time is the only time yolngu will be with Bill very much. Also yolngu still don't draw a difference between work time and other time. Thus, if it is the cause of loss of rapport between Bill and his yolngu co-workers, 'efficiency' can become 'inefficiency'. Yolngu are more person oriented than information or work oriented, so to get the best kind of co-operation from them they must grow to respect you as a person.

A 'good person' in yolngu eyes tends to be informal rather than formal. (Formality can easily seem like officiousness.) They also need to be warm, friendly, have a sense of humour, be relaxed, patient, tolerant, unpretentious and generous; and not a pushy clock watcher. Yolngu are capable of working very hard, but they do not subscribe to a work-ethic as such. More usually, they work in bursts - either motivated by obvious immediate need or from a creative inspiration. 'Good manners' in an Aboriginal community implies a capacity to be sensitive to moods and to capitalise on the times of inspiration. I am not suggesting that balanda should start working 'Aboriginal time', but that they will have greater chances of inspiring yolngu to be more productive if they avoid the rudeness of being pushy and inflexible. In western society, formality normally precedes informality as people get to know each other and co-operate together to get a job done. In Aboriginal society, if there must be formality it must be preceded by much informal contact.

**How tolerant are yolngu about balanda rudeness?**

When you are new to an Aboriginal community, yolngu make a lot of allowances and are generally very understanding. However, they do expect you to know their stock of manners after you have been in their community a reasonable time.

As in our society, particular personalities can 'get away with anything' even after they fail, after a lengthy time, to conform to local expectations. For example, I once observed a balanda woman tweak the cheek of a very important yolngu...
elder and say, 'How are you? You're looking very well.' Much to my surprise he quite enjoyed it, and I was to learn later that yolngu gave this particular woman wide latitude because of her personality and the degree of affection she seemed able to both give and draw from them. But we should not define general rules from the behaviour of exceptional people.

If a yolngu man agrees on Friday that he will go fishing with you on Saturday morning and doesn't turn up, is he being rude to you?

By the yolngu attitude to verbal commitment, no. If it were always the balanda initiated verbal agreements that yolngu did not adhere to, the explanation would probably be that yolngu dislike verbal confrontation and, as a consequence, frequently say what they think the balanda want to hear. But many of the instances of failure to meet verbal commitments involve yolngu initiated arrangements. A deeper analysis reveals that, from a yolngu point of view, there need be no direct connection between what they do and what they have promised to do. Also from their point of view, it seems very strange behaviour to carry out a commitment if what looked like a pleasure yesterday has turned into a chore today. They are much more pragmatic in their reaction to present circumstances and in this context less governed by what balanda call 'principles of keeping your word'.

What this behaviour really means is that 'extenuating circumstances' become valid at a different level for them than for the balanda. For example, if a balanda committed himself to a fishing trip and broke his ankle, his failure to make the trip would be considered as being due to valid 'extenuating circumstances'. By contrast, if your potential yolngu friend agrees on Friday night to go fishing on Saturday - but on Saturday morning feels very tired - that tiredness probably qualifies, in the yolngu value system, as 'extenuating circumstances'. A balanda will often, without thinking, interpret this difference between the two value systems as rudeness on the part of the yolngu.

Also, modern Aborigines tend to live in two fairly clearly separated domains of behaviour (which are supported by domains of language, domains of values, domains of different orientation to time, and so on). One of these domains is the balanda world of technological work, cash economy, attendance at school, clocks etc., and the other is the yolngu world of relatives, close social atmosphere, independent choice of action and a more casual attitude to time, and so on. One of the effects on yolngu of living in these two domains of behaviour is that a commitment made in one fades (sometimes into insignificance) when viewed from the other. The yolngu domain is still by far the stronger in terms of values and definitions of social responsibility, and so often wins over made in the balanda domain. And, of course, if the verbal commitment involves something that is personally important to yolngu, (something that still seems important on Saturday morning, that is) they will meet it. But it remains true that one of the hardest features of yolngu behaviour for balanda to get used to is
the frequent failure to link verbal commitment to actual behaviour at all kinds of levels - from fishing trips to important political decisions made in the community by the yolngu themselves. It is because of behaviour like this that yolngu gain the reputation among balanda of being subjective people and of 'living in the present'.

Is it inexcusable that, having agreed to go fishing on Saturday morning and having decided to change his mind and not go, a yolngu fails to come and let you know?

From the yolngu point of view, no. To begin with, he hasn't done anything as definite as 'change their mind'. Yesterday, when he made the commitment, his intention to go fishing was probably serious. However, he wasn't saying, 'I hereby agree to take you fishing tomorrow, come hell or high water.' He was saying, 'At the moment, I feel that I'd really like to go fishing with you in the morning.' Yolngu tend to be opportunists and to act on impulse, in the same sense they tend to be ready to react to opportunities as they present themselves, rather than to plan carefully for them. Even when a yolngu ceremony involves much planning, no one can be sure what day or week it will actually begin. (This may be an adaptation to the small degree of control they had over the physical universe in their 'hunting and gathering' heritage.) In other words, a more yolngu way to arrange a fishing trip for Saturday morning would be to go down to the beach when one is ready and, if there is someone with whom you'd like to go, suggest it and go. Finally, it's worth remembering that the system can work both ways; if you have committed yourself to a fishing trip with a yolngu, but don't want to meet the commitment, you probably haven't spoiled his day and he won't think any less of you.

If you give yolngu a lift in your boat and when you land they get out and walk away - with or without a friendly smile or nod - and offer no thanks and no help to put the motor or boat away, are they being rude?

No. From their point of view, people normally do things for one of two reasons: either because they want to, or else because they have some obligation to fulfill to specific relations. They automatically think that you gave a lift because you wanted to, so there's no need for an expression of thanks. (The fact that there is no Aboriginal vernacular tradition of saying thank you immediately after an event is consistent with this view.) If the people to whom you give a lift are friendly the next time you meet them, it might be more because they now know you a little through a shared experience than because they are being grateful for what you did. Yolngu seldom expect 'public spiritedness' from others and normally respect your right to do what you want to do, which apparently includes giving a lift. If the yolngu involved is a young person, he they will probably say, 'thank you', because he learned it from balanda contact, but you still may not get any help in putting the outboard motor away, unless you ask for it. In other words, if the expression of thanks after receiving assistance is looked at as a
sociolinguistic rule of *balanda* society, then the *yolngu* has learned the linguistic aspect of the behaviour, but not the social attitude with which *balanda* associate it. Again, from their point of view, there is no need to feel any obligation to you - because the main reason you did anything was because you wanted to, and they won't sympathise with you or even understand any motive you may have of 'needing to help the Aborigines'. This is not to say that we *balanda* teachers should not encourage people to help others for the sake of helping them. It is only to say that we should interpret this sort of *yolngu* behaviour towards us, when it happens, from their point of view.

An enthusiastic new teacher decided that she ought to get to know *yolngu* people 'in their situation' so she built up courage and went down to the village one Saturday morning, went straight up to a group of people sitting under a tree, sat down with them and bravely tried to think of some topics of conversation to break the stony silence that met her. After a few questions, such as, 'Do you like living here?', which did not receive satisfactory answers, she left feeling hurt and embarrassed.

This teacher failed to realise that, although Aboriginal places of living are largely unwalled environments, they are not public places. Each *yolngu* family has territory which carries roughly the equivalent amount of privacy as a house with front and back yards does for *balanda* in their society. If you observe closely you will see that when other *yolngu* walk by various camps that are not their own they do not look around; they look at the ground as they walk, or look straight ahead. You will also discover that some people heading for their own distant camp will go down onto the beach - not for the pleasure of walking the long way round on the sand, but because it is expected that they won't invade the privacy of other groups. People actually keep to 'paths' when they walk through camps. They are not simply 'walking through the camp'. Also, if you sit in one camp and ask questions about people who live two camps away within easy vision, you might be surprised how little people know about them. For example, they may genuinely not know that a 'neighbour' has gone off to another community. It is not good mannered to be overcurious either about them or about their neighbours.

Aboriginal people are generous and hospitable, but their behaviours tend to be governed by protocol, as behaviours in our society are. For example, if you want to visit a person that you do not know very well, you need to have a legitimate reason for the visit. Once this purpose has been achieved, a relaxed social time, with no particular point, might follow. Perhaps the best way to approach a camp is to go to the edge of the camp area and catch the attention of somebody there, then ask for the person you need to see. This corresponds to knocking on a door. Either the person you need to talk to or the required person will beckon to you, or call out to you to come and you will be invited to sit on a blanket. (The spreading out of a blanket is a frequent act of welcome in Aboriginal communities of Northeast Arnhem Land.)
Why do some *yolngu* people seem to periodically change their names, and why are they offended if *balanda* keep using the old name?

Probably because someone has died who had the same name or a name that is phonetically similar to it. As children are often named after their *mari* (grandmother or grandmother’s brother) there will be many cases of two or three people with the same name on any large settlement, and these people all have more than one name. This does not cause any problem. The respectful thing is to do is simply conform to local contemporary usage. It is also better to ask a third party what a *yolngu* person’s name is, rather than ask that person directly. Aboriginal people are reticent about saying their own Aboriginal name. (There are a few other words which should perhaps be avoided in Aboriginal communities. For example, in Northeast Arnhem Land, ‘black’ is not yet ‘beautiful’ and to refer to people as ‘skinny’ is a bigger insult than it is in western society.

**Is talking clearly, forthrightly and strongly likely to be more offensive to *yolngu* than *balanda*?**

Yes. This is probably more true for *yolngu* adults than for the children, although it is often true for the children too. (‘Strong talk’ in the case of children does not include the common, semi-affectionate bellowing of mother and grandmothers.) Several times a *balanda* teacher was observed ‘speaking wrongly’ to a *yolngu* child who was very clearly in the wrong. However, by speaking in such a manner, the teacher lost the initiative, because, in the student’s eyes, his crime had been overshadowed by a greater one committed by the teacher, and the student said, with all guilt gone, ‘But you spoke roughly to me.’ ‘Strong Talk’ in *yolngu* culture is associated with animosity or anger, especially where there is a difference of opinion. A statement such as, ‘There’s nothing personal in what I’m going to say, but …’ is meaningless to *yolngu*. They have no objective, impersonal form of conversation. Often, in my own home, several young children, teenagers or adults have sat with horror and amazement written all over their faces while observing quite hard or heated debates between groups of *balanda*, expecting them to come to blows at any moment, and somewhat confused when one of the debaters laughs or offers coffee all round. (It is not suggested that *balanda* teachers should never ‘speak strongly’ to a class. In many cases there may be nothing else the teacher can do. The main point is that ‘strong speaking’ has such a different function and nature in *yolngu* language that it is very difficult for *balanda* teachers to use it in an effective, yet inoffensive, way.)

Before leaving this topic, perhaps two more related points should be made:

* If you need to exercise strong verbal discipline, try as much as possible to do it in relative privacy, because the shame and the embarrassment caused by being ‘dressed down’ in public is more acute in *yolngu* society than in *balanda*.
society and can so easily be interpreted as personal animosity.

* You should be extremely careful of speaking strongly to senioryolngu men or women, or clan leaders. If you do this you will not only offend that person deeply, but will also offend all the members of the clan or extended family who observe the scene. That 'blood is thicker than water' is more true of yolngu society than of balanda society.

If a yolngu asks you to do a favour, something that seems unreasonable or impractical, is he are they being disrespectful to you in some way - for example, if someone asks you to lend them your outboard motor, or to take them out for a load of firewood just before dark, as you sit down to tea?

No, because:

* One reason a balanda might misinterpret this action is because normally one would think very carefully about how a listener is likely to respond before the favour is asked. Here the responsibility for judging the reasonableness of the request is largely taken by the asker. In balanda culture a refusal to grant a request is embarrassing and unpleasant, with the onus of avoiding a refusal situation therefore being placed on the asker. The asker is required to ask only for things genuinely felt to be reasonable and likely to be granted. This restriction is not found in yolngu culture. If a yolngu is asking a favour, the responsibility for judging the reasonableness will normally be left up to the listener. In yolngu culture this is not a harsh thing to do because the yolngu is prepared to accept a very lame excuse when the answer must be 'no' - that is, very lame in a balanda's opinion, such as saying, 'I haven't got any petrol', then, after a short time, driving off somewhere else. Balanda are often embarrassed when saying, no, because they feel awkward at offering a lame excuse. However, the yolngu asker will normally accept the euphemistic 'no', i.e. the excuse, without anypersonal feeling of rebuff. (This is an aspect of yolngu behaviour that is similar to a practice that is common in at least some parts of Papua New Guinea, where, on being refused an 'unreasonable' request the asker will say, 'Mi triam tasol', and go off with a broad grin. What has been said means, 'I'm only trying, that's all; don't take it too seriously; no hard feelings.')</n
* Another factor to keep in mind is that yolngu still do not know many of the subtleties of what is considered reasonable and what is considered unreasonable in balanda culture, and one of the few ways open to them to find out is to build up enough courage to ask. Not only are balanda
cultural expectations difficult to understand fully, but a wide variety of balanda are found in Aboriginal communities. They range from liberal, share-my-stuff types to colonialistic keep-your-distance types. Asking a favour is a very pragmatic and sure way of finding out what sort of person a newcomer is and how much they will be willing to do for various yolngu.

Incidentally, it would be wrong to get the impression that yolngu are always asking for favours in an insensitive way, regardless of your feelings in return. If you really don't want to get involved in the give and take, they will soon find out and leave you alone.

Another case of potential strain over the asking of favours is simply the problem of the frequently poor control of English on the part of the yolngu. For example, a yolngu saying, 'You give me this?' which is meant as a harmless 'me triam tasol' question, can be interpreted by balanda as being 'pushy' and 'grasping'. Occasionally, of course, it might be so, but mostly it is not. (Another solution is to learn some Aboriginal language.

If a yolngu family asks you to take them to some crabbing spot three or four kilometres away in your vehicle and you say, 'O.K., but after I finish this job', are they likely to believe you mean exactly what you say?

Unless they are quite well versed in balanda ways, no. Yolngu seek to avoid direct verbal confrontations much more than balanda do. They have a system of making polite excuses instead of saying a direct 'no'. This system allows all parties to keep their right to independent action. The problem is, however, that in the situation described here, the yolngu family will often think that you are really saying 'no' and will then disappear. And, being opportunists, they will probably be off asking someone else. This might cause you to be annoyed because, half an hour later, when you start up your vehicle to take them to the crabbing spot, you find that you have to wait because several of the children are away asking someone else to take them. Remember that they were probably not at all upset by what they thought was your 'no', and they will be most surprised that, for some reason, you seem to have changed your mind.

If you are telling a story and the audience is restless - i.e. members are quietly talking to one another, sometimes laughing quietly at each other's private jokes, or gazing at the ground in apparent boredom - does that mean they are not listening?

Usually no. Yolngu can sit in rapt attention if the subject is emotionally and immediately absorbing to them, although even then the major speaker will not be the sole person talking, as members of the audience still reserve the right to talk quietly among themselves. But if the audience is in an uproar or talking so loudly
that the speaker cannot be heard, then obviously they are not listening. However, generally speaking, a *yolngu* audience contains more people moving around than a *balanda* one. The fact that *yolngu* reserve the right to speak and the right not to listen explains a lot of this behaviour. At Milingimbi a new *balanda* teacher was surprised to discover (from a series of comprehension questions given to the students later) that restlessness in the audience while he was telling a story did not necessarily mean that they were not listening. On another occasion a very sophisticated, confident *yolngu* woman was giving a lesson on Gupapuyngu pronunciation to *balanda* school staff. Their careful attention, motionless behaviour and concentration staring (in other words, a perfect *balanda* audience) so unnerved her that she refused to teach subsequent lessons. Only tolerance and experience can help the *balanda* teacher know when class restlessness during a teacher's talk, or while reading aloud, is productive cultural behaviour or when it is play at the expense of learning.

**If you pass a *yolngu* on the road and say, 'Hullo', and there is no response, is the person being rude?**

No. Many *yolngu* people are extremely diplomatic and respectful to *balanda* and often go out of their way to wave, smile or say 'hullo', but such greetings and other small talk are not part of their culture. A normal pattern when *yolngu* pass on the road is to ignore each other, and if an avoidance relationship is involved, normally one or both of the people will seek a wider detour. Most younger people will return a greeting, but they will also appear inconsistent because, for example, someone who greeted you the first three or four times may ignore you on the fifth time; or someone who ignores your greeting at Milingimbi may greet you like a long-lost brother while in Darwin. When they are sometimes ignored, *balanda* feel there is some unexplained animosity from the *yolngu* towards them personally, but really what is probably happening is that greetings are something that the *yolngu* have superficially adopted from *balanda* ways, and when they are upset or tense about something in their own life, such adopted behaviour becomes very low priority and thus ceases to function.

One of the aspects of *yolngu* culture that many *balanda* do not understand is the amount of tension and stress with which *yolngu* have to live, under modern settlement conditions. This ignorance about *yolngu* tensions is partly because *yolngu* and *balanda* see very little of each other outside working hours. Also, the continuation of false stereotypes that *balanda* have about how 'Aborigines are peace-loving, co-operative, happy-go-lucky and generous' and how their 'kinship system works like clockwork' and so on, merely further ignorance about *yolngu* tensions. There are also causes of tension with which *balanda* often fail to sympathise, such as those caused by social change, and pressures from western culture for them to conform to its cultural values. And there are tensions brought by alcohol and by living in large communities with other Aboriginal groups who are perhaps traditional enemies. One young *yolngu* man at Milingimbi, who had a very responsible *balanda*-type job that he performed very efficiently, just did not greet *balanda*, thus making it awkward for some to feel friendly towards him.
A *balanda* woman who knew him well explained that he had simply drawn the line at what he could and could not handle emotionally in the modern contact situation. One of the *balanda* requirements that was too hard for him was the responsibility of always being alert and cheerful in giving greetings.

