

" When are you fellas gunna teach these 'ere little black kids how to read and write?"

LITERACY FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS: LEARNING FROM PAST FAILURES

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ABSTRACT

In the first instance this paper offers the findings from research which focussed on the school curriculum and classroom practices of an Australian inner city primary school with a majority of Koori (Aboriginal) students. In particular it describes how, within the specific school context, Koori students' oppositional behaviour at a whole school and classroom level, and teachers' responses to this oppositional behaviour, result in a curriculum implicated in the continuing educational disadvantage of the Koori students. This disadvantage was particularly pertinent to those literacy learning situations where opposition was most marked.

A second aspect of the paper will first examine a predominant theoretical position on how young learners acquire literacy and juxtapose this with the research findings, and second, analyse the dominant discourses of literacy for Aboriginal learners in order to understand why schools' learning contexts fail young Aboriginal literacy learners.

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To date, much of the empirical research on Aboriginal learners and literacy has implicated Aboriginal circumstances in the explanation for the lack of success in schools. This has generated a deficit discourse. Further insights, such as those we offer here, draw upon recent research in a poor inner city school, and reflect the need to challenge traditionally held explanations for schools' failure to ensure high levels of academic success for Aboriginal students. Such a view implies that the "marking" of the Aboriginal learners without also "marking" others such as the teachers, the curriculum, the school and its policies and practices, ignores crucial elements implicated in the highly visible inequity of educational outcomes for Australian Aboriginal students particularly apparent in the field of literacy.

While as authors, we share a common socio-political and cultural educational perspective, we speak through this paper as two distinct voices. One voice (V1) is that of an educational sociological researcher who reports on Aboriginal students' responses and teachers' pedagogical responses to a specific educational experience in a school serving a predominantly poor community. This research was conducted when the researcher was Principal of the school. The other voice (V2) is that of a literacy educator who draws on the interpretations from the research and offers some insights for future literacy teaching in light of the fact that a major outcome of the research was that the students' oppositional responses were most marked in literacy learning situations. This paper reflects a continuing and unfinished dialogue between the two voices. Different voices are indicated throughout when it is clear that one voice is speaking.

THE RESEARCH ORIENTATION (V1)

The research focussed on a school characterised by both very poor educational outcomes and strong student opposition, particularly among its majority group (53.9%) of Koori (Aboriginal people from most areas in NSW) students. In this setting, being indigenous and living in

relative poverty were significant community factors which interacted with the school. What was explored was the extent to which the school's curriculum and the teachers' pedagogical practices contributed to the educational advantage or disadvantage of the Koori students. Throughout the study the classroom curriculum was seen to be a relationship between teachers and students responses to education produced within the constraints of the specific school context.

An understanding of the nature of students' responses to education draws on Willis's (1977, 1981, 1983) theory of resistance and cultural production, wherein resistance to school is seen to be a cultural response to schooling. Significant also in resistance theory is the relationship between educational inequality, social reproduction and student oppositional behaviour. It is argued that when students respond with oppositional behaviour to their perception that the local school is not able to deliver promised educational success to the majority of their group, then indeed, that behaviour constitutes a rational response.

The research moved beyond considering only the standpoint of the students. It also considered those factors shaping the way teachers approached classroom practices. In linking the themes of students' and teachers' responses to their context steered the research focus towards the interactions between teachers and students in classrooms. As a consequence the fundamental research inquiry did not simply explore whether students were resisters, but more importantly, whether there

were conditions within the milieu of the school which might bring about resistance.

Therefore, although the research was located within an established research tradition of examining and attempting to understand disaffected or resistant school students, it also went beyond this in its attempt to highlight school conditions which may encourage certain students to reject education. Employing this wider viewpoint offers potential for educational change.

THE LITERACY PERSPECTIVE (V2)

Literacy is a social and cultural practice, and as such, literacy education is not simply a matter of teaching particular skills, for it involves the transmission of values. As each student's cultural identity both shapes and is shaped by their experiences of literacy education, the possibility that a mismatch occurring between the significance of literacy as represented in a student's cultural identity and in the learning context of a school is quite high. This is further increased when the cultural background of the student is that of a minority. This applies to Aboriginal students in Australia. This cultural difference raises a dilemma for the student who faces the

choice of either adopting the perspective of the school and rejecting or devaluing their own cultural identity or resisting the externally imposed literacy practices and rejecting success as schools deem it, and therefore alienating themselves from the school.