Is it reasonable to expect *yolngu* children to respond to all the questions they are asked in the classroom?

No, because:

* In *yolngu* society, it is bad manners to be too curious or inquisitive, and *yolngu* passively resist answering too many questions because it goes against their notions of independence and privacy.

* *Yolngu* children generally do not experience in their own culture the use of questioning as a teaching technique or the question-and-answer technique of transferring knowledge. It follows that *yolngu* cannot understand why a teacher is asking questions when she knows the answers. (There is one setting in *yolngu* society where they do ask questions when they know the answer - that is when they are angry and make a loud speech in public. Here one of the techniques of verbal challenge is to 'ask' rhetorical questions such as, 'Do you think I don't know what you've been doing, eh?' These questions are never answered, and children expect not to have to answer similar questions from teachers.) This simple inability to understand the function of the question as a teaching technique is enough to reduce children to a confused silence.

* Hypothetical questions are an even worse problem, because they are never found in *yolngu* speech. Even if *yolngu* are asked an hypothetical question in a very real setting and it has immediate relevance so that they seriously try to understand it, they still often misunderstand because they transpose the hypothetical setting to a literal setting. For example, if you ask, 'Would you rather have a banana or an orange?' and the answer is, 'Orange', it will be assumed that you have an orange and a banana right there to give away. Or if you ask, 'If X tried to marry Y, what would her relatives do about it?' (presumably you are trying to work out the marriage system) the listener will assume that you really think that X wants to marry Y, and will reply, 'But she doesn't.' It is not inconsistent with this example that what may appear as hypothetical questioning about the ideal kinship system poses no difficulty for *yolngu* because
here they are dealing with formalised reality rather than with the hypothetical behaviour of individuals.

* In the area of command questions, *yolngu* children behave very differently from *balanda* children. In the *yolngu* camp no one ever acts on the first request (e.g. go and get some firewood? or Will you get some water?). The reaction of listeners suggests that they think the requester is tentatively testing a vague idea aloud, and no one thinks the requester is serious until the third or fourth mentioning. Then the listeners comply if the circumstances are appropriate. From experience, the listeners know that suggestions and requests are often casually made and then dropped. An experienced teacher has said:

'One of the most difficult communication problems in the classroom is the number of times I have to ask something to be done before the action takes place (although if I ask them to go and play the drums they're off before the sentence is finished). I am sure they understand such questions or requests the first time, but are preconditioned by rarely being forced to do anything (and never forced to do it on the first request), to keep wondering if you're going to insist. The indication is that you ask three or four times.'

* Shyness in the company of *balanda* is probably more a barrier to answering questions for small *yolngu* children than it is for *balanda* children. It is a real part of *balanda* culture to teach children to answer when they are spoken to. *Yolngu* children are allowed to behave more as they wish, and to express their independence by choosing not to answer.

* Although *yolngu* are expected to conform to many social norms, it is also a *yolngu* ethic for individuals to maintain a right to independent action where that action does not go against some requirement to which they are expected to conform. One of the common areas where *yolngu* children express this right of independent action is in choosing whether or not to answer questions. Often *yolngu* simply choose not to answer. This seems strange to *balanda*, because we always answer each other's questions, even if by evasion. *Yolngu* simply feel no such obligation to answer a question - they do so if it suits them.
* Yolngu will sometimes answer what they think you want them to say. For example, they will say 'Yes', when they know the right answer is 'No', but they think you hope it will be 'Yes', just to avoid the possibility of direct verbal confrontation or the likelihood of further questions.

* If you are in the habit of phrasing a question in the form of alternatives in English, it might prove fruitful to slow down and work out one alternative at a time. For example, rather than ask, 'Should we work on the boat on Saturday or go camping?' it might be more productive to ask, 'There's the boat to finish and there's that camping trip. What would you like to do?'

Yolngu children sometimes resist answering a teacher's questions. Isn't it inconsistent that they often ask many questions in the most frustrating way in class?

No. The balanda teacher often uses the question-answer approach to transfer and clarify knowledge. This is not a typical yolngu way of doing things. A number of balanda teachers at Milingimbi noticed how rare it is for yolngu students to ask questions that reveal curiosity or a hunger for knowledge or a drive 'to know'.

An oversimplified explanation is that it is possible that yolngu, as a religious society, have a religious or phenomenological rationale which allows them to accept much of what they see as 'natural phenomena'. For example, a magic trick, a dramatic chemical experiment or the workings of a motor car are accepted with less wonder by yolngu than by balanda. In contrast, balanda society, which is largely secular, seeks to have a scientific or logical explanation for what people see; hence the different use of a questioning approach to knowledge.

On the other hand, yolngu students often ask many questions of teachers, but these are of a special nature; they are procedural or reassurance questions: 'Will I use the English book?' 'Are we going to the library?' 'Is this right?' (One balanda teacher at Milingimbi, who had a very good relationship with the students but who sometimes became frustrated with the children asking 'Will I use my English book?' ad nauseam, once replied, 'No, use your Russian books' and the students happily went ahead with the English books.) This type of question might indicate an insecurity in the classroom situation or a lack of real understanding of what school education is all about. Although teachers should be glad when yolngu children in their classes are sufficiently confident of their relationship with their teachers to allow them to ask questions incessantly, they do find the situation frustrating because most of the questions have nothing to do with learning. The children are not being inconsistent by often asking but seldom
answering questions, because their questions and the teachers' questions are of very different types.

Patsy had heard about Aboriginal cooperation rather than competition and wondered whether praising children for good work might not be wise because it inspired competition.

Patsy is on to something that should be thought out. One aspect of good manners, surely, is to save people embarrassment, ostracism or teasing: therefore the subject of praise is part of the matter of manners in a cross-cultural setting. Aboriginal children, especially boys, go through a lot of training for personal independence. Independence training is based on the need in a hunting and gathering economy for all to be able to fend for themselves if need be. Thus, young yolngu are trained to do things for internal reasons and not for external rewards. Praise is a form of external reward. Yolngu parents do not praise their children, except intermittently. This does not mean that it is wrong for a teacher to praise - in fact most children like to do well and to be noticed for doing well. But this praise should not be too public. If a teacher makes a public fuss over a child, other children might tease and 'level' that child. This 'levelling' is consistent with training for independence, because when an individual rises too far above his fellows, this can be interpreted as a bid to exercise control over them. Personal warmth is not misinterpreted as praise, so perhaps the best approach is to express praise to individuals in relative privacy and to make an attitude of personal interest, warmth and goodwill the most pervasive public form of praise and encouragement.

CONCLUSION

Many of the rules of verbal behaviour discussed in this chapter may seem to the reader to be operating outside the school context, and therefore not to be important to a teacher in an Aboriginal school. But there are two main reasons why an understanding of sociolinguistic rules in yolngu speech and behaviour will help the balanda classroom teacher. First: a yolngu child's assessment of the teacher in the classroom will be based more upon who they are as people than what they do as teachers. Yolngu base their judgments mostly upon the former. And the balanda teacher's reputation as a person will be as much established by their behaviour outside the school as in it. It is also important to realise that what yolngu adults think of the teacher as a person will, in the long run, influence their effectiveness with the children in the classroom. Secondly, a new balanda teacher's feelings (as well as a yolngu's feelings) can be deeply hurt by misunderstandings, and misunderstandings can easily turn into contempt. If a balanda teacher has 'written off' yolngu, the feeling cannot be hidden from the students, and again the effectiveness of the teacher is lessened. To be forewarned is to be less hurt, and to hurt others less. It is hoped that a better understanding of some rules of Aboriginal interpersonal communication might enable more tolerance, joy and effectiveness to be part of living and teaching in an Aboriginal community.
Chapter 3

Yolngu rom: Aboriginal law
Charles Manydjarrri

Balanda and yolngu have to stick together and work together and help each other. This will make it much happier for balanda and for yolngu. That’s the way it ought to be. But sometimes balanda are not very understanding of yolngu, and make us upset, and sort of embarrassed, making times difficult. But I think it’s important to understand that balanda are not really bad. A balanda is someone that comes and works and helps so we can learn as much as we can to help our own people.

Balanda are not really bad people. It’s just that they don’t often understand yolngu people and yolngu ways of thinking and feeling. When we can’t talk to each other, that’s when we start the problems. It is very important that the balanda come into the community and be part of us. We could learn as much as we can while we’re all part of the community. It’s very important and it would work. The balanda would come into the camps and sit with the people, even work with the people. That would make life better. Because both the balanda and the yolngu have been growing up in different societies. And now we have come together.

As we all know, it’s good that the balanda are working in the community with people, working with the children, showing education. Not just giving education but trying to work and live and share things together. The balanda have taught a lot to the yolngu people not because they want to take over the land, not because they want to take the ritual of ceremony from the people; it’s not that. The balanda are there to help. To train us to be equal to all Australian people. That’s what they mean; in the future we won’t need balanda to help us. We’ll be on our own.

Bad balanda go to a ceremony without permission. They fall in love with
yolŋu people. They are in the middle of camp, sitting in the ceremony without permission from the tribal people. It's bad when they are saying bad things about yolŋu people, bad things about how people are living their lives today. That's what I mean. Yolŋu people are not happy for balanda to go to stickybeak at their ceremonies. These are some of the things balanda shouldn't do. Yolŋu are not very happy when you are very upset at work. When you're shouting at yolŋu or calling them names. These are some of the things that are not very good for balanda people.

When you're treating yolŋu people, you have to come and make him like a friend; no, not like a friend, like a brother. Or a sister. That would mean that most of you are part of one family. When you're treating yolŋu people you must be good at feeling yolŋu, thinking yolŋu, working with yolŋu, helping yolŋu, sharing with yolŋu and that would stop a lot of difficulty. If you treat a yolŋu as a brother or a sister like we do at home with relations, you have to love them and share with them. Not just sharing clothes, but sharing religion and life and work.

Balanda teachers coming into the community are different from yolŋu. The way they have been brought up at home, the way they have been brought up in their society, are different. In balanda society you can belt or give a smack at school for to the kids and you can keep them away from going home any time you like. But out here it's different. In yolŋu society it's not like that. We used to be given a smack when we were children in 1951 or 1952 or 1954; the balanda teachers used to smack us with a ruler. The teachers would take action. That is the balanda way. But when the missionaries smacked the children the parents were very angry, arguing and fighting with the teachers. Yolŋu parents don't want to see their children smacked by teachers. Don't smack the children. Take them to the headmaster or to the parents and talk about it and it will get much better for the teacher and the children. If you start to give smacks it will make things very hard. You won't see the boy at school for a few days. He'll be at home. Why? Because you've done something that the child and the parents are not very happy about.

Look at the post-primary boys and girls. You can't ever take action to those older boys and give them smacks. If you do I'm sure they'll just go and jump on you, because they are old enough to take action too. That's why the teachers should be careful to look into the matter carefully. The school would be much better. That's what it should be like.

Think about the community. Think about the children and their backgrounds and their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and uncles and you will become part of the yolŋu people. Then you should know what people are really like. I think it's very important that we work to understand the little children and their language. And later on they want to see you and tell you that you are a good teacher and they will like you so much, I'm sure.
What does world view mean? What is the Aboriginal world view like and how does it affect people’s behaviour. Is it possible for a white Australian to understand the Aboriginal world view? In this chapter I hope to present a white person’s point of view on these questions. I have three sources of information: eight years living with Milingimbi yolngu, ten years learning and working with the yolngu language, and as many years reading the work of anthropologists, linguists and Aboriginal writers. I feel that I have only the remotest understanding of this question but it is one which needs to be thought about and talked about. Hopefully this chapter will provoke debate.

What does world view mean? Although many academics, for one reason or another, object to the expression ‘world view’, to me it sums up pretty well the ideas and beliefs which a group of people hold about its world and the people and things in it. We don’t all see the world in the same way (although ethnocentric people may believe we do). Our world view may be difficult to describe but it affects the way we see the physical world, our possessions, other people and ourselves. Consequently it affects the way we act, the way we think, our beliefs about right and wrong, and our emotional reaction to what happens around us.

What is the Aboriginal world view like? Speaking firstly of those Aboriginal people who have been least affected by the western world, it seems that they do not, as white people do, see the world as being divided up into identifiable physical objects in the here and now which can be counted, analysed and related scientifically. Their world is made up of entities which are related in a quite unscientific (from a white person’s point of view) way, but in a spiritual way which reflects the nature of a universe quite different from a white Australian’s. There are a number of striking differences. Firstly, the Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or space in the same way or to the same extent as the white world. The land is still inhabited by the same beings which were involved in its creation. The spirits of dead people are constantly present. Ceremonies not only re-enact the activities of ancient heroes but also somehow recreate them. English words, of course, are hopeless in trying to describe a universe in which the
western constraints of time and space are transcended, but a favourite English word used by Aborigines to describe their historic and contemporary world is 'Dreaming'. The things that happen in our dreams are strange because they are not constrained by time and space but by underlying and unconscious psychological connections which we really know very little about. The Aboriginal world is similar. It is governed by relationships which are simply not available to scientific study. When an Aboriginal man says that a particular area of land is his mother, he is not speaking metaphorically. To him the land is his mother in a literal sense, in a way quite inaccessible to the western mind.

A second distinctive feature of the Aboriginal perspective is that things cannot be quantified. In a world made up of objects related through their spiritual essences, rather than their physical properties, counting is irrelevant. Value lies in quality and relatedness rather than in quantities. Quite expectantly, Aboriginal languages contain very few numbers and have few terms available for the objective contrasting and comparison of physical objects.

Another mark of the western world view is what has been termed 'the cult of the individual'. It seems that every culture strikes a balance between the individual and the group, and the white culture heavily favours the individual. The white persons' myths often centre around the self-made man - 'from log cabin to White House', or 'local boy makes good'. The formal education system fosters this by employing interpersonal competition as a motivation towards greater academic effort. Aboriginal society on the other hand makes an individual's sense of worth depend upon where he or she fits into the group, rather than what he or she can get from it. An education system designed to help Aboriginal children would emphasise cooperative learning ventures and avoid competition as being basically antisocial.

The above are only three of the wide number of differences between Aboriginal and white perspectives. The Aboriginal universe is basically one in which physical, scientific qualities are irrelevant and the world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in 'the Dreaming'.

What are some of the effects of the Aboriginal world view? Here I plunge still deeper into speculation, but my reading and thinking lead me to see it like this. The ancient Aborigines, unlike their European cousins, had no need to develop a scientific perspective on the world because, living in a warm climate, they had no need to develop agriculture or technology. This may have led to the Aborigines becoming what some have said was the most religious culture in the world. In some groups, it seems, the menfolk spent up to two-thirds of their waking time involved in ceremonial activity. Similarly, because the weather was generally warm and the people were not forced by agriculture to settle in one place, it seems they had no need to develop a complex material culture. All their creative and religious drives were spent in the development and perpetuation of a hugely complex mythology with its many songs, dances and ceremonies. The tragedy of this great spirituality is that it dies when a man or woman dies, with few visible traces left in the material world.
The religious world was not the only one to benefit from the Aborigines' reluctance to preoccupy themselves with material possessions. The family and the land both both became objects of creative and emotional investment. The Aboriginal relationship system is extremely complicated. In the yolngu system, for example, there are literally dozens of kinship terms each bearing certain responsibilities and certain feelings that go with that relation. Everyone in the Aboriginal world is related. Everyone fits irreplaceably into a complex circular system which accurately reflects the timelessness of their world view.

Similarly, the land is part of the people in a way in which white Australians might never understand. Different areas of land are related quite specifically to different families - as mother or grandmother or sister. Every tiny piece of land is named - like 'the place where the possum burnt his hand', or 'the place where Walamarrana died'. At Milingimbi, and probably many other places, the songs are often made up of long lists of place names, and people seem almost invariably to be named after places. The relatedness of a person and his/her land are so complete that, at Milingimbi, men often greet their relatives by calling them, in English, 'Country'.

What, then is the white person's world view like? Some people characterise the Aboriginal and white world views as worlds of 'being and doing'. The Aborigines concentrate on being, on timeless qualities which unite them to the land and to other people. The whites focus on 'doing'. They see the world as highly manipulable. Things can be changed and they can be collected. The whites' drive to make, change and collect things has led us to develop a complex mathematical and scientific system. If you really want to collect things you must learn how to count them. To manipulate things you must learn how the physical laws of the universe work. You must also see yourself as an individual capable of competing with other members of the group for a share of the power which derives from the ability to manipulate. In the white persons' world things are given a reality through science. At the beginning of this chapter, for example, I tried to establish some credibility for my argument by quantifying (in years) my experience with Aboriginal people and language. A Milingimbi yolngu would consider the quality of my relationship with Aborigines to be a much more pertinent qualification.

Summing up thus far, it appears to me that the great advantage of the white persons' world view is that it enables them to make themselves physically more comfortable. Labour saving devices, modern medicine, and all other so-called benefits of western civilisation are all products of the white person's world view. To me, the great disadvantage of the white persons' view is that it allows them more power than they can handle. Not only does the scientific world view often alienate people from the spiritual and qualitative aspects of their personality, it also gives them the wherewithal to create the kinds of weapons which could wipe out the whole world's population, it seems, in a matter of minutes. The great advantage of the Aboriginal world view is that it ensures the intimate coherence of all people in the group - with each other, with their land, and with their dreaming (white people may call it time). The unfortunate disadvantage of the
Aboriginal world view, it is quite clear, is that it renders them mostly powerless to resist the relentless onslaught of western civilisation. Their philosophy of 'being' rather than 'doing' carries very little of the self-conscious militancy required to cope with the encroaching western culture.

Remote Aborigines have been relatively unaffected by the influences of western culture. But to what extent do English-speaking urban and rural Aborigines retain the world view of their ancestors? I, of course, do not know, and individuals differ greatly. But it seems to me, from talking with urban Aborigines and reading Aboriginal literature, that something has definitely been passed down which remains in the Aboriginal consciousness and way of life long after other aspects of traditional culture have fallen away. This can be seen in the strong drive of the dispossessed to regain their land, and in the extended family system wherein rural and urban Aborigines still find security in a very hostile world. Is the white persons' formal education system helping or hindering the Aborigines' efforts to maintain their freedom and integrity in areas where they are oppressed by social and economic exclusion? Clearly, good education helps, poor education hinders. What is good education? What should teachers know or do to ensure that Aboriginal pupils can reap the best benefit from school?

Firstly, teachers must remember that, because of their different world views, Aboriginal children are fundamentally different from white children. They are not poor reflections of their white Australian counterparts. Teachers who expect Aboriginal children to see the world as whites do, will inevitably label them as lazy, slow learners, and unmotivated. Rather, they should understand that these children work towards their own goals using their own learning systems and incorporating their own cultural values. Any teacher whose classroom depends upon competition and who inadvertently portrays Australian life as a mad scramble to the top of the ladder of success will find his or her Aboriginal pupils particularly reluctant.

Secondly, because Aboriginal children have their own special ways of thinking and learning, they must be specifically catered for in the classroom. There is a small but increasing literature on teaching Aboriginal children, and teachers have a responsibility to make themselves familiar with it.

Finally, teachers must include a study of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture in every classroom programme. This study, equally important for white and Aboriginal students, needs to incorporate a sensitive and unbiased study of the problems which Aborigines face in modern Australian society.

While it is true that our world view constrains the way in which we think and act, it is also true that we can, to a large extent, choose the way we view our world. There is much to be admired in both the Aboriginal and white world view, and concerned and careful education is a good starting point for encouraging concerned and caring Australians.
In 1923, Rev. James Watson landed at Milingimbi to start a mission station under the auspices of the Methodist Overseas Missions. His choice of sites was questionable - most of Milingimbi is surrounded by mangroves where sandflies breed in plague proportions. However, the decision was made and the settlement of Milingimbi has survived and is there to stay.

Life, both for *balanda* and *yolngu* was very different in those early days. For the *balanda*, cut off from civilisation, without radio, without planes, without any regular shipping service, Milingimbi must have been a hard place to live. Even today, with a telephone, monthly barge service and a daily plane, *balanda* still talk of their isolation. How much more difficult it must have been before. And for the *yolngu* it was all so strange. The missionaries were aliens - unfathomable and unpredictable.

The missionaries came for some fairly specific reasons. They came out of humanitarian motives to help people who were suffering from diseases such as yaws and leprosy which had been introduced by outsiders to Arnhem Land. As missionaries, they also had evangelical aims.

From the start they saw formal education as a major means of achieving their ends. The *yolngu*, on the other hand, can have had no idea why the *balanda* had come, or even where they had come from. I suspect, too, that after only a few years some of the *yolngu* started to lose sight of why they themselves were at Milingimbi. They had come basically out of curiosity, but they soon found their way of life had altered irreversibly.

Before the *balanda* came, the *yolngu* had an education system of their own. It was primarily informal, lifelong and highly effective for its purposes. It was conservative in nature, aiming to pass on the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in a stable world.

With the arrival of the *balanda* came change. The first school was set up in 1925. It played a role in introducing western concepts to *yolngu* children. The
first school was run on dormitory lines. About fifteen girls attended. They slept at

the school and had all their meals together. Some of the clans would not allow

their girls to attend as they were not quite sure what it was all about. However, of

the students who attended that school, some are still alive today and they

remember their experiences happily.

In 1926, a year after the school opened, a new missionary, Rev. T.T. Webb

arrived. A man of foresight and common sense, one of the first changes was to

the dormitory system. He felt it was not right to separate children from their

parents in this way. His approach was to educate the children in the day school

and also to work with the adults, teaching them skills and offering them work. This

became the basic approach to education on the mission until the Second World

War.

In 1928, the Mission Board in Sydney discussed the use of the vernacular as

a medium of instruction. Rev. Webb argued that it would be far more effective

than the 'pidgin' English that had been in use up to that time. In 1973, his

judgement was officially vindicated when bilingual education was introduced in

Arnhem Land.

Through the 1920s and 1930s, the mission and the school operated at a low

level. There were never more than a handful of missionaries - at times no more

than two or three. Typical activities in the school were sewing, mat making,
carpentry, sport, reading, writing, and arithmetic. The children played 'shop' using

cardboard coins, even though money was not in general use on the island at that

time. In 1934, the Mission Board, (probably as a result of an investigation by a

Special Education Commission it had set up) issued the following statement in its

annual report:

'This sphere of our work has caused concern for some

considerable time. We feel that some of the subjects taught in the

past have been too far removed from the life, habits and outlook of

the people. We are seeking to introduce those subjects which will

tend definitely to fit the children for life on the station. The

emphasis we feel, should be on concrete and objective lessons

rather than on such subjects as history and arithmetic.'

In the early days, we have a plea for relevance in education recorded. That

goal is still being chased.

There are a few records to indicate who the teachers were during those

years. Two Fijian teachers were at Milingimbi during that time 'to help nomadic

Aborigines adapt to a sedentary way of life in which agriculture will play an

important part'. As late as 1972, the gardens established in those days were still

flourishing, but there is little evidence of them today.
Mrs. Webb was also one of the teachers. During the 1930s she taught in the school and ran the dispensary. On the side she organised women into making mats and baskets. There were up to eighty-seven children in the school just before she left Milingimbi in 1938.

By 1940 the roll was up to one hundred and ten - from infants to Grade 3, although some of the students were teenagers. The teacher was a middle-aged man, Keith Wade, and he did some of his work in the vernacular. An extremely wide range of topics appears to have been covered. One report mentions 'yolngu language, English, number, baseball, hockey, agriculture and brickmaking.' After Mr. Wade left in 1941, Rev. Arthur Ellemor arrived. He reopened the school with one hundred and thirty-eight enrolled students. The highest daily attendance recorded was ninety-eight, with the average being seventy-five. Forty years later the attendance rate was about the same.

The war years and the early postwar years were difficult times for the mission. Milingimbi was used by the RAAF as a base and the mission was bombed several times. Many yolngu people left the island and the school was closed. It was not until 1949 that any formal schooling got under way again. This time the students, seventeen of them, enrolled for correspondence lessons with the South Australian Education Department. This attempt to educate people (or rather for people to educate themselves) was finally looked at by the Government and it was agreed that the Federal Government would help build schools on missions in the Northern Territory and subsidise the wages of qualified missionary teachers. Until that time Milingimbi had never had a proper school building of any size.

The first 'proper' school building at Milingimbi was constructed by local labour in 1952. It was about 33m x 8m, with an iron roof, louvres and a dirt floor. It was divided into two rooms. A later suggestion by the Department of Education that it be pulled down to make way for a new administration block was turned down by local councillors, many of whom had acquired their basic education in the old building.

On 8 January 1951, Beulah Lowe started the present Milingimbi school and her work at Milingimbi extended over 26 years. She ran the school under conditions many would regard as impossible. In the mornings she taught fifty primary-age children and in the afternoons, fifty teenagers. As well as teaching she helped feed the children a hot meal every day.

Although English was the official language of instruction and the children were taught to read and write in English, Miss Lowe put much effort into language learning and later into linguistic analysis. She employed yolngu people in the school as teaching assistants. Charles Manydjarrri, who contributed to this book was a student-teacher. He started work with Miss Lowe at the age of fourteen.

In 1958, Joy Forbes took over the school and Miss Lowe commenced full-time linguistic work. By 1960, the school had been built up to a staff of four trained
teachers. For ten years the school had struggled on with limited resources but with great dedication from this group of teachers. Today there are people at Milingimbi in their forties who are literate because of their work.

In 1961, Alan Fidock took over as Head Teacher. He was a man of unbounded energy, who as well as running the school and teaching a class, ran the bank agency, was superintendent of the Sunday school, started a fishing industry and ran an artifacts business for the community. The 1960s were important years in bringing stability to the school and widening its activities. In 1965, a preschool was started by Beryl Edmunds and in 1966 post-primary education was offered for the first time. There was an extensive building programme during that decade, with preschool, primary and post-primary facilities all being constructed with local labour. Yolngu staff, although employed as teaching assistants, were at times called on to take responsibility for whole classes because of the shortage of trained teachers. The official government view of yolngu staff, however, was very poor. Consider, for example, getting a teaching certificate such as the one reproduced below, after a course of training.

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FORM 7

REGULATION 46

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA [sic]
Ward's Employment Ordinance 1953-59

CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCY

I hereby certify, in pursuance of Section 24 of the Ward's Employment Ordinance 1953-59 that .................... has successfully completed a course of training in the calling of Teachers' Assistant - details of the course being as follows: Teachers' Assistants' Training Course, Darwin, July, August, Sept. 1961.

......................................

Instructor-In-Charge

......................................

Supt of Special Schools

I also certify that the said ......................... has gained a knowledge of English and Hygiene which I consider appropriate to the calling for which he has been trained.

......................................

Director of Welfare

---
The 'wards of the State' mentality was still pervasive.

The school slowly increased in size, until in 1969 the enrolment reached two hundred and seventy. Throughout the 1960s the main problem to be faced was the lack of teaching staff. Finally, in February 1969, the Methodist Overseas Missions, recognising that it could not staff all its mission schools adequately, handed Milingimbi school over to the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration.

The 1970s were years of great social and political change for yolngu people. Milingimbi changed from a subsistence, ration-based economy to a cash economy, almost overnight. Until 1969, when the Welfare Branch introduced a small wage called a 'training allowance', there had been very little money directly available to yolngu. In 1970, mothers received their child endowment direct for the first time, and in 1973 'award wages' were introduced for all workers. With almost total Government funding, the economy began to flourish and the economic changes had profound effects upon people's lives. Plane services began to arrive twice a week instead of fortnightly, the store was full of consumer items, outboard motors and four-wheel drive vehicles proliferated. People began to travel.

Political, social and economic changes continued to occur at a growing rate. It was mainly through formal education, however, that people learnt the skills necessary for them to adapt to and cope with their changing circumstances.

By 1973, the school curriculum was being seriously considered. Before then the courses offered were ad hoc or completely irrelevant and inappropriate. Bilingual education was officially introduced in 1973.

The other major thrust of the 1970s was the development of the yolngu staff as a professional body. Onsite teacher training was offered and most yolngu staff members received some teacher training. It is with these people that the future of Aboriginal education now lies. Certainly they will need much help and guidance for some time yet and there is still an important role for the balanda teacher to play, but in the long term the yolngu people themselves must take the major responsibility for the schools in their communities.

There were balanda teachers who went to Milingimbi and argued that balanda had no right to be there; that they should all pack up and go away. The naiveté of this argument is best countered by the yolngu people themselves, who, while they may think nostalgically of the old days and ways, realise at the same time that the world has changed and that a sound understanding of balanda culture is necessary if they are to cope with life in this changed and changing world. Formal education offers people the chance to come to that understanding.
A. INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR FUNCTIONAL LEARNING STYLES

During the last few years many teachers of Aboriginal children have become familiar with some ideas about applying traditional Aboriginal learning styles in modern classrooms. (see Harris, 1984 and 1982a) However, some misunderstandings and misapplications have developed along with some very positive results in the classroom use of Aboriginal learning styles. To be an effective teacher of Aboriginal children one would need to understand that traditional Aboriginal styles (see NOTE 1) of learning have severe limitations for classroom use as well as much value. The purpose of this paper is to help teachers clarify this issue.

While this chapter is written for teachers of Aboriginal children and thus directed at practical rather than theoretical issues, it does need a unifying theoretical theme. The idea of 'functional learning systems' (Cole and Scribner, 1974) might be that theme. A particular style of learning is neither 'good' nor 'bad' in itself, but is effective if it helps the learner adapt to the situation and survive well in it. The traditional Aboriginal economy and technology was that of hunter-gatherers, which was well served by a largely informal non-verbal learning style. Western technological society and cash economy is well served by a higher proportion of formal, verbal, learning style. In the context of Aboriginal schooling, then, we need to analyse the differences between formal and informal learning and work towards that combination of features of both, and their application, at different stages of school learning, which would constitute a functional learning (see NOTE 2) system for modern Aboriginal children.

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*B. INFORMAL AND FORMAL LEARNING (see NOTE 3)*

Contrasting formal school learning with informal learning will clarify the differences between what Aboriginal students are used to and what they need to be able to handle when they go to school, especially if they are to succeed beyond upper primary levels.

The major features of informal Aboriginal learning, at least in North East Arnhem Land (Harris, 1984) are:

1) Much Aboriginal learning is by **observation and imitation**, rather than through verbal instruction, as is often the case in classrooms. ('Verbal' here includes both oral instruction, answering questions, and reading and writing.) Virtually all survival skills, social skills and much learning of artistic skills such as painting and dancing are learned through observation and imitation. Yolngu people learn by looking more than through talk. Aboriginal people are highly verbal, but talk has more of a social than a teaching function.

2) Much Aboriginal learning is through **personal trial and error** rather than through a combination of verbal instruction and demonstration, as is the case, say, in a school chemistry laboratory. Put another way, Aborigines learn by doing, and this is efficient for learning their traditional technology, but unsuitable, say, in a chemistry laboratory.

3) Much Aboriginal learning is through **real-life performance** rather than through practice in contrived settings. Even when Aboriginal people say 'practising', such as a warm up dance getting ready for a ceremony proper, or when they have football practice, they tend to turn these into events that are ends in themselves and not only the means to later ends.

4) In Aboriginal learning experiences there is relatively little focus on sequencing of skills, rather, Aboriginal people learn through **successive approximation to the efficient end product**. That is, there is more learning of wholes than of parts. For example, if a non-Aboriginal school teacher were teaching dancing (or taking choir practice, or giving a woodwork lesson) the students would be required to practice a sequence of separate skills which later would be combined into the whole activity. By contrast, an Aboriginal child from a very young age will join in and simply perform as much of the whole dance as he/she can, getting better over time through successive approximations to the mature end product.

5) A very common Aboriginal problem-solving technique is **persistence and repetition**. This too is suitable to their traditional economy and technology. For example, the best way to ensure spearing a fish is to keep throwing at fish until you get one. (See Harris 1984, Brandl 1980 and Coombs et al. 1983) for further details of Aboriginal learning contexts. It should also be said that culturally different learning styles are not unique to Australian Aboriginal people, but examining other groups is outside the scope of this chapter. (See
Cohen 1969, and John 1972, as examples of interesting studies of other groups.


i) **It is decontextualised** - with its content having little application to everyday life and survival.

ii) It follows from i) that it will therefore deal largely with **abstractions**, i.e. information abstracted or taken out of any real-life context.

iii) It follows from i) and ii) that it will therefore need to be conducted **verbally**, which includes both the written and spoken forms.

iv) **It is a conscious process.** Before something can be talked about the speaker must be conscious of it.

v) **It must be purposeful in the context of i) - v) above.** (Aboriginal people are, of course, very purposeful in contexts which are familiar to them, e.g., hunting. But a skill such as hunting does not necessarily involve i) -iii) above in order to be effectively learned.) Because the role of purposefulness in formal learning may be less familiar than the roles of i) - v) above, it invites some additional explanation.

The particular characteristics of purposeful learning behaviour which most school children in western society begin to master by their mid-primary years as defined by Christie (1983) in relation to Milingimbi Aboriginal children are:

a) **A goal which is conscious, specific and realistic.** Frequently Aboriginal students have very different goals from their teachers. For example, some students' goal in school learning is to produce a page of 'ticks', or to produce 'work' - even if it is copied, or to move up through the school on the basis of age rather than mastery of skills, or simply to keep the teacher happy (Christie 1980). Aboriginal children continue to set unrealistically high goals after failure and often do not increase their goals after success.

b) **Internal control** or a sense of being in control of learning. This is related to the psychological construct of locus of control and in this situation involves the individual's willingness and ability to exert personal control over the learning process. Frequently Aboriginal students wait passively for learning to happen, assuming that teachers are bestowing learning on them, rather than making it happen. When teenage Aboriginal students at Milingimbi were asked to give advice to younger students about how to learn well in school they listed passive behaviours: 'sit down', 'listen to the teacher' and 'be quiet'. One other evidence of this behaviour is the infrequency of 'why' questions or attempts to clarify information. These children do not realise that they must try, think, and make learning happen.
c) Judgment or using feedback concerning progress towards the goal. The purposeful learner continuously monitors his goal-directed progress. Some signs of this monitoring are: reflection, acknowledging when he is right or wrong, that it was his doing, and making moves to correct mistakes or to continue after success. He interprets a wrong answer as his own mistake, rather than teacher’s spite.

Purposeful learning is not only a matter of confidence or of assertiveness in learning, but part of a whole cultural attitude towards the nature of knowledge and the learning process:

Passive participation is not sitting back and doing nothing. It is doing something in a special way which reflects your view of yourself, your world, and the situation you are in.

(Christie 1983)

The communication breakdown between non-Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal students in the formal learning situation is more than a failure to communicate information; it is a failure to communicate goals and the nature of goal-directed behaviour.

C. THE ROLE OF INFORMAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

There are, however, important classroom benefits to be gained from understanding ways in which traditionally oriented Aboriginal children are used to learning outside school:

a) Informal learning styles are the best way to introduce the fundamentals of the three Rs and for that matter, any classroom skill or understanding. While the term ‘Aboriginal learning styles’ is used, the approaches consistent with Aboriginal ways of doing things are found in varying proportions in all cultures. And informal (or more strictly, planned informal) approaches to, say, the teaching of initial reading will work better with all children, white or black, than the formal, teacher-centred approaches. It is almost as if western teachers, have in some subject areas such as the teaching of reading, overshot the limits of usefulness of formal instruction. Because formal teaching is so powerful we assume it works for every learning task. Because Aboriginal children are more used to learning informally (or have learned a higher proportion of what they know informally) than non-Aboriginal children, it is all the more important that Aboriginal children learn to read through a planned informal approach. (Harris, 1984).