This explanation for why schools have been less successful in educating students from diverse backgrounds compared to students from a mainstream or majority culture, is labelled as a theory of cultural discontinuity (Au 1993). Heath (1983) also inferred this in her longitudinal study of three American communities. She described the communities' literacy practices and the children's engagement in and exposure to family discourse patterns which differed from that of the school. This mismatch between home and school experiences is evidence of the disadvantage that some groups are at when they enter school, due to the fact that their practices do not match those of the dominant group whose values and practices are congruent with that of the school.

An extension to the theory of cultural discontinuity is the theory of structural inequality, also proposed by Au (1993). This theory offers a view that goes beyond mismatches between the culture of the home and the cultural practices of the school to much broader, political, economic and social forces. Within this theory some groups are seen as subordinate or oppressed, and some are seen as dominant.

In an attempt to embrace the broader issues, this theory suggests that we need to look at societal patterns that become embedded in policies and practices at the school level and thus maintain the dominant group's advantage by maintaining the status quo. This is done through the imposition of dominant group values, standards and practices upon subordinate groups. This is most evident in those widely accepted school practices that are a part of the school's hidden curriculum or invisible culture.

Au (1993) gives an example of this when she suggests that when old pedagogies are perpetuated, discrimination results. Luke also refers to this:

... some models [of teaching literacy] naturalise particular interactional patterns and textual practices in ways that systematically exclude those students from economically marginal and

culturally different backgrounds (1995:16)

Au claims that:

The familiar old patterns of instruction that prevent students of diverse backgrounds from achieving high levels of literacy, such as assessment that devalues their home language and instruction that violates the values of students' own cultures, result from the power dominant groups have to impose their values and standards upon

subordinate groups (1993:10).

In an effort to determine the degree to which the research school's curriculum¹ failed to facilitate its Koori students' academic success, we need to describe, interpret and analyse the responses of both students and teachers to the learning context they experienced. What follows then is a description of the research site, followed by an interpretation of the predominant student and teacher responses and the effect these had on student learning outcomes.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The research focussed on an inner city primary school - Greytown at which the first author worked for nine years. Greytown lies close to the central business district of a very large Australian city. In many ways it is typical of inner city working class suburbs. The majority of people who live in this area and make up the school community are what Australians term "battlers". There are many single parent families, and, in a high proportion of these, the sole parent is the mother. The majority of people work in low status, low income jobs, or rely on social welfare.

Greytown differs from most inner city suburbs due to its ethnic mix. Much of its reputation as a very tough suburb centres on a square of four streets called "The Centre". The Centre is a very poor area: the housing appears to be substandard; the physical conditions are devastating when first experienced; broken glass and garbage lie all over the streets and there are abandoned cars; there is heroin addiction and alcoholism, crime and an air of despondency.

Greytown School serves a multicultural population, and has a significant (more than 50%) Koori student group. The school has approximately 200 pupils. There are also quite a few other ethnic groups - Anglo-Australians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesians, Greeks, Lebanese, Turks and small numbers of children from the Pacific Island countries.

What follows next is a discussion of the data obtained from the original sociological research into Koori student opposition at Greytown School. There are four sections to this presentation of data. In turn each is concerned with the school's curriculum, community issues, students' responses to the curriculum and teachers' responses to the students' responses. It is argued that curriculum is constructed in a relationship between the school, the community, the learners and the teachers.

HISTORY OF THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT (V1)

Historically the school of 200 pupils had been distinguished by the difficulty of its teaching context, in particular the extreme nature of

the disaffection of the majority of its pupils, particularly the Koories.

The school was characterised by two features. First, there was the

students' opposition to the school, to its curriculum and to their teachers. Many pupils were disruptive, aggressive and/or disinterested. Its reputation was one of a tough urban school. The Koori students added a further dimension, and an intensity to this toughness. Second, there was a low academic level of achievement for many of the students, particularly the Aboriginal group. This was continually reflected in low classroom performance in basic skills subjects, and particularly in literacy. Interviews showed that student opposition, particularly by Koori students, was perceived as a very real factor in all classrooms, and it occurred regardless of the teaching style or the disciplinary prowess of the teacher. The research indicated that twenty-nine percent of students in the school were categorised by their teachers as offering strong classroom opposition. It was further shown that there was a correlation between high opposition and low academic standard. Of the 55 students who were said to be most opposed to the curriculum, 38, or 69%, were also assessed as being of low academic standard. Thus, these figures show that, according to their teachers, 20% of students in the school were both low achieving, highly oppositional students. In this group, the overwhelming majority (92%) were Koori students.