The teaching of reading provides a good example. From the point of view of western theory about the reading process there has been a shifting of emphasis during the last fifteen years away from the idea that reading is best taught as a
decoding skill, to teaching it more in terms of a much broader communication skill. One of the more out-of-date ways to approach the teaching of reading was to emphasise the teaching of letters first, then words, then comprehension skills, then later to expose the learner to lots of easy reading practice. More recently, the tendency is to reverse this emphasis; to expose the child to lots of reading first and foremost (which is done by reading a great deal to and with children), and only then to teach smaller parts in a more informal way in the context of meaningful material. The theory is that although children do need to be taught word-attack skills, it is more important to realise that children learn to read by approximating reading behaviour, Harris, (1982b). This approach incorporates the major aspects of Aboriginal learning styles:

learning by observation
  by doing
  by imitation
  by personal trial and error
  by real-life performance
  by persistence and repetition

as well as utilising personal orientation and the principle of learning through successive approximations to the efficient end product.

All this is a different approach from the careful sequencing of skills in formal schooling, where cumulative skills are taught in such a way that the ultimate usefulness of each skill is not obvious at the time of teaching. However, although informal learning strategies will help children learn to read, in time children must read to learn and this involves more consciously such higher level cognitive skills as judging, predicting, evaluating, etc., which are best achieved by involving children in discussion after reflection on what they have read.

Beginning to learn English as a Second Language can be more effective in planned informal or semiformal activities - i.e. by doing, role playing, imitating and through successive approximation etc. The same is true for many aspects of primary level Social and Cultural Education - i.e. aspects of history, geography and economics - certainly the local parts of those learnings. Fundamental or introductory natural or environmental science could best be learned through planned informal activities, or informal and formal teaching combined. On the other hand, those aspects of science which cannot be experienced in the same way, cannot be taught informally. In other words, effective teachers of Aboriginal children need not only to know the children well and be able to adapt to them, but need to know each curriculum area well, before they can work out where to apply and where not to apply Aboriginal learning styles in the classroom. Until teachers know the curriculum principles well and the children well they cannot put the two together.

b) Teachers who can make use of Aboriginal learning styles will be able to ensure that what the children are learning is truly meaningful in the social context. Aboriginal learning styles have a special benefit in
second language situations because they are generally not language-dependent. This is largely because when learning is by doing and looking etc., there are more contextual clues which 'explain' what is involved. Informal, contextual learning can partially overcome the language barrier, where white teachers speak English, and Aboriginal children come to school with an Aboriginal language as their first language. Teachers need to realise that when they are talking in the classroom in English they are juggling around large numbers of quite abstract ideas and much of this juggling is dependent upon tiny English prepositions which the children may only barely grasp.

In addition, informal learning is valuable in the early stages of all learning. For example, most teachers now accept that children 'learn to read by reading' and there is evidence to show that this is a powerful learning strategy.

The danger with informal learning is, however, that because the learner is not always fully conscious about what he knows, he cannot always apply that knowledge to other problems. While it is argued that there is ultimately no side-stepping the need to learn through verbal instruction for those who want to succeed in secondary schooling or to cope with many culture contact situations, there are also dangers in depending on verbal instruction when experience-based activities combined with a carefully planned use of language would be more effective. This is true for children of any culture.

On the other hand, one danger of a teaching approach which is too predominantly verbal is that students may learn to respond, but do not really know the significance of all the terms the teacher uses. This is particularly important where the home culture has not provided the context for the words or concepts used in school. An example of the reverse teacher-student situation will illustrate the point. Some non-Aboriginal teachers working in Aboriginal communities learn to outline some of the local Aboriginal kinship system, learn how to address some Aborigines by kinship terms and gradually come to think that they understand the kinship system, i.e., they are able to respond because they have 'learned' the reciprocal terms. But they usually do not get to know the social or economic significance of these terms and cannot apply them appropriately in many different settings. And the moment of truth comes when they are at a ceremony and say to an Aboriginal, 'Why is X dancing now?' The Aboriginal person thinks the answer is obvious, and that they must already know because they can say the kinship terms. In the same way Aboriginal children can say 'nine' when you say 'six plus three' but often don't know where it fits into life. These problems are often difficult to perceive in classroom practice, because, according to Christie (1983b) Aboriginal children are forced to develop complex coping strategies in the face of impossible teacher demands. (Impossible, because teachers are expecting Aboriginal children to think, learn and understand like white children.) These coping strategies allow the classroom to run relatively smoothly, but minimise learning.

Ideally, in as many situations as possible formal and informal styles should be combined to avoid the dangers of each. A combination of what we are calling
'Aboriginal' and 'formal' learning styles is always the most effective primary classroom approach - a combination of doing and talking.

c) A teacher who understands how children learn will have a good chance of building up rapport with students. Non-Aboriginal teachers who work in Aboriginal schools have a much better chance of developing rapport with the children if they understand the patterns of socialisation that made them Aboriginal children. Some teachers find that the students don't respond to them for the first six months, and they give up careful planning and preparation because 'nothing is happening'. If they were warned that it takes six to twelve months for Aboriginal children to accept most teachers, they would be prepared to ride this period of adjustment and keep high expectations for the students and keep preparing carefully for lessons. The main point here is that teachers can easily misinterpret Aboriginal children's classroom behaviour as 'laziness', etc., but seen in the light of the children's own perspective these behaviours are in fact preferred Aboriginal behaviours. ('Laziness', for example, is often really the Aboriginal preference for non-pushy participation by not obeying until the third or fourth request.)

d) Teachers who understand Aboriginal learning styles will be more able to understand and assist the Aboriginal staff with whom they are working. Perhaps even more important than teaching children is the non-Aboriginal teacher's responsibility for on-the-job Aboriginal teacher training - in both the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of school education. If the non-Aboriginal teacher has a fundamental understanding of the potential strengths and weaknesses of Aboriginal learning styles for classroom application, he/she will be in a much better position to understand Aboriginal teacher behaviour and to suggest any necessary adjustments to, or to reinforce, their teaching behaviour.

It is quite possible that non-Aboriginal teachers will be able to adapt to Aboriginal learning styles in classrooms more readily than Aboriginal staff. This, of course, is because non-Aboriginals are themselves able and willing to act purposefully in their classroom work, i.e., they have clear educational goals, a sense of control over the situation and the ability to monitor their progress towards the goal. Aboriginal staff, tending to be conservative and to expect to teach as they themselves were taught in school, sometimes become uneasy when innovative classroom programmes are introduced. Because Aboriginal learning styles are largely informal, Aborigines are not conscious of them and do not find it easy to discuss them and analyse them. Thus non-Aboriginal teachers need to spend time initiating discussions - preferably with groups of Aboriginal staff - about how Aboriginal children learn at home and about how these insights might be applied in classrooms. Incidentally, when these insights are deliberately applied to learning in the classroom it is probably more accurate to refer to it as planned-informal learning.

To conclude then, all initial learning must be introduced meaningfully, which means through context-embedded learning. This is true even for language teaching:
... a major pedagogical principle for both first and second language teaching is that language skills needed in context-reduced situations can be most successfully developed on the basis of initial instruction which maximises the degree of context-embeddedness.

(Cummins 1981:14)

Brian Gray also talks about meaning preceding talk:

Children must perceive the meanings which are to be communicated before being asked to master the surface forms in which the meanings are to be expressed.

(Gray 1982:10)

Therefore, informal learning styles must be employed. But, whereas informal learning styles are essential for laying the foundations, they are not sufficient, because without verbalisation the children will not learn what formal education is out to teach them, that is, how to be purposeful in (school) learning, how to use language in context-reduced ways, how to handle abstractions and how to handle context-free principles. As Wells says:

One of the chief aims of schooling is to help the child to transcend the limitations of thinking which is tied to the context of immediate practical activity.

(Wells 1981:261)

And as Cummins further says:

Recent research suggests that ... part of minority students' failure in mainstream classrooms may derive from application of context-embedded strategies in the school setting where context-reduced strategies (e.g. responding in terms of the logic of the text rather than in terms of prior knowledge) are expected and rewarded.

(Cummins 1981:12)

D. SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISAPPLICATIONS OF ABORIGINAL LEARNING STYLES

There are a number of misunderstandings which teachers have about
applications of Aboriginal learning styles. One is that Aboriginal society has undergone so much social change that learning style contrasts are no longer valid. Without going into detail here it can be said that while social change has taken place in some areas of Aboriginal life, in isolated Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory it has not been significant in the area of learning styles. Also some teachers say that too much extrapolation is done from observations made at Milingimbi; that Aboriginal groups throughout Australia are very different. Observations made as far apart as Bathurst Island, Ernabella, Yuendemu and Arukun (for example, see O'Brien, Plooij and Whitelaw, 1975) indicate that in terms of learning style, traditionally oriented Aborigines from all over Australia have much in common (as would traditional hunting and gathering societies throughout the world, because learning styles are closely related to economy and technology). In terms of applications that can be made in schools, however, the following are much more important misunderstandings:

a) "Aboriginal people will do better at school if they are allowed to do school activities in the Aboriginal way." Provided teachers really understand what the crucial processes are in learning different skills and have analysed the strengths and weaknesses of 'the Aboriginal way' for teaching each skill, and have carefully planned for those teaching activities, for most areas in the curriculum in the earlier years, and in areas such as local history and geography in later years, Aboriginal learning styles can be productively used in classrooms. But it would be wrong to imply that if we could only learn enough about the 'Aboriginal way', eventually the whole school curriculum could be taught through Aboriginal teaching styles, and that the formal school approaches are only a stop-gap measure in Aboriginal schools till those greater insights come. The point is that because of the nature of what is to be learned in schools, that is, often verbal mastery of knowledge away from the here-and-now, the value of traditional Aboriginal styles is necessarily limited in schools. Schools use language to stand as symbols for real experiences, which leads to further use of symbolisations through written words, and mathematical symbols etc. This allows children to abstract principles and apply them to situations they have not previously met. The Aboriginal learning system is not a functional learning system for everything that needs to be learned in school. Whether a formal or informal style fits the task best is dependent on the nature of what is to be learnt, more than on the students' cultural affiliations.

Aboriginal learning styles evolved as adaptations to cultural, economic and technological realities for Aboriginal people. They are very efficient for those purposes, but are not efficient for all modern purposes. For example, persistence and repetition is an efficient problem-solving approach if the problem is spearing a fish, but not efficient in analysing an ailing motorbike engine; and trusting older authority figures is an efficient learning attitude in a society where there is one religion and one political system for all, but is inefficient where there is freedom of religion and a variety of acceptable political ideologies. We cannot ignore western educational theories. We must be critically selective of both them and of Aboriginal learning styles, to achieve the purposes of modern Aboriginal learning.
b) 'Respecting Aboriginal learning styles requires letting things happen naturally.' There are a few teachers in Aboriginal schools doing what one observer regarded as 'sloppy, poorly prepared activities and laying this at the feet of Aboriginal learning styles'. In fact, to apply Aboriginal learning styles profitably in the classroom takes more time and more effort to understand and plan than the more traditional 'school' way of teaching. The word 'natural' in relation to 'traditional' is somewhat deceptive. A superficial analysis of traditional Aboriginal society might lead some observers to assume that things were 'just happening' very casually, when in fact there were pressures at work (e.g. economic necessity) which ensured that the significant adults in the Aboriginal children's world were performing a range of important skills in the presence of the children and which the children needed to learn. There was probably also significant social pressure on the children to learn these skills early and effectively. Without the frequent presence of these adults the quality of informal learning to which the children were exposed could be very inefficient. Also, in informal learning the proportion of 'newness' (or unfamiliar content and processes) in any activity is very small. Thus, in view of the fact that much of the experience of Aboriginal children in school has a higher proportion of newness, unless adults are setting up the situations with a clear educational purpose in mind, so-called 'informal' learning experiences are likely to have little more than a baby-sitting function.

Informal learning must be carefully facilitated by the teacher. The danger is that it is often equated with the teacher doing nothing; e.g., letting the children tackle the block corner on their own. To evaluate this act we need to ask the question, 'What are block corners for?' They are designed among other things for children to develop exploratory behaviour. But if children are to learn by watching and copying there must be an adult in the block corner, for if the blocks are strange to the children, and they see no adult lead the way, little will be learnt. Also, children's exploratory behaviour is often started by adult verbal suggestion and discussion, and without this the quality of exploration in this context is likely to be low, especially so in that exploratory behaviour is a cognitive process and not a skill.

From this discussion two principles emerge: informal learning in school is effective for learning skills that other people are already visibly performing and for activities where the proportion of unfamiliar material is not too great. In particular curriculum areas, e.g., ESL or reading, or social studies, a great deal of behind-the-scenes planning is necessary on the part of the teacher/facilitator to make the experiences promote the desired learning. Thus, there is an obvious difference between informal learning in a traditional Aboriginal setting and in a modern classroom: in the former, although the adults were probably very effective teachers, they would seldom plan a teaching situation as such and may not have been fully conscious of what learning was taking place. So probably neither the student nor the 'teacher' were conscious of being in a 'learning situation'. In classroom informal learning, the teachers need to be fully conscious about what is planned to be learned from each experience.
c) 'Aboriginal children should do their school work in groups, because cooperative learning is an Aboriginal learning style.' In many cases group activity clarifies issues for weaker students and allows weaker students to experience success. For example, group discussion in a pre-writing activity is positive, and group reading during Shared-book Experience is very helpful. However, if the teacher, through knowing the students very well, perceives that some students are always coasting in the group activities, then they need to change the classroom organisation Christie (personal communication) observes that 'copying' is a major escape route perfected by many Aboriginal children. White children copy too. But the difference between white children's and Aboriginal children's copying is that the latter often do not realise that copying is not an effective approach to formal learning.) Copying among Aboriginal children is a serious education problem. When it is not the kind of group work that fosters true growth it is made worse by teachers who label it 'cooperation and let it go.

d) 'Aborigines learn by repetition and rote memory.' Repetition can promote learning more effectively than a lot of teachers recognise. For example, the power of bed-time stories to teach children to read partly depends on the repetition involved. But quite obviously if students are allowed to, say, continually play flash card games which embody skills which they have mastered years ago, or practise skills which are isolated from any meaningful context in which they can be applied, or allowed to do sums on the board or arithmetic work sheets endlessly at a level of difficulty which they have reached a long time before, or which involve operations which those students cannot apply in real-life situations, then repetition as a learning style is being applied in a way that short-changes the students. The teaching principle might be that repetition, or practice of itself does not teach new ideas, but is successful only when accompanied by meaning and purpose. For example, the repetition of bed-time stories is helpful only because the child has his/her own purpose to gain enjoyment and is not merely following some external pressure. Learning tables in arithmetic is helpful, that is, it becomes usable knowledge, only when the students can see multiplication in a broad meaningful context and when they can use the tables with purpose in real life applications.

e) 'Aborigines don't ask questions.' Apart from being an oversimplification (because Aborigines do ask some types of questions - see Harris 1984), the questioning nettle has to be grasped if Aboriginal students are ever to succeed in the school system. Aboriginal parents train their children not to ask too many questions. For example, one experienced non-Aboriginal teacher at Gapuwiyak observed that in mathematics lessons when children started to ask a lot of questions, the Aboriginal assistant teacher said, 'Don't ask so many questions - you're not balanda kids'. On another occasion Aboriginal adults have been observed to respond to children's questions by distracting the children, saying things like 'Look at those birds', (in a similar way as a non-Aboriginal parent would try to distract a child who was distressed or misbehaving). Teachers should accept that the Aboriginal customs here will not prepare students for high school, so strategies for getting Aboriginal students used to questions must be
worked out. Christie (personal communication) suggests that games which required students to ask meaningful questions would be helpful. But perhaps more importantly, teachers need to learn how to ask questions in a way that does not confuse children. Also, Aboriginal children need to accept that asking and answering an unnatural number of questions is part of the school subculture. Teachers need to explain the purpose of questions. One of the problems is that teachers act as if all school activities are natural in terms of life outside schools - when clearly they are not.

Another principle about questioning is that if an experience precedes verbal discussion and questioning, the students are likely to be more confident and more talkative about the content being discussed (see Graham, B., 1984:28) The importance of using an experience (informal learning) as a stimulus for fostering verbal (formal) learning has been symbolised by the learning triangle. (See Section E of this chapter). Here students move from experience to discussion to recording. If we try to start at the discussion stage, students often have nothing to talk about. If we start and stop at the experience, students do not learn to learn through verbal means. If we go straight to the recording stage (as is done often by writing a mathematics sum on the board), students may be doing nothing beyond rote activity. If we use all three stages we have combined, as it were, informal and formal styles to the best overall learning advantage.

f) 'Teachers in the traditional Aboriginal setting perform tasks and provide answers for children.' Like other aspects of Aboriginal behaviour this can in some contexts be a really useful aid to learning. Most non-Aboriginal teachers tend to be worried about this Aboriginal trait and believe strongly in letting children struggle.

In some cases for the adult to do the task for the students is educationally sound. Some educators believe that for some learning tasks for the child to be helped, say, twenty-four times over the same item makes learning just as efficient as being instructed, say, four times with the student being required to struggle on his/her own. (By struggle I do not mean floundering, but outlaying effort.) But we need to be careful here. If a child is struggling, you know he has a goal and internal control. On the other hand, if you help a child twenty-four times he will not learn unless you have successfully communicated the goal and he has internal control. Therein lies the danger of repetition and even modelling. These strategies will only work if we put them into a purposeful context. For example, take the teaching of reading: children can learn by going over and over stories with other people (such as bed-time stories or lap-method). These are really cases of adults 'doing' for the children - and this is positive, but only if the child has learning to read as his or her goal - something we take for granted in relation to white children. Or take cutting and pasting by Aboriginal children. Here the proportion of newness for the Aboriginal child is high, so for them to observe the adult or have the adult do it is an excellent starting place, even if the student does need to do it independently later on. Or take jigsaw puzzles. A good way to start this skill is to watch and imitate adults, and then to move into trial and error or doing it on their own. But if adults also talk about what they are doing for or with the children (an un-Aboriginal thing to do) this combination of
'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' styles would be efficient without being intimidating.

g) "Aborigines don't verbalise a lot in learning contexts, so shouldn't be required to do so in school." Sooner or later talking must be a major means of teaching and learning in school - it is unavoidable because much of what is learned higher up in school must be outside what can be experienced, seen, imitated, or performed. A list of learning processes such as could be found in almost any educational psychology textbook, e.g., observing, recalling, classifying, comparing, contrasting, generalising, inferring, predicting, hypothesising, analysing, synthesising and evaluating, shows plainly the importance of verbalising in formal learning. Even a topic such as teaching Aborigines the white man's views about land would require verbal learning which uses many language functions typical of formal learning.

It is not just any kind of talk that develops a body of context-free principles or a body of knowledge that goes beyond the immediate context of the local people and environment, but particular ways of using language. For example, Aborigines are highly verbal - but much more for social than teaching purposes, and many 'white' parents are highly verbal, but quite often for the regulation of family life and behaviour rather than to stretch the child's imagination. Tough (1980) provides examples of some of the ways language is often used in the school as a powerful tool of learning: talking for imagining, talking to think, talking to clarify and expand general knowledge, talking to express and explore ideas, talking to clarify and order experience, talking to stimulate curiosity and problem solving attitudes, talking as a tool for interpretation, and talking as a means of adjusting to new situations. In all of these different purposes for using language the child is nearly always dependent on adults for initiation into subtle and more complex uses of language.

h) 'Non-Aborigines learn informally too'. In western society there is a great deal of both formal and informal education whereas in more traditionally oriented Aboriginal society most learning is done informally.

Two common experiences in non-Aboriginal homes might make these distinctions clear. Firstly, there are of course non-Aboriginal examples of fairly 'pure' informal learning. These occur when there is no time pressure. A boy learns to shave by watching his father shave on and off over many years. The significant features of this informal learning setting are that the adult is doing something real, the child watches and maybe pretends or imitates, there is virtually no verbalisation of the process, and after a long period of time at the appropriate age the child successfully, with a little trial and error, performs the skill. The second is that of children learning to tie their shoelaces. This is a difficult and complex task that usually must be accomplished in a short time. So, the parents take steps that are typical of formal school learning and thus unconsciously they prepare children for school even though at this stage there is nothing as advanced as, for example, questioning what is happening or about to happen. Parents break the task up into parts (sequence the skills) e.g., first knot,
then bow, then knot the bows. Children practise each part before proceeding.

Also the parents verbalise a great deal of the process. This collapses the time involved. The verbalisation process which accompanies the knot-tying raises awareness of the process to the conscious level, so the learner consciously knows what he/she is learning. An added aspect of the preparation for the school in this example is that the child is getting used to learning those things imposed by adults and when demanded by institutionalised time schedules.

E. THE LEARNING TRIANGLE AND THE CONTENT/PROCESS Crossover: AN INTEGRATION OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL METHODS.

Teachers can do more than a lot of us presently do to avoid 'dumping' school verbalisation on Aboriginal children. Skilful teachers have their own routines, but for those less adept it is a good rule to begin with experiences, and then talk about and record those shared experiences. It is here that the three step learning triangle is so important. As discussed above, step one is share an experience, step two is talk about it, step three is record it in some way which allows for more talk. This approach involves beginning in an 'Aboriginal way' and ending up in a more conscious, verbalised 'school' way of transmitting and reviewing knowledge.

![Share an experience](image)

Learning a concept (IDEA)

Talk about it Record it

It is hoped that readers do not assume that the importance of verbalisation is being urged merely because it is a 'school way' or 'white' way of doing things. Verbal learning is important because it is highly efficient in terms of allowing for out-of-context learning, allowing immediate feedback, promoting the formation of generalised principles, and creating consciousness about what is known and not known, which in turn increases the chances of applying knowledge or principles in new settings.

Another teaching approach which is helpful in building bridges from formal to informal learning with Aboriginal children can be called the 'content process crossover'. The basic idea here is that formal learning processes, that is, verbal learning, should be started on familiar content, and that new western content should, where possible, be introduced through informal processes, that is,
through watching, doing, participating, telling and labelling. In this way the teacher can avoid teaching new content and new processes at the same time.

F. CONCLUSION

In order to improve Aboriginal schooling in fundamental ways, the starting point for a teacher is to be well grounded in western educational theory and in an understanding of Aboriginal learning styles. There are, of course, important areas of Aboriginal knowledge in terms of language, world view, mathematics and science, etc., that we need to learn much more about in order to improve Aboriginal schooling, but those matters are outside the scope of this chapter. The central theme of this chapter is that until teachers know their school curricula well (including various teaching methodologies) and know the Aboriginal students well, they cannot put the two together. Those teachers who believe that all we need to know is the Aboriginal way of doing things only have half the formula; those teachers who think they only need good western teaching methodology and do not need to make special adaptions for Aboriginal children only have the other half of the formula.

Formal school-type learning must be a part of any functional learning system in modern Australia. A teacher of Aboriginal children who has not made a close study of traditional Aboriginal ways of behaving in learning situations is at a real disadvantage in trying to develop the most effective teaching approaches for Aboriginal children. To be an effective teacher of Aboriginal children, teachers must be well grounded in educational and pedagogical theory, must know and understand the children, must know and understand Aboriginal school staff, and must be able to analyse effective teaching strategies in the light of all this knowledge.
NOTE 1

It should be explained early in this chapter that although it is largely devoted to informal Aboriginal learning styles, and although it will be claimed here that the vast majority of Aboriginal learning was achieved informally and largely non-verbally, it is not being implied that there was and is no formal verbal instruction in Aboriginal society. Mothers certainly name people and things a lot to their children and there is verbal instruction at ceremonial times and there is much telling or reciting, but all of these examples of verbal teaching are different from the two-way process of student and teacher being verbally involved and responding to each other. It is a matter of proportion: most learning in Aboriginal society was achieved informally.

NOTE 2

The concept of a 'functional learning system' was developed partly to counteract the concept of the 'deficit model' of learning by ethnic minorities.

We should not become uneasy about the recognition of difference on the grounds that it begins to look like 'deficit' difference. Difference is a fact of life in Aboriginal communities. The deficit model implies that the problem is in the emptiness of the child's head, and the responsibility for failure lies with the child. The difference model claims the child already has learned skills and knowledge that are functional in his situation: and that he need more and different skills for the new situation: and that the responsibility for failure lies more with the teacher. The resultant ethical justice and attitude change by teachers add up to important classroom gains.

NOTE 3

To prevent the theme of this chapter from becoming too complex the basic contrast of formal versus informal learning has been used most of the time. However, in some ways this is an oversimplification which the chart (Appendix 1) may partially overcome for those interested in analysing the contrast further.
APPENDIX 1

THE INFORMAL - FORMAL LEARNING CONTINUUM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context Embedded</th>
<th>Context Reduced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Planned - Informal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidental learning.</td>
<td><em>Real-life</em> or concrete experiences where teachers consciously plan to ‘live’ what has to be learned, e.g. learning to read by reading approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-life experience</td>
<td>No pressure on students to perform or overt time limits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating; doing watching, imitating etc.</td>
<td>Teacher conscious of imparting knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No pressure or time limit on learner to learn.</td>
<td>Planned use of informal learning strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No institutionalised office of teacher.</td>
<td>Assessment part of the total experience, children unaware of being assessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More learning of wholes rather than parts; successive approximations to efficient end product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants are living, learning is a by-product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively unconscious.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Hidden curriculum’ in classrooms.</td>
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</table>

A major teaching principle in L1 and L2 is that ‘language skills’ in context-reduced situations can be most successfully developed on the basis of initial instruction that maximises the degree context embeddedness. (Cummins, 1981:14)

Chart from Graham, B, 1984: Language Power, Appendices, Northern Territory Department of Education, Darwin, N.T.
My first yolngu class was, at least in its organisation, traditional. The programme was, to use open classroom terminology, more teacher-centred than child centred. In these days, that is quite a confession, but that was in 1972, before I had heard of bilingual education, yolngu teacher emancipation or the open classroom. I planned what the children should do, when they should do it, and how. This was the only system by which I could keep constant tabs on how much the children could understand, how much they were learning and where to go next.

There were about thirty-five Grade 3s (and sometimes forty) in the group, but some of them had only had a week or so of previous schooling. And then there was Monty, an autistic boy who fitted in as a sort of hyperactive mascot. He had no speech, and virtually no communication with people, but he loved to be around us and to draw on the blackboard with crayons.

We also had a yolngu teaching assistant called Master, whom everyone loved. The children all sat at their desks - I wanted to be able to see what they were doing. And they loved the desks. They loved everything in our school system which showed vestiges of nineteenth century schooling. (I fear that yolngu children, and often their teachers, thought that by the very act of sitting at a desk, straight backed and shiny faced, they were learning something.) They arranged themselves into groups of their own choosing, although I gerrymandered a bit to ensure that the slower children were mixed with the brighter ones. The groups did not change much. Every so often one child would get the pip with the others and ostentatiously get up and carry both desk and chair to another group, but that was tolerated. The groups were continually changing desks for different subjects, according to my arrangement.

For mathematics and reading, the children were divided into groups, two for mathematics and four for reading. Master usually took the slower group, working through the exercises in the vernacular with endless patience.
READING

Reading was conducted in English, on a revolving basis for four days a week, so that each day two of the groups would be with a teacher and two would work independently. Master and I would be responsible for two groups each, and hover between them. I would explain what each group had to do before we started, and set them all off working. This is basically what each group did (although circumstances often changed things somewhat):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>A Day</td>
<td>B Day</td>
<td>C Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>B Day</td>
<td>C Day</td>
<td>D Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>C Day</td>
<td>D Day</td>
<td>A Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>D Day</td>
<td>A Day</td>
<td>B Day</td>
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A Day. A new story was introduced. We used the Price Milburn Ready to Read Scheme (PM), which is the best I know of. I read the new story to the children first and discussed the meaning of it, then they reread it, either silently (giving me a chance to go to another group for a moment), in chorus, or taking turns. We would probably read it twice and discuss it. Then we would have a ten minute, or slightly longer, phonics session for the more advanced groups. This was impromptu and based on words in the new story found to be difficult. For the slower group, this was usually replaced with a ten minute session with flash cards. Then the group would read class library books and magazines. There was no writing on A day.

B Day. This would involve some reading activity based on the previous day's story. Anything was suitable as long as it involved genuine reading for meaning, could be carried out with only minimal attention from the teacher, and it involved some writing so that I could assess it. Sometimes it was simply to reread the story and answer some comprehension questions. Sometimes the story text was altered slightly and made into a cloze test. Sometimes it involved sequencing sentences and copying them, or some similar activity. I would go over the group's work when I had finished with the A Day group.

C Day. I would scratch around to find a supplementary story. Using the Ready to Read series, with its multiplicity of little books, this was easy. For the slower groups this was harder, so sometimes I would have to write the story myself. Master took the group doing this. They read the story as a group first and later read individually to him while the others were doing a follow-up activity.

D Day. This day was the favourite. Earlier in the year I had tried using a 'reading kit' - one of those commercially produced programmes, in vogue in 1972, consisting of an endless succession of graded insipid stories and activities of doubtful educational value. The children loved them. So on D Day they were allowed to work with them, provided they organised the plotting and graphing of their progress through the colour-coded work cards themselves, which they did.
with precision. If they didn't want to do that, they could read books from the class library, read or write for the class newspaper or complete any unfinished work from previous days. (Sometimes they were told to do this, but only for a few minutes.) At this time, the school library was rather small, so I put a lot of energy into building up the class library. I bought about thirty-five paperback versions of children's picture books and collected new and second-hand material wherever and whenever I had the chance. D Day also meant going out onto the veranda with a group of friends and Monty to read a favourite story together. Monty must have heard 'The Donkey's Egg' at least fifty times. Master helped the D Day group to organise itself.

Instructional reading was planned to last forty minutes, but the class reading session followed straight on from the formal reading lessons, so as soon as they were ready, the children would find their books and begin to read.

Class reading was planned to last for fifteen minutes directly before morning tea, and all children were expected to read a book quietly to themselves during that time. Most of the children loved this and settled down to it quickly when they finished their work, and a steely glance from me usually subdued the 'ratbags'. Monty had a passion for motor cars so, using an old steering wheel and a cardboard box, we built him a racy little model at the back of the room. During class reading, he went for a ride in his motor car. I worked on the principle that children learn to read by reading, and what they needed more than anything else was practice at reading at their own level. Usually the class settled down well to private reading and gave me a chance to do some work with individual children. I tried in vain to get the class to read in perfect silence, but found I had no choice but to tolerate a low, constructive buzz. Usually our only interruption was Monty changing gears or encountering a tight corner. On some days the class reading time quite plainly wasn't going to work - the children were excited about a fight at home or in the playground or there was someone new or something different afoot - so I would gather them on the floor and read a story. They also had something read to them for a few minutes every day before lunch and before home time.

Every Friday, reading was different. We worked as a whole class as far as possible and we concentrate on the 'why' of reading and writing. Practical reading usually involved letter writing, research or study of the printed word in the environment. To write a letter, we would compose it as a class and volunteers would come forward and write it on the blackboard, phrase by phrase, as it was formulated. The class read the whole letter back in unison as each new sentence was added. Then we copied it out. The children loved the utilitarian idea that we were writing to real people asking for things that really did turn up. Fridays would often be used to read and discuss any replies that came through the mail: those polite notices to the effect that 'No, we're sorry but we can't send you thirty-eight free samples of this (or that)'

Research reading was usually rather chaotic; the brighter half of the class would usually squash the non-fiction section of the tiny library and rummage for
information on a given topic - frogs, cowboys or Elvis Presley. Some of the children learned to use an index, but most of them were still looking for a picture and trying to read the caption. The slower half of the class would spend their time pouring over *Time* and *Woman's Day* looking for pictures they fancied. Master helped them to find the part in the text that referred to the picture. The children were allowed to cut out the pictures and paste them into the class newspaper if they wrote a sentence about them or, for the slower ones, if they copied out its title. A special time after morning tea was reserved for going through this with the whole class.

In a remote Aboriginal community, often the only place where reading material can be found is the school. In an attempt to convince the children of the value of reading in the outside world, we sometimes made an expedition to read the advertising for the pictures or anything else that appeared in the store window; or we looked at the labels on cans of food and read the the new notices around the place.

**WRITING AND SPELLING**

Writing, as far as possible, went hand in hand with reading. Sometimes children would have a writing exercise to accompany their instructional reading story, and every day the children wrote a story for an hour. Mostly these were simple news stories. My attempts to get them to write creative prose were perfunctory (and largely unsuccessful), but the children learnt to put interest into their news stories and film critiques. Spelling was taught in these periods. Each child had what we called a 'try card'. The try card, was one of the key pieces of classroom equipment. A piece of light card about three centimetres wide and three centimetres long, if a child writing a story wanted an unfamiliar word, it was spelt first on the try card. Then it was bought to me, and together we would work out the correct spelling if necessary. This encouraged children to try to spell, yet allowed their writing to be relatively free of errors. The corrected words made a good list of personal spelling words. We only had a spelling lesson once a week, when the children would learn list words and test each other in pairs. I would add a couple of words of topical interest, from social studies or from try cards with only a few words on them. I managed to get little individual dictionaries for the children and a 'Cat in the Hat' dictionary for the whole class.

**MATHEMATICS**

The class was divided into two groups; those who could and those who couldn't. I always took the 'coulds'. I started the year with the N.Z. *Blue Book* Scheme, which, as mathematics textbooks go, was quite good. The children worked through it quite well and their books were alive with ticks. But I grew painfully aware that whenever I gave them a problem from real life to solve, they were struck dumb. They could all tell me what seven times four was, but no one could tell me how many slices of bread would be needed if seven girls wanted four
slices each. To overcome this, I increased the real life component and kept doing so until it took up the whole lesson.

Mathematics is different from reading. Reading, if properly taught, is always meaningful. So our practical reading lessons were only necessary one day a week. But mathematics is different. It is possible to compute efficiently without any idea of the meaning of or use for mathematics in the real world. So, practical reading once a week, practical mathematics every day! To achieve this we had to first slow down the volume of work to be covered. The whole group had to work through every example together, talking about it, demonstrating it and writing it down in standard form. That is why we only had two groups. I wanted all the children to be working with a teacher all the time. My group had quite a wide spread of ability, so I varied the difficulty of the problems and demonstrated the algorithm continually. I wasn't so much worried about how many of them understood the answers as about how many of them understood the questions. I think that that's the key to teaching mathematics to children, especially yolngu children: ensure that they really understand the question.

We would start a lesson with some mental arithmetic. I might ask, 'If I had eleven apples and I gave Monty six of them, how many would I have left?' Then we would go on to pencil-and-paper examples, each a real life problem, preceded by and followed by verbal explanation and practical demonstration. As a background to all this, the children learnt their 'tables', which we sang every morning in traditional fashion. The children loved that.