These low achieving, highly oppositional students who occupied most of the teachers' time and energy were the main research focus. Collated data presented a very clear picture of a school in which opposition by a large number of predominantly low achieving Koori students was a major classroom concern.

The key to the school's ethos was a watershed period in which there was a dramatic change in the school's approach to their curriculum. This occurred in the early 1980s when a new principal began to work with the staff of the school to change the nature of the relationships between students and teachers. He fostered a belief that it was important that the teachers show the students that they could be trusted. Thus an attempt was made to reduce the social and cultural gaps between teachers and students.

Greytown at this time dedicated itself to building positive school relationships for all its students. Morning lines and assemblies became places for laughing, sharing, practical jokes. Parents became a part of the daily happenings. Sporting teams operated on Saturdays and the staff worked with parents in coaching, organising and supporting. Good relationships with the parents, especially the Koories was also considered to be important. Winning over the parents was made easier by the improving student-teacher relationships.

Through these dramatic changes Greytown School had approached and embraced the principles of social justice in education by focussing curriculum decisions on its most disadvantaged group, the Koori students. School documents showed that although Greytown School continued to work for a long period towards being a "better place," there was an increasing realisation that it still was not making a difference as far as academic success was concerned for the majority of its students, even though its equity programs had gained admiration in the wider educational community. The focus of school change then moved from the work of the school as a whole, to the work of teaching and learning inside classrooms. The plan was to bring together literacy development and culturally appropriate Koori learning, with knowledge to be generated from observations of the resultant pedagogy. The aim was for success in the mainstream curriculum, using the cultural strengths of the students. This aim appeared in school documents:

Greytown School and its Community believe that success in Education for

Aboriginal students will be facilitated by improved academic performance undertaken in a culturally sympathetic environment.

Within this context, Aboriginal English, which has its own distinctive features in terms of style, vocabulary, rhythm, intonation and non-verbal features needs to be validated and used in the formation of literacy skills.

We envisage our plan as being long term, aiming to increase academic skills to maximum levels, thereby promoting self esteem, improving retention rates and enabling further community participation and self determination.

In the year when the data was collected, there was a review of the concerns in the school in the annual management plan. Literacy was still a prime concern, as it had been for the whole of the time since the watershed period. The management plan (1992) noted:

It was felt that this year the school had to seriously address the major academic concern of low standards in literacy, but there was a strong feeling that we had not properly addressed this issue, despite considerable resource allocation over long periods of time. In many ways this was a key, not only to the future educational success of our pupils, but to lessening resistance within the school, because of the strong correlation between resistance and academic success.

Desired outcomes were to increase literacy skills for all of our students K - 6, and importantly to work as a staff on more effective pedagogy in this area. It was conceded that teachers had to accept

responsibility for success or failure in the development of literacy for their students.

The next section discusses how themes in the school's Aboriginal community interplayed with the school's traditions. Both the school's traditions and the community themes were seen to influence Koori students' responses to the curriculum.

THE HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The research indicated that there were a number of culturally produced themes in the local Koori community. The most significant was the clear belief that Aborigines were the most oppressed group in Australian society. Koori people felt that they were in a daily battle against the rest of Australian society. Continuous fights against institutions, particularly the Police, the Justice System and Welfare, had shown them that they had to struggle constantly to survive.

As part of the wider system, school was seen as another agent of oppression. For Greytown students there was evidence that school results mirrored the general situation for Aborigines all over Australia, with few getting through to the end of High School. Education was seen as a false promise, and there were associated feelings of the pointlessness of sending children to school. Thus on the one hand there was a strong community perception that Koori students would not succeed, while there was also a belief that just gaining access to school was a major achievement, due in part to the long history of Aboriginal exclusion. Being there at school was seen then as a goal in itself, and thus manifesting another perception that students being happy at school was the most important issue, even above learning.

The research indicated that these community themes were imported into the school and this profoundly influenced student responses to their classroom.

STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THEIR EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Koori students' relationships with the school were generally characterised by opposition. It is crucial to understand that these oppositional stances of the Koori students were not light-hearted exchanges aimed at escaping the tedium of the daily lessons, games between the artful students and their long suffering teachers. All teachers at the school, regardless of years of service and previous ability to discipline students, experienced a very difficult classroom situation. Within this oppositional response there were a number of prevailing, recurring themes among students across all classrooms.

Unwillingness to take an educational risk

The most striking common feature of all Greytown classrooms was the unwillingness of the Koori students to take an educational risk and a fear of being wrong in the classroom. However, as a group, the students were not reluctant to take risks elsewhere in their lives. It was not uncommon for students to scale the tall roofs of Greytown school or run across the eighteen suburban railway tracks at Greytown Station. Rather, the classroom seemed to be the site of their greatest danger. Across all classrooms teachers found students who would not willingly take the kinds of educational risks which are thought to be an important element for progressing in learning from the known to the unknown.

The parts of the curriculum which the students would readily attempt were low risk lessons, generally with no written language, nor challenging components. Such was the strength of the student opposition to the curriculum, that teachers invariably moved to these easier lessons in an attempt to alleviate the problems of classrooms where nothing was being attempted or achieved, or to improve discipline.

Concept of Shame

A second theme closely linked with that of non-risk taking, was what was commonly termed by Aboriginal staff and community members as the Aboriginal 'concept of shame'. As a community member explained:

It's an Anglo thing to have a go - bad luck, good try, it's all right. It's not too much shame for them, the Anglos. That's a big part of it I think. Because they've [Koories] been put down for so long by society in general.

So do you think the shame is like a defence?

It is, yep. I would never ever answer questions at school.

As a defence mechanism against being seen to be wrong, avoiding shame could often be manifested and/or interpreted as classroom misbehaviour. Being in trouble was invariably felt to be better than not being able to handle the work.

Refusal to do Work

A third theme was a refusal to do work. Consequently, the major problems facing the teaching staff were: trying to fulfil the needs of many students in the classroom desperately seeking attention, recognition and reinforcement when risk taking work was being

undertaken; coping with large numbers of students who absolutely refused to attempt work. In all interviews teachers described this "down tools" approach as being something they had not previously

encountered, and one which contributed to their enormous daily pressure. The following comment by a teacher was typical:

They would just down tools and chuck it in, that's it. It was often the natural response when things got too difficult.

Students reacted in a number of ways to their feelings of not being able to cope in the classroom. Often they ran from their classes, or deliberately got into trouble so they would be sent outside.

The critical point about these student responses to their classroom is that they were directly related to the curriculum. The fear, the reluctance to take risks, the work avoidance and refusal were tied to those aspects of the curriculum which would appear to be the most vital for future educational success. In particular, areas related to literacy and language were strongly feared and consequently opposed. Lessons in reading were vehemently rejected, regardless of underpinning theory. Many different reading approaches had been tried at the school, and all faced similar opposition. Written work was cast aside, as were lessons where the students had to think and extend themselves. The patterns of opposing crucial components of the curriculum emerged early and continued throughout the school.

Student responses were spread over a wide range, from the passive doing nothing, to the defiant and the violent and total withdrawal from the school and education. The crucial point which emerges from this research is that the oppositional behaviour of the students was directed at the curriculum, despite the variances in intensity as it interplayed with other elements. It did not, in essence, distinguish between teachers, people, educational theory, Blacks and Whites. It worried at the heart of the curriculum and its offer of educational success, an offer which could not be trusted or accepted. An Aboriginal teacher discussed this:

They say things like: I'm not going to; I can't do it; I do not want to do it; I'm not going to do it; you can't make me. And I do not. You can try to coax them around but until they are willing to open up and let you help them, you're beating your head against a brick wall. Whether that's coming from me, a Koori to another Koori kid, or whether it's coming from the teacher to somebody else, they just resist.

Do you get the same thing as the White teacher, do you get the same resistance?

I get the same resistance.

This oppositional behaviour contributed to the production of conditions in the school and classroom which placed the majority of students at risk of low educational outcomes specifically in literacy.

THE OUTCOMES OF STUDENT RESPONSES

Low standard of learning outcomes

As a result of these responses to the learning context there was at Greytown school a large group of Koori students who were working at a low standard. This low academic standard was directly related to low literacy levels. Scores in the Basic Skills Testing