Master took the other group who really didn't know what was going on. These children didn't understand the questions, or even that there was one. In an 'attempt to find a 'mathematics medium' with both meaning and interest, these children worked mainly with money - a big box of real money from which never a cent went missing. They played 'shops' with Master and counted their money over and over. They also collected vast quantities of shells, which they used as counters. We tried Cuisenaire rods with little success, but might have succeeded with more effort. About once a week children did a development activity. Building with blocks, water and sand play, plasticine shapes may have been useful, but I felt that it was not the solution to their problems. Some of them may have needed more experience at manipulating their environment. They all needed more experience at manipulating their knowledge of the environment, more experience in thinking. These were the children who had seldom or never been to school previously, the best fisherboys and hunters, and those with the widest yolngu experience. They knew about their environment but didn't understand school. They couldn't see what the teachers' were trying to get at, nor did they understand the teachers' language or techniques. So we planned work which was closely related to (in fact, was a replication of) their outside world. Most importantly, we gave them a yolngu teacher who understood how they thought and who waited more patiently for results.
SOCIAL STUDIES

Social studies was seen as the least important section of the curriculum, and was another area where we never got past the social situations of the children themselves. Once again, it was relatively teacher-dominated. I planned the units of work, the content, the method of presentation and so on. We studied the institutions on the island and how these affected our lives. We attacked, with a view to solving problems, such subjects as: What is the difference between *yolngu* and *balanda* food? How does the council make new rules for Milingimbi? We planned expeditions and talks to help us with these problems then wrote our findings into class books and charts. Looking back, it was all rather superficial. If I were to do it again I would concentrate almost exclusively on *yolngu* institutions, gradually comparing them with *balanda* ones. Social studies inevitably included health and natural science. I tried as much as possible to plan ahead, but I learned not to 'flog dead horses'. I capitalised on the unpredictable curiosities of the children. For example, stockyards, horses and bullocks took off at once, and another time everything was centred around 'armies' for a week or two.

*YOLNGU SOCIAL PATTERNS*

With only a few exceptions I tried to encourage the use of *yolngu* social patterns. I let them sit with whomever they liked, and gave them ample time to obey me with that nonchalance so important to *yolngu* children. Punishment of children is rare in *yolngu* culture and accordingly it was disapproved of by the parents and met with little success in the classroom. Usually a word or two would subdue the problem children, and, if that failed, a few minutes outside the door would generally work. Master could, and often did, subdue a riotous class with a few gently spoken words, and we all felt quite contrite.

Once a week we went to the creek for a swim and mud fights. Every few weeks or so we went for a picnic over the salt pans. Everyone brought five cents and we made ourselves vegemite sandwiches and cordial. We left a few minutes before lunch and came back at three or four o'clock, after playing softball, fishing, catching crabs or collecting shellfish. We rambled for long distances, the boys racing ahead with their sticks and fishing lines, the teachers and the girls walking behind carrying the food, with Monty somewhere in the middle, car spotting. The aim of these picnics was to consolidate friendly relationships between the children and myself and, of course, to have a good time. It also helped me to understand the children and how they related to one another, and to understand Master and the way he related to them. I learnt slowly that *yolngu* children do what they're told because they think it is a good idea rather than because they are told. I had to learn that the idea, 'I am a teacher; therefore I must be obeyed', meant a lot to me but virtually nothing to them. Teachers of *yolngu* children have to earn respect. They are not awarded it automatically by virtue of their position. I also learnt, happily, that any cultural *faux pas* that I happened to make were readily forgiven.
The phonics-based primers which we had been using for two years in the bilingual programme, were working well with a group of children who happened to be both bright and making it to school five days a week. However, a large group had tried the primers and, either because they were not ready for this approach to reading or were irregular in attendance, simply never got 'off the ground'. The other children, in the middle, were off the ground but fluttering precariously.

The 'never off the ground' group was given to me. It comprised over twenty children, about ten of whom would be at school on any one day. They were second and third year infants with whom I had an hour and a half every day, in an open classroom. The children knew me well and I could speak to them in Gupapuyngu (or in English to the one or two children from other settlements whose language was not Gupapuyngu). Gupapuyngu-speaking children read in Gupapuyngu, the others in English. Elements from the Ashton-Warner approach and the Language Experience approach were used.

The method was simple. Children had large paper bags with their names on them. In them inside we kept all the pictures and stories they had done. Each day they came to school, they read all the stories in their bags to me. If they were keen, they would read them all to themselves a dozen times as well, and probably inflict each one onto any small relatives or friends they could find to listen. While waiting for me, picture in hand, they would also read other children's stories, leaning over my shoulder and often getting to know these other stories as well as they knew their own.

* This chapter was first published in The Aboriginal Child at School Vol 4, No 2, 1976. This revised version is reproduced here with permission of the editor.
When I arrived at school each morning, the children would come to take a piece of paper and a box of crayons and sit down to draw a picture. The keener ones came immediately; the ones preoccupied with other activities came when I called them. I started by trying to encourage children to draw pictures of stimulating events in their environment, things that they had seen and done which had affected them. But they were not interested in doing this in the same way that I found balanda children to be. Even the day one of the school buildings burnt down produced nothing! So I let them draw what they wanted to, which was generally a quiet domestic scene, cooking, playing, hunting, riding in a boat and so on.

The children would first fold back a section at the bottom of their page, and when the picture was finished to their satisfaction, they would bring it to me and dictate their story. Usually the stories started at about three or four words, increasingly over the months to (sometimes) a whole page, but from the children who were new or shy, came only one word or nothing at all, just a picture to look at and put into the bag.

With the children watching, I would write a story slowly in the space below the picture, using a thick black pencil and reading each word as it appeared on the page. The children would read back the sentence straight away, pointing to the words, one by one, before they had time to forget them; instant success at reading! Then, one by one, they would read yesterday's story, the one from the day before, and so on, until all the previous stories had been read.

I had to bear one important factor in mind. Whenever children came across a word they didn't know, I told them immediately. They never had to fidget in silence trying to work out a word; right from the first day they were fluent readers! Sometimes, for some children, this meant having every sentence read first, before they read it themselves. But this stage never lasted long. The picture was always the most important clue to decoding the words. Everything the children read, they could read easily. As their repertoire grew, so did their dependence on recognising word shapes and initial sounds, until I could easily fold down the picture of the better known stories and the children would read them without the picture clues.

Along with this came the incidental teaching of sight words and word attack techniques. Some of the children profited by flashcards with words on them; just something else to pull out of the bag and read to me. Other children didn't seem to benefit much from flashcards. However, all the children enjoyed looking comparatively at their different sentences; this word appearing twice, but with a different suffix each time; this word very short and appearing in all the stories; and these two sentences exactly alike except for one different letter (notice how they sound nearly the same too). Some children learned quickly with this type of word study; others didn't.

Sometimes children didn't want to draw a picture or cut out a magazine picture or even paint or do any other suggested activity. They would just read
their stories and go away. Children at school for the first time in a month could easily start again where they had left off.

After a time - a long time - some of the children were obviously learning well. After three months they didn't want pictures any more, just stories. They didn't want only their own stories; they wanted everybody else's as well. I started making up stories for them to read. It came as a shock that they could read information that had started in someone else's head and not their own. But this excited them. I even managed to use the Gudschinsky supplementary material because it turned out that the sounds and syllables which we had drawn out to look at ourselves, were, as often as not, the same words and syllables as those selected for the first few lessons of the primer, on the basis of their high frequency. These few well-started children were over the difficult stage. They knew what reading was about. They knew that it was meaningful; and, not only that, it was rather fun.

Perhaps a third of the children did not progress like this. Possibly this was through lack of attendance, motivation, readiness, or previous failure. They were not progressing with the 'no tears' method either. As their bags became heavier, their task became more difficult. Despite my efforts to make the experience fun, and without pressure, sessions with these children were becoming long and tiresome. I solved this problem by carefully weeding out the pictures and stories which were continually misread, or causing difficulty, while keeping the number of stories for each child at about a dozen. No child had difficulty in coping with that many. Seldom did they notice that one of their valuable pictures has mysteriously disappeared overnight. If they did notice, the picture was hastily retrieved and, incidentally, the story never again forgotten. Some of these children, rote-reciting stories on a few pieces of paper, appeared to be making no progress. But left-to-right reading techniques, one-to-one correspondence of words and other basic reading techniques were being reinforced, and when the sentences were over-learnt, and we started the game of folding down the pictures so that only the story remained, even these children found that they were really reading and were exhilarated.

The stories never seemed to lose their mundane character. However I stuck to my principle of letting the children draw, dictate and read exactly what they wanted to, and they never seemed bored. And besides, this tendency had some real advantages. The same words and sentence structures began appearing again and again. Children sometimes had a dozen stories comprising of only fifteen or so words. Fortunately, in Gupapuyngu, word order is not highly significant within a sentence. Recurrence of patterns such as 'I am playing in the ...', 'Yesterday we went to the ...', and 'We went hunting for ...' made the books easy to compile. The stories were cut off the bottom of the pictures and these pictures were pasted onto sheets of stiff paper and stapled to make a book. The text was written on the facing page of each picture; a basic sentence pattern with only one word different each time. Some binding tape and some spray-on fluid to preserve the drawings made the books professional-looking and permanent. In the library these books had a hard time competing with the beautiful,
highly coloured English language books, but the children loved to read them in small groups with a teacher.

Some of the problems remained unsolved. Firstly, despite the fact the Ashton-Warner approach and the Language Experience approach both successfully incorporate the use of group teaching in their scheme, it didn't work at all well with this group of special children. Secondly, the reading of individual stories and incidental word analysis etc. would take five to ten minutes every day for each child. Other interested children would have to be occupied with another activity until called for by the teacher; a situation ideal in the open classroom, but probably difficult to organise in a one-teacher small class. A third 'problem' was the tendency of the group to grow. Successful readers from all the other groups started coming to me with their pictures, wanting stories to read and copy. There were children, bags, pictures, pieces of pictures and books everywhere. These responses were channelled into highly successful supplementary activities for the other children, ones which the yolngu teachers could manage well for their own reading groups. All that these yolngu teachers needed was accurate spelling ability in their own language. As the teacher got to know each child's responses, they could decide whether this approach was better as the key method or as a supplement to another method.

Finally two things were borne in mind during all of this. Firstly, there is a time and place for teaching young children who are still learning English (or any other language) what 'correct' grammar usage is. This is not it. The children dictating the story, whatever language they used, would get the story on paper just as they told it. Any attempt to correct the grammar, and the child would not be able to read it back the next day. Secondly, the reading and word study as described here was only a small part of this reading programme. In any reading programme, lots of time should be spent in creating a reading environment for the children. Even with only an hour and a half a day, I made sure that I spent about ten or fifteen minutes reading to the children, listening to my children and older children reading, or just looking at books with them. Any reading would be brought frequently and meaningfully into every other activity in the open classroom.

R.V. and C. Allen summarise a child's learning in a Language Experience programme thus:

* what he thinks he can say
* what he says can be written (or dictated)
* what has been written can be read
* he can read what he has written and what others have written for him to read.

This approach to reading is very slow. It takes time for any results to show. But it is also easy for both the child and the teacher. It makes children conscious that the reading process can be connected with real life; they can actually read and recall ideas that they had yesterday and have forgotten. Reading becomes very real.
Chapter 9

Teaching purposeful reading to Aboriginal children*
Michael Christie

In many aspects of formal education we expect Aboriginal children to think, learn and behave as white children. This is an unreasonable expectation because Aboriginal children in their home lives are seldom equipped with those skills which are necessary at school. Worse, teachers often don't understand what skills are required in school learning because they are so fundamental to the task, and because white children display these skills so easily.

This chapter looks at the reading process from this point of view and identifies areas where Aboriginal children need to be taught specific skills before they can read with purpose. Suggestions as to how to teach these skills are included.

The major aim of this chapter is to look at ways in which teachers of Aboriginal children can improve reading ability. I believe that our teaching methods could be facilitated by concentrating on what I see as being the crucial difference between yolngu and balanda children in the formal school setting. That is, that yolngu children do not expect to and do not participate in the school programme in an active purposeful self-conscious way, but rather participate passively in the school learning process in the same way as they participate passively in their day-to-day home life. What I intend to do is talk first of all about this particular idea and then later suggest things that I hope or believe teachers can do about it.

Of course there are different ways in which anyone can participate in a school or outside activity, but for the purpose of this chapter, I am dividing participation into two broad subgroups: active and passive. The way in which you or I participate in any activity could be roughly indicated on a scale with active participation at one end and passive participation at the other end. How we participate depends on both the activity and the sort of people we are. When I watch television I participate passively, when I go fishing I participate actively. In

*This chapter was originally published in The Aboriginal Child at School Vol. 10. No. 2 1982. It is reproduced here with permission from the editor.
a school staff meeting I fluctuate between passive and active participation depending on how I feel and what we're talking about.

Although how we participate depends very much on the situation and our mood, still, each individual has a generalised tendency towards either more active or more passive participation. Not only do individuals show generalised tendencies one way or the other, but so do cultural groups. And my understanding of yolngu children and adults, from my experience with them and research I have read, indicates that their way of life is geared very much towards passive participation. Most people who are familiar with the personalities of traditionally oriented Aboriginal children will have noticed this. They are happy to cooperate passively with virtually anything that occurs in the classroom, but have enormous difficulty in taking initiative in any social or learning situation. For example they tend to learn inductively rather than deductively. Deductive learning requires active thoughtful manipulation of material which they tend to find difficult. When teaching and observing yolngu classes, I am constantly surprised at the time and effort the children will put into passive participation activities - for example they will copy a story or map off the blackboard meticulously and be wholly absorbed for over an hour - and yet how much difficulty they have where active thoughtful and self-conscious participation is required - for example in solving verbal mathematics problems. When active participation is required, the children have poor concentration, poor understanding, and show poor results.

Passive participation is the rule rather than the exception in the children's everyday life as well. In the yolngu way of thinking, it is preferable to let things happen rather than to make things happen. Forcing things to happen through making structured plans and coercing others to fulfill them is seen almost as a form of violence. Most sensitive balanda teachers know how much yolngu react against people asking too many questions, or people trying to organise them into a highly structured activity. Experienced teachers also know how much more comfortable it is to exert subtle influences over classroom organisation than to constantly take an active dominating role. There has been much talk in the past about the Aboriginal lifestyle being in harmony with nature. I think that, when compared with the industrialised capitalist western nations, this is very true. And these two contrasting lifestyles, I think, pretty consciously reflect the two primary patterns of participation - active and passive.

AN EXAMPLE OF PASSIVE PARTICIPATION

Since the principle of passive participation underlies most of what yolngu people do, it is a useful perspective for observing differences between yolngu and balanda behaviour. Take, for example, an Aboriginal religious ceremony. The Aboriginal people all agree that there is to be a ceremony but they also believe that passive participation is the most polite and the most peaceful way of achieving it. Therefore, no one person takes all the initiative. There is much discussion and planning together among the older people. No one takes full responsibility, and people who try to take too much power are passively resisted. The plans are specific, but when the time comes, participants know not to force
the development of the ceremony so the time factor gets stretched, and often the whole action is put off for a day or a week. The amount of formal organisation is minimal. All the organisation is either inherent in the ceremony itself (e.g. who is to do what, the order of events, who sits where) or else is worked out there and then by discussion. It is a satisfying experience for all, because anyone who wants to play a part is welcome but the reserved people can simply sit and watch. In a sense everyone (especially the dancers) is active. But there is an essential passive element in the participation. Even the most powerful organisers in the ceremony can only work in cooperation with each other. No one forces the dancers to dance and although they dance together, they dance independently. The dances have definite ends but don't seem to have definite beginnings. The music starts, and the dancers join in their own time.

Passive participation is not sitting back doing nothing. It is doing something in a special way which reflects your view of yourself, your world, and the situation you are in. Some Aboriginal people, in some situations, will show active participation but generally, in traditional and modern Aboriginal culture, the passive style is preferred. And, in fact, passive participation is what an Aboriginal child knows best when he arrives at school.

But when we look at the school learning system, it requires active participation. Problem solving is the active manipulation of thoughts and ideas. Trying is the active control of one's abilities directed at a specific goal. School motivation is the state of active orientation towards a goal.

This enormous difference between the sort of participation that Aboriginal children are used to, and the sort of participation the school expects from them, is seldom understood by white teachers. There is good reason for this. White teachers are so used to active participation themselves, and active involvement inheres in virtually every aspect of white schooling, that they see children who don't know how to participate actively, and mistakenly call them unmotivated, lazy or retarded. What white teachers and children take for granted, the Aboriginal children find quite foreign and even frightening.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

Although it is easy to see that there is a difference between what a yolngu child is expected to do at school and what he is used to doing at home, it is rather difficult to discover the fundamental nature of the difference.

I have chosen what I see as three essentials of active participation but this is really only the beginning of a theory. These three essentials are discussed below as they apply to active school learning.

1. Goal

The active learner must have a goal. The goal must be conscious, specific, and
realistic. In a formal learning situation, the goal usually starts with the teacher and is more or less communicated to the pupil. If the teacher and the pupil have different goals or if the pupil has no idea what the teacher's goal is, he may participate passively, but he will be unable to participate actively.

2. Internal control

The learner must, in this situation, have a sense of being in control. In other words, he must believe that he can learn, and that whether or not he learns, is really primarily his responsibility. He can't sit there passively waiting for learning to happen, he must try it, think about it, and make learning happen himself.

3. Judgment

Once the child recognises his goal and believes that he can do something to attain it, he must continually make judgments about his progress towards the goal. The two main forms of judgment are prediction and reflection. Along with reflection comes personal responsibility. If a learner does not acknowledge personal responsibility, then his successes will not carry much intrinsic motivational value. (in other words he/she will say 'That was lucky, I hope it happens again', rather than 'That was successful, I'll try to do it again') Also, when he fails, the learner must acknowledge that he himself did something wrong, so that he can think again, try another stratagem or adjust his goal.

Why is it then that yolngu children can so successfully learn the intricacies of their own culture without employing these skills of active participation? Research into Aboriginal learning styles has revealed numerous different ways in which Aboriginal children learn at home and these largely entail passive inductive processes of socialisation. At home in the real life situation these methods of learning are very efficient. But school learning is different. Even after our attempts to make school relevant to yolngu children it is still mostly verbal, it is conscious, and it is largely divorced from the real life situation.

Although most teachers have never thought of school learning in these terms, these three factors of goal, internal control and judgment are crucial, not only to successful formal school learning but to successful active participation in all areas of life. (See NOTE 1)

TWO POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES

One way of looking at the problem would be to say that the school's expectations and the children's culturally different home backgrounds simply don't match. And there are two possible approaches we could make to remedy this.

1. We could systematically change the nature and the demands of formal education so that the behaviours outlined above are no longer required by the education system.
2. We could systematically go about teaching the children those behaviours which are part and parcel of formal education so that they can cope with them.

The short answer I think is that we must do both - concentrating on the latter solution in primary and post-primary schooling, and the former in preschool and infant schooling.

The first solution, to change the nature of the school to make it more suitable for Aboriginal children, is what most people would call Aboriginalisation, and it centres around the use of Aboriginal language, Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal culture and social patterns, and Aboriginal learning styles in the classroom.

A great deal more work needs to be done on the second solution. It is impossible to implement a formal education system that uses only yolngu learning styles at all levels. Somewhere along the line, active purposeful, self-conscious and motivated thinking, learning and problem-solving needs to be developed. If the children are going to learn the volume and the content of education that we're trying to teach them, then we'll need to start by teaching them how to participate actively in the learning process. Indeed I would see one of the aims of formal education itself as being to teach children how to act purposefully - that is thoughtfully and effectively - in their new world of balanda-yolngu contact.

Why are there so many employable young men and women on the Aboriginal settlements complaining that they have no work while the schools, the store and the workshops are crying out for capable reliable workers? It's not because these people are lazy. They devote much time and energy to their own activities like ceremonies and hunting. It's because the amount of purposeful, active, self-conscious behaviour which is required to achieve these slightly balanda behaviours is more than most young men and women have been equipped with during their yolngu socialisation and their balanda education. If we can teach them to participate actively in the school learning situation, they will also be learning how to do so in their out-of-school living.

THE TWO ALTERNATIVES APPLIED TO THE TEACHING OF READING

Let us now turn to the practical aspects of education and focus on the teaching of reading. What sort of process is reading - active or passive? It is crucial that teachers realise that reading is very much an active, purposeful, creative process. It's not a passive process like watching television. If reading were like watching TV we would have no trouble teaching anyone to do it. And in fact parts of reading which don't require much active participation - like simple decoding and learning sight words, the yolngu children pick up well. But the real reading - reading for meaning, reading for interest in real life - is an active creative process into which an individual must put a great deal of conscious effort.

Unfortunately, the way in which we organise our reading lessons seldom
reflects this understanding. Much more often our teaching leads children to believe that reading is a process not essentially meaningful itself or in which their participation does not create meaning. I think this is because, without realising it, we are trying to do two distinct things: to teach children how to read, and to teach them to be interested, thoughtful and effective readers. Teaching children how to read is a minor problem compared to teaching them to be readers. We should examine both aspects of teaching reading separately.

TEACHING INITIAL READING: WHAT READING IS AND HOW IT IS DONE

In recent years, much work has been done finding ways of teaching Aboriginal children beginning reading. Generally the ways that have been found to work best have coincided rather neatly with what we know about traditional Aboriginal ways of learning. The area of Aboriginal learning styles applied to teaching reading is discussed in detail by Stephen Harris (1982b). He recommends a wide range of reading activities based on three principles:

1.) We need to develop strong expectations about reading by creating classrooms which are the equivalents of reading homes.

2.) We need to ensure that Aboriginal children have many opportunities to learn the functions of reading either before or while they learn to read.

3.) We need to work on an approach to teaching reading that allows children to experience what it feels like to be reading before they can read independently, and an approach which allows approximating reading behaviour and which allows for much reading-like behaviour.

The activities which are recommended by Harris include the lap method, the impress method, the language experience method, shared book experience and a range of others. It should come as no surprise that the methods being propounded as suitable for initial Aboriginal readers are generally recommended for white children who are starting to read. This is because all young children learn best by inductive methods. The best way to teach a child to read, it seems, is through exposing him to a language rich environment in which the skill of reading is being used in a variety of meaningful ways. The environment, says Holdaway (1980) 'is an emulative rather than an instructional one, providing lively examples of the skill in action'.

Many teachers of traditionally oriented Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory seem to agree that since these methods have been introduced systematically, they have been generally successful. I would argue that I could think of no better way to get children started on reading. But this reading that children learn from these methods is basically decoding. They are learning how to recognise words on paper and they are learning what reading is, but they are
not learning the self-conscious purposeful operation of reading.

TEACHING READERS TO READ: PURPOSEFUL READING

The self-conscious purposeful aspect of reading is not discussed very much in books on teaching reading. This is because white children who have been socialised into patterns of active participation, by and large bring their abilities to bear on the reading process as they learn to read, and automatically work with what they are reading to make it meaningful. They do this better than Aboriginal children, not because they have had a wider experience of reading, although this is true to some extent, but because they have had a wider experience of working purposefully to create meaning. This aspect of reading is what Holdaway calls self-regulating. In the following description, note how much his language refers to purposeful involvement:

The most complex aspect of the children's reading behaviour involves process: they are learning much more than simple linguistic items, they are mastering ways of operating, strategies for generating language for meaning. They monitor their own output, yea-ing and nay-ing as they go: one part of their attention tastes success or otherwise in encoding the deeply understood meanings. On the surface, this throws up self-corrections of an increasingly refined kind, entailing the strategy of semantic and syntactic re-running of confused sentences. All of these delicate operations of the task involving the organism at several levels, are under personal control. A product of this self-regulating behaviour is the steady flow of intrinsic reinforcement, confirming, sustaining, relaxing and restoring.

(Holdaway, 1980:53)

Ideally, as a child learns to read, no matter what method is used to teach him, he begins to apply his skills to purposeful participation to the process of reading. He begins to think carefully about what he is reading, he asks himself questions and reads to answer them. He thinks about whether what he is reading makes sense and, if it doesn't, he goes back and reads it again. In other words he displays the three characteristics of an active learner:

1. Goal. He is actively searching for meaning, he is not just calling out words.

2. Internal Control. He believes that meaning is something which he himself derives from print. He doesn't wait for the teacher's praise to make it meaningful.

3. Judgment. He thinks about what he is reading, he makes predictions, and goes back and reads again if it doesn't make sense.
The main point of this chapter is that we cannot assume that yolngu children will automatically be able to apply these same skills to the reading process. In fact, the problems which yolngu children have with developing reading ability past the initial stages can mostly be traced, I think, to their inability to attack the task purposefully. Holdaway (1980:103) talks of the importance of 'predictive and confirming processes' in the total structure of language learning.

It becomes clear why the language user from the earliest stages of learning must monitor and self correct his own performance - that to see the pupil's function as lying in performance and the teacher's function as lying in correction was to grossly misperceive the process.

And later:

When we look at the childish picture of learning to read and write which we present to children in bits-and-pieces parody of language function, we can only stand in awe at the consummate skill so many of them display in cutting through it all to personal control of their own behaviour on a level of far greater complexity.

(Holdaway, 1980)

I want now to look at ways in which we can teach this personal control of reading. I think that it is a difficult task and I think that those that I have been able to come up with are only a beginning of a solution to the problem. But I hope that these recommendations will at least show teachers what I am thinking about and lead them to evaluate their own teaching practice in these terms. What we must do is design and employ teaching activities which aim quite specifically at teaching Goal Consciousness, Internal Control, and Judgment.

GOAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In the early stages of reading by the 'Aboriginalised method', the children are reading either because the teacher tells them to, or because the teacher has whipped up their enthusiasm, and they want to read. Somehow, in order to develop purposeful reading in children, we have to change from this teacher-centred situation to a situation where I am reading because I want to read (but I could decide not to if I liked), or because I want to find out the answer. Now in a classroom of thirty children at reading time each day it is nearly impossible to give children a choice of whether they want to read or not, but I think we could come up with some strategies pointed in this direction.

*Emphasis mine.
1.) Help the children understand and internalise the basic goals of your reading programme. Teachers should spend much more time talking with children about learning to read. The children should realise that, first of all, the teacher is trying to teach them how to read. Do they realise this? or do they think that the teacher is going through a weird *balanda* ritual called school? Talk to the children about the books that they can read, the ones that are too easy and the too hard ones, and tell them what you're aiming at in your reading programme. If you're having a phonics lesson, tell them why you are having it.

2.) Help make meaning the goal of reading rather than teacher approval or getting to the bottom of the page. Every time a child reads and the teacher says, 'Yes', 'No', 'Thank you, sit down', or 'Read that again', the goal of finding meaning had been eclipsed by the goal of keeping the teacher happy. (See Christie 1983a) He sits down and his work is done. But every time the teacher says, 'What would you have done then?' or, 'I wonder why the little old woman said that?' the child's goal consciousness is fixed on the story. He sits down and maybe he'll have another look at it.

3.) Of course, some graded reading materials are so trite and boring that both teacher and child are hard pressed to think of any comment at all to make about them. If that is the case, then the child may be learning to decode, but he won't be learning purposeful reading. That's why teachers need lots of extra reading material. It's not simply window dressing to make reading more interesting. It's the only possible way of teaching a crucial function of reading. And once again, yolngu children cannot be expected to learn that automatically. They must be taught it.

4.) Ask the children frequently what they want to read about (this question will be met with a stunned silence because you are calling for internal control, but persevere) and then make sure that they get it. This will usually mean you sitting down and writing it for them, because libraries don't have much simple non-fiction - especially things that the children want to read about - but it is important enough to warrant the work and you can keep what you have written for later.

5.) Non-fiction is very important for teaching purposeful reading, so always be on the lookout for easy to read books, illustrated dictionaries and magazines like *Look and Learn*. Make the goals explicit in the children's minds by talking about what they are looking for. Spend a Saturday in your school library sometime so that you know exactly what books there are, and send the children off to the library to look for information themselves, even if you have to plant a book in there somewhere beforehand.

6.) Something which is of even greater interest than commercially published non-fiction is the local community newspaper if there is one. If there isn't, school newspapers or class newspapers are just as good. Class newspapers don't need to be printed. We used to make one by getting the children to write their news (sports results, poems, jokes and stories) on long strips of pad paper (an A4 piece cut in half lengthwise). These we stuck on to big sheets of brown paper with
a few pictures, photos and bits and pieces from comics and magazines. These would drift around the classrooms and eventually be taken home.

INTERNAL CONTROL

Holdaway says:

There is no escape from trusting children with the major responsibility for their own learning. This is not just another soft appeal to human decency - it arises centrally from the actual nature of the tasks to be learned. When faced with the moment-by-moment necessity for self-regulation and self-correction in language function, it is soft and sentimental to believe that children are too immature to govern their own language behaviour.

Striking the balance between teacher direction and internal control is no mean feat. It is unreasonable to give children a completely free rein, and yet somehow you must teach them that purposeful reading is up to them. The best way to do this is to organise situations where the children find themselves alone with a book that they can read and want to read. Here are a few suggestions:

1) Instead of having the group read around in a circle to the teacher, tell them to go out on to the verandah and read it to themselves. When they don't have a teacher hovering above them, they will be more or less forced to take personal control.

2.) Send home books with them. Yolngu people at Milingimbi really spend quite a lot of time at home looking at newspapers, doing puzzles and examining stray bits and pieces of written material. In doing this, they are learning that reading is something which can be meaningful if the job is attacked with purpose.

3.) Sustained Silent Reading (S.S.R.) is another thing which is very important for developing internal control. It has been written about widely, so I won't go into detail here. Just one comment. I think that library time is appropriate for flipping through books and looking at pictures. In S.S.R. the children really need to be reading, not flipping. This is very hard to organise, but very important. The other important thing of course is that the teacher must read too.

4.) The perfect language activity for establishing internal control is writing and this needs to be integrated into the reading programme, not because it looks good, but because of its
crucial role in establishing personal control. Of course, creative writing with Aboriginal children is also a major effort - a sure sign in itself that they have difficulty with internal control. When asked to write, they can't automatically start tapping all those ideas we know they have inside them, so they start looking to the teacher or the past or the school tradition for ideas. What does he want me to write? What did I write yesterday? What's that kid over there writing about? Once you manage to get children to write about what they really think and to tell the stories from their own point of view, then other children are really interested in reading them. Maybe systems like Breakthrough to Literacy are good to get children started on writing, but maybe the predetermined set of available words is enough to stop them from looking inside themselves for ideas and start juggling the words in front of them looking for meaningful sentences 'out there somewhere'. Think of the methods you use. Are they really aimed at promoting internal control of reading?

5.) Teaching spelling through internal control is discussed in an article called 'A Good Way to Teach Spelling', The Aboriginal Child at School, 1981, Vol. 9. page 38.

JUDGMENT

When we view reading as a self-regulatory process, it becomes plain how much it depends on prediction and reflection. A reader needs to be reflecting on what he is reading continuously so he can use what he knows of the story so far to help him read effectively. Miscue analysis is the best way to determine how efficiently a child is doing this. If his miscues are meaningful substitutions then he is thinking about what he is doing and making it meaningful. But it is very depressing to hear children reading, making errors which render the story meaningless, and still not turning a hair. These children don't know how to use their powers of reflection to make it meaningful. Once again we can't assume that Aboriginal children are going to be able to do this automatically. Here are a few beginning suggestions on how to do it:

1.) When the children come across a word they don't know, they need to employ predictive strategies in their effort to work it out. Aboriginal children tend to depend heavily on decoding strategies like sounding out and syllabifying which often amount to blind guessing. If they don't use a context clue, they are likely to come up with a wrong guess and carry on reading without thinking whether it is meaningful. Teach them to re-run the sentence when they get stuck and to read on past the hard word as well. These strategies need to be taught quite specifically, and whole classes or groups lessons can be
planned to do this.

2) The traditional way of teaching reflection on a whole passage (also a traditional way of filling in time) has been written comprehension questions at the end of a set passage for reading. There is still a place for this. Note how the children express their answers. So often they don't give the answer in their own words, but rather copy out part of the story that contains the answer somewhere. This is a problem of internal/external control. They can't bring themselves to express the answer in their own words so they look for some external source of expression - the original story.

Comprehension questions don't need to be written. Oral ones are probably better. If the child can't come up with the answer, make him go away and re-read the story until he finds it. If the children are having a terrible time with comprehension, then the story may be too hard for them to read purposefully.

3) The cloze procedure is another popular way of getting children to reflect on what they are reading. Once again the difficulty most Aboriginal children have in doing cloze is a sign that we need to spend more time teaching reflection. Most children I have observed, when given a cloze passage, as a reading exercise will begin by copying the whole passage, blanks and all, into their books. They enjoy this because it is a busy activity with an obvious goal, no requirement for internal control and no reflection required. After the whole passage is copied out, they then need to be pushed to fill in the blanks and most of them know that if they fidget for long enough the teacher will encourage them by giving them a couple of answers. Persevere with cloze procedure. Make them as easy as you can when they are just beginning and use passages that they already read before the deletions were made. If you do this you can afford to let them sweat over them a bit and come up with some answers. Mark the children's work with the whole class. Read out the sentences and get the children to decide whether they are meaningful or not. (Don't let on whose is whose). This way you can get the children to reflect on their reading and writing as a group.

4) Reflection can be easily taught through writing. Notice how seldom Aboriginal children will spontaneously reflect on their written work, reading it over, punctuating it and improving it. This reflective behaviour must be taught, and I feel the best way to teach this is to have children write something small every day, and work through it with them. Make sure you see every child’s work before the end of the lesson, and make sure they work over it until it makes good sense. Get them to do this revision in pairs; the
discussion helps them to think about what they are doing.

5) Predictive strategies must be emphasised. It often pays to start reading a story with the children and after a page or so, to talk about what you think is going to happen. Then the children can continue reading individually with a special goal in their minds - to find out. Some stories lend themselves to this technique.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It seems that there are two separate aspects of Aboriginal children learning to read. The first is learning what reading is and how to decode, and the second is learning how to read with purpose. Ideally these should both be taught together. Certainly neither is any good without the other. However, it seems to me that purposeful reading develops only after basic decoding skills have been mastered. For this reason most of the suggestions I have given have been more relevant to teachers of primary and post-primary rather than infant children. Of course, it is still important to continue to work towards improving the general skills of the children at the upper levels. Purposeful reading is only one aspect of the reading process.

The above suggestions are by no means meant to be a complete guide to purposeful reading. They are rather aimed at showing teachers the sorts of questions that they should be asking as they prepare their lessons and as they teach. These questions could be summarised as follows:

1. GOAL.

Do the children know what you are trying to do as a teacher?
Do the children have learning to read as a conscious goal?
Do your reading activities provide practice at reading to find out?

2. INTERNAL CONTROL

Are the reading activities you plan aimed at teaching the children such that they can and must derive meaning from reading themselves?

3. JUDGMENT

Are you teaching the self-regulating nature of reading by encouraging the children to predict and reflect on every aspect of their reading and their learning to read, especially on the meaning of what they read?
Chapter 10

What to do until the reading specialist comes *
Michael Christie

Nothing is more depressing for a teacher than to hear about other teachers' successes while feeling incapable of replicating them. Enthusiasm for other people's programme begins to wear thin in the cold light of your own circumstances. What exactly can be done to achieve reading without tears at your school? There are so many ideas and theories in the teaching of reading that we are at a loss to know which one to choose.

Teaching yolngu children to read is an even more difficult task, for two main reasons. Firstly, they come from a culture where reading is not a part of every day life, so there is a lot of reading which we take for granted and which they don't understand. Secondly, we know only a very little about the ways in which yolngu children learn. If we think carefully, we can see our past failures have only taught us that balanda teaching methods are, by and large, simply unsuitable for yolngu children.

What exactly do we know about the ways in which yolngu children learn? Not a great deal really, although some interesting research has been done in the last few years which is setting us on the right track.

It has been found, for example, that Aboriginal culture (like most non-western cultures) places a considerably greater emphasis on learning through the visual mode than through the verbal mode. In other words, yolngu children are more likely to remember exactly what is shown to them, than what is explained to them. Western culture, on the other hand, is much more verbal in its thinking and balanda children at school quickly learn to use language as a thinking tool and often drop the use of visual mode to a large extent. This is why balanda teachers talk so much. Thus, whereas the balanda child might be quicker to analyse words, to discuss them, to break them down and build them up, the yolngu

* This chapter is an expanded version of the paper originally published in The Aboriginal Child at School Vol. 6, No 3, 1978. It is reproduced here with permission from the editor.
children may be quicker to use their visual ability and remember large numbers of sight words, phrases and even sentences from their shapes. This appears to be true of all pre-industrialised, preliterate societies. (McCracken 1972, Van Allen 1976 and Ashton-Warner 1970)

The yolngu children's extensive use of the visual mode has some far reaching effects upon the way they learn. So often they need almost no explanation, and so often, as we know, our explanations seem to achieve very little. But they watch something once or twice, and can copy it almost exactly. Now of course, reading is essentially a language process, not a visual process but with careful planning, we can use what the children are able to do well, and worry less about what they do relatively poorly. Oral language is an important part of the curriculum, but instead of working to improve the oral language basis of the reading programme (as many of us have been doing so valiantly and so unsuccessfully for years), we should be more concerned with capitalising on the children's visual abilities, which are so strong.

It has also become clear that yolngu children have different views about what is 'interesting'. This point may be a touchy one, but I feel that it's important. For so long I tried to stir up the creative urges of the yolngu children who worked with me. We tried everything, from cookery to space travel, and interest was always polite but faint. After my creative urges had all but fizzled out, I realised that the children were still working very happily and relatively consistently week after week. Unlike the balanda children I had taught, these yolngu children did not need a catalytic burst of fresh creative ideas once a week to keep them motivated. Of course, new ideas and old ones would regularly float in and out of the classroom and be snatched up by teacher and children alike, but I found that using the artificial and contrived sources of motivation which had been so necessary in teaching balanda children were generally a waste of time and energy with yolngu children. In pre-western Aboriginal education, there was never anything artificial in motivation or subject matter; and contemporary Aboriginal culture is still geared towards relevance and reality in the teaching and learning situations. Apart from the fact that they expressed an interest in the oddest of uninteresting things, and generally the same things for week after week, these children were content to work, not hard, but consistently, without my having to stand on my head to entertain them. Teachers of yolngu children are thus more able to get down to the serious business of teaching without too many trimmings.

I can hear a few teachers objecting to this even as I write, so I will hasten to add that I have seen some teachers use all sorts of creative techniques to vastly improve the relevance and standard of their classroom practices. The point that I'm really trying to make is that the things which we can and must do in teaching balanda children to read are very likely not the same things that we need to do for yolngu children. In trying to work out a good reading programme for Aboriginal children, our best bet is to put our knowledge of yolngu children together with our knowledge of the reading process, and pay less attention to our experiences with balanda children.
IF YOU ALREADY HAVE A READING PROGRAMME WHICH SEEMS TO BE WORKING WELL, DON’T DROP IT.

Although we are loath to admit it, very little of what has happened in Aboriginal education seems to have worked very well. So if you feel like a failure, don't worry. You're not alone. But if you see that your programme is successful, keep going. But be realistic. Do your children really understand what is going on? Do they know what reading is, and what it is for? Or do they think that reading is something you do sitting in a circle with the teacher? Do they read in their spare time? I mean, actually read. Are they developing their reading skills as well as you would like them to? The fact that they say the right word at the right time is really not a good measure of the success of your programme. So look objectively at what you're doing and be prepared to drop anything which isn't worth salvaging. In my class, for example, I was forced to stop using duplicated work sheets for practice on specific work skills, and I had to drop virtually all the word games and reading games. They looked impressive, and they kept the children happily busy for hours, but they weren't teaching them anything. So I dropped them. Drop what you have to, but work hard to keep what is worth keeping. We need all the help we can get.

TURN YOUR CLASSROOM INTO A READING ENVIRONMENT

We balanda come from a language-oriented, reading-oriented culture. It is impossible for us to imagine how different the life of a yolngu child must be. It is also difficult for us to estimate the tremendous advantage balanda children bring to school when they come from a language and reading-oriented culture. The children from 'reading homes' are halfway towards reading on the day they arrive at school. Now a wise school programme will aim to improve the reading habits of the community as a whole, but what can be done at the classroom level? Even if the community is not a reading environment, the classroom can be. Reading should be incorporated into as much of the classroom activity as possible. In the early grades, and probably into post-primary as well, this usually means the teacher should read to the children frequently. Soft pedal natural science, mathematics social studies and formal reading lessons for the first few years at school. Remember your two basic goals: language and cognitive development. Concentrate on talking with and reading with the children, and on developmental play until the children have a good grasp of their own language and are little experts in the fundamental processes (such as comparing and contrasting) which form the basis of all operational thought.

A little window dressing doesn't hurt either; labels for items, maybe some reading games, signs and posters all around the classroom. But a reading environment really requires reading, and lots of it. This includes reading the local newspaper, preferably one with English and vernacular. It also means teachers reading to children, children reading to children and even teachers reading to teachers.
USE THE LAP METHOD

The lap method is the perfect way to learn to read. The child sits on an adult's lap, and they read together. The adult demonstrates a love for reading. This is important because all children, and especially young children, learn by imitation. The adults read the books - children's books - and the children in their lap read along too as much as they can. They talk about the pictures and point to the words. They discuss the stories and predict the outcomes. It is an emotional conditioning to books. Later, the children will always pick the same books to read to themselves, reciting some of the texts from memory, making up the rest of it, repeating the catchy phrases and instructing younger friends and relatives concerning the plot and its denouement. Short books with lots of repetition are the favourites. Considering the nature of reading and the nature of yolngu children, I am convinced that teachers reading to children in an emotionally warm setting is the single most important factor in teaching children to read. Do it often, four or five times a day, with different groups of children. Even if for no other reason, balanda teachers in bilingual schools should develop some rudimentary language ability in the vernacular so that they can help the yolngu teachers and read simple stories [in the vernacular?] to young children. (I can add that in my own experience the children's hasty corrections of my pronunciation and the discussions of the stories was one of the least painful methods of language learning.) Above all, lap sessions must be relaxed and enjoyable. You might not be 'teaching', but the children will be learning!

MAKE THE CLASSROOM LIBRARY INTO A GROWING CONCERN

Keep the library at the centre of activity, not in the back corner behind the nature table. Instead of telling your children to use the library after they have done their lessons, try telling them to do their lessons after they have finished in the library. Change the collection regularly, and stock lots of books you and the class have produced. Start making your own personal collection of good quality children's books (both in English and the local Aboriginal language) which appeal to yolngu children. When reading to the children, show a healthy bias towards their own books - read at least one or two of them a day. Make sure that you and the class all have the opportunity to read books from the library for a few minutes every day. Try sustained silent reading, a technique explained later in this chapter.

MAKE CLASS BOOKS

Most teachers, at some time or another, have had at least a perfunctionary attempt at producing books from classroom materials. Get serious about it. In earlier grades, before children can write well themselves, get them to tell stories onto a tape and transcribe them and make books yourself. (This can be wildly successful.) Only use the best stories but make a careful job of the books. Concentrate on quality more than quantity. Other stories can be composed by the
class as a whole - those repetitious stories that yolngu children generate spontaneously - and illustrated by them as well. Some of the books will never stand the test of time, but some will become classics in their own right, and make a valuable contribution to the classroom reading resources. They are also important in that they contribute to the understanding that reading is a process associated with the thoughts and idioms of the children themselves, and is relevant to their real experiences.

INSTANT READING SHEETS IN A LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH

Instant reading sheets are one of the many things that fit under the broad heading of the 'language experience' method. What follows is a brief account of my own version of them. After a couple of years in a reading-rich school environment, yolngu children will begin to read, quite automatically. By this I mean that they will know what reading is and they will enjoy being read to. They will be able to recognise a few words (mainly their own names and the names of other children and a few words of interest that have cropped up in the classroom). For some time now, their teacher has been writing short labels - only a word or two - on the bottom of their pictures when they have talked about them. And slowly they have come to realise that the next day the teacher is able to read these words back to her. She is ready to learn to do it herself. Every day, at some stage, she draws a picture of anything which takes her fancy.

They leave a space at the bottom of the pages for the teacher to write their stories, reading back each word as the teacher writes it. Each child then reads the story back immediately to the teacher, and so do any other children who are standing around. The children also have large cardboard bags (the most soiled and the most patched up pieces of equipment in the classroom) in which they treasure all the other stories they have written. Each child brings these out and reads them as well. Because they are all the child's own work, and because the child can tell that the teacher thinks that his or her sentences are the most interesting and important things in the classroom, the child knows nearly all its stories perfectly. Any words which the child can't read are told by the teacher immediately so children are never left puzzling nervously over words they don't know. At this stage the words read are all sight words; if the child doesn't know them, he or she doesn't know them. But it is amazing how quickly the stock of sight words is built up. Any story which gives trouble can be culled. Soon each child has a stock of sentences which can be read fluently.

It is important to appreciate the advantages of this method: the children compose the stories themselves so the vocabulary, grammar and idiom are perfect for them to read. They made up the topics themselves, so they are interesting and familiar. It is a whole word, meaning-oriented approach which is appropriate to young children, especially I think, to yolngu children. The child's own picture provides the best sort of context clue. And, finally, in bilingual programme, it is a good source of simple reading material in an unpublished language.
I have used instant reading sheets as the basis for a whole programme and as a supplementary method; both worked well. To me it is the most meaningful and least painful way to begin reading. (The Ready-to-Read 'Instant Readers' are books which introduce reading with a high picture content. If you are teaching readers in English you could use them to supplement your instant reading sheets.)

USE 'VERY - OWN WORDS'

'Very-own words' is really a fashionable way of saying individual sight words, Sylvia Ashton-Warner calls them key words. When I went to school in New Zealand in the 1950s, they were called 'look and say' words. It's basically how I learnt to read (although everyone has the same words to learn) and I think it is still a useful technique with the majority of children. They get a knock out of having their 'very-own' words. And because the children choose their words themselves, they are words which are already emotionally important to them - they are their very own.

This is how the system works. The child (or a group of children), armed with their bags, sit in a group with the teacher. After a few minutes of discussion concerning the things that are currently trendy for eight-year-olds to talk about, the teacher asks if anyone wants a new very-own word. Not everyone wants a new word every day. The child tells the word to the teacher who writes it on a piece of light card and gives it to the child. If it's a genuine very-own word, the child is delighted with it, and before long it is indelibly printed on its mind. The child shows it to the other children and reads it to them, then goes off and copies it into a special book or onto a special piece of paper, and draws a picture. Instant reading again! A more advanced child will write a sentence with the word in it, maybe use some previous very-own words, and, perhaps, some of the words learnt from instant reading sheets. The papers are illustrated and made into little books, which the children use like dictionaries. Very-own words are liable to turn up in the dictated stories and are quickly spotted. Children are supposed to keep their cards in their bags, but they are always bringing them out, reading them, using them in their writing, counting them, gloat ing over them and losing them. Clean-up time every afternoon involves helping a few stray very-own words find their way back to their rightful owners. Everyone seems to know everyone else's words.

Very-own words are always a good basis for writing. A class book about 'My Favourite Thing is ___', or 'At night Time We ___' usually starts from the very-own words set. Children know each other's words and lend and borrow them freely. Sometimes a word catches on and everyone wants it. 'John Wayne' was an all-time favourite. More than one language is often represented in the very-own words but don't worry about that. Learning to read is learning to read, whatever the language.

This is not the place to teach the little words which are so necessary in writing, like if, but and because. These should be taught elsewhere. Very-own
words have to be fun, and personally important to the children. And they usually are. But they can also be overworked. Children should be given an opportunity to get a new one every day, but should only be given one if they want one. Sometimes very-own words are forgotten. If any of them are forgotten or have lost their interest, they can be extracted. A child should be able to read all of its very-own words by sight, and will love to go over them with the teacher. This system takes a while to get started but it is well worth it. Apart from the obvious aid to reading, the words can be used for everything from card games to creative writing.

SOUNDS AND LETTERS

I could have called this section 'phonics', but, unfortunately, the word upsets me. I am always suspicious when I hear teachers say that their children are learning to read by a phonic method. I'm inclined to suspect that children in the early stages of learning to read teach themselves and the look-and-say method is spite of (as much as because of) the teacher, and recognise nearly every word they read by its shape. However, eventually all good readers need phonic word attack skills.

And all beginning readers need some rudimentary knowledge of the letters of the alphabet. They should be able to write them correctly and know the difference between them. I think that knowledge of sounds and knowledge of letters can be combined and teaching them can start quite early if it is done carefully.

The way I do it with infant pre-readers and early readers all children need their own blackboards. Individual blackboards are so useful for so many activities, that they are basic equipment. I think that the whole class (or as many as you can muster) could work with sounds and letters for 15 to 30 minutes each day (or longer), depending on how much success you are having. There is no magic order in which to introduce the letters, but there are some practical considerations. Don't worry about trying to cover everything. Remember, it's not really a phonics lesson. What you are trying to teach is:

* that words are made up of letters
* the letters (usually) represent sounds
* how to write the letters
* how some sounds and letters correspond

Look at the written form of the language you are working with. Begin by looking only at the letters (or digraphs) which start words, and calculate which of these occur most frequently. This is where you start. Because the sound-letter match (or, more correctly, the phoneme-grapheme match) seems to take forever to sink in, I would, for the first month or longer, use only consonants and only those that frequently occur word-initially. Vowels and blends can be introduced later. And because it is so difficult and confusing, I would also avoid asking, 'What does this letter say? or, 'Write down the letter which says _'. Also, for the first three months I would concentrate on the writing of the letters rather than attaching the sound to the symbol.
The teacher sits with the children. 'Today we are going to talk about the letter "b". This is what it looks like.' The teacher writes the letter on the blackboard and the children write it in the air with their fingers, then on their own blackboards. 'What does it say?' 'B.' 'Can you show me where the "b" is in the word _? We know lots of words which start with a "b": banana, bathi, barramundi, boy, Baymaramawuy. Watch my lips pop open when I say them. Who can think of some more "b" words?' (I never had much success with that question, but it's worth a try.) 'Let's write another "b". What does it say?' Discuss the shape of the letter, talk about 'b' words and get the children to write, write, write. The principle involved here is that sound/symbol relationship is gradually established when what they see, what they hear and what they do are coordinated over a period of time.

Some theoreticians insist that because letters don't occur naturally in isolation, they shouldn't be taught in isolation. I tried teaching syllables. It worked, but was rather laborious. Teaching letters in isolation worked much better, and the children had no trouble.

It takes a long time for this sort of activity to pay off. In the meantime, console yourself with the fact that at least children are learning to write with correct letter formations. Make sure that they start at the right place and go in the right direction, and you will have saved some other teacher untold trouble in years to come. (I always find myself calling out, 'dow-w-n, up and arou-u-u-nd' as I write the letter, giving verbal reinforcement to the motor activity. I don't know if it does any good, but I think it's sound theoretically.) Once children have begun reading and know what reading is all about, you can really go to town on phonics. I work with syllables and letters, identifying mystery words, having spelling tests, playing 'hangman' and so on. The children love it if they are readers and understand what is going on. But remember:

* Don't try to start a child reading by teaching phonics. It's hopeless. Phonics is essential for consolidation but confusing as an initial technique.
* Don't let your reading lessons turn into phonics lessons. The children must spend most of their time reading meaningful material. A few minutes a day on phonics is ample.
* Finally, don't try to force the carry over from these lessons into reading. It can cause untold confusion. Just be content to wait for the day when the light dawns, and they start to 'sound out' for themselves. The name and the sound of letters is close enough to ignore the difference.

THE WRITING ROAD TO READING

I maintain that many children are hindered in their reading progress by their inability to write. Writing should be an integral part of the reading lesson, used to reinforce the new words. As mentioned already, I think children ought to be able to form all the letters of the alphabet correctly before formal instruction in reading
begins. As soon as children learn a new word they should be encouraged to write it - first to copy it and later to write it from memory. Dictation seems rather out of fashion, but I find it invaluable - it's painstaking but really reinforces learning. Writing is a very concrete part of what really is quite an intellectual process. Writing can increase the students' feelings of having achieved something tangible. In writing, the children literally 'get their hands on it'.

SUSTAINED SILENT READING

SSR is one of the new ideas in the teaching of reading. It is based upon the principle that children learn to read by reading and that children often learn how to read, but seldom actually get around to doing it. How will they ever learn to read for pleasure? Basically, SSR is simply getting children to read for a certain period of time each day. It can be really valuable in providing reading practice and in promoting positive attitudes if a few simple rules are observed:

1. Everyone must read. Every child and even (or especially) the teacher. Children learn through imitating models. At SSR time the teacher gets out a book and reads it conscientiously while the rest of the class does the same. Sometimes whole schools practise SSR. Everyone from the principal and office staff to the cleaner sits and reads for ten minutes or for however long is allotted, every day. If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for the children.

2. Reading must be individual and silent. Each child selects one book which must not be changed and must be read silently, interrupting no one. If the teacher expects the children to read silently, they will do it. Non-readers look at pictures and 'read' old favourites that they know by heart. In classes which aren't really used to silent reading, the teacher could put a pile of books on the floor in the middle of a rug (more books than children) and before telling them to choose a book, might choose a couple herself, read the first couple of pages aloud to the class, make some comment and put them back. They will be the first books to be taken. If the classroom is a reading environment, many of the books in the pile will be class favourites already.

3. A timer is used. The teacher explains that everyone is going to read anything they like quietly for a set (sustained) period. The time must be out of sight so no one becomes a clock-watcher - not even the teacher - and a bell must ring so the children won't begin to think that the teacher has forgotten and interrupt to ask if time is up. Use a kitchen cooking timer. Start with two to five minutes a day and build up gradually to ten, twenty or thirty minutes or more, depending on the reading level of the class.

4. It must be for enjoyment only. Don't keep records or reports. Don't ask comprehension questions or insist that children choose books that are at their 'right' level (whatever that means). When the timer rings, allow any children who want to, to continue.

SSR is a great idea, and if you follow the rules it will really work. It might take a week or two to get it established, but it will be worth it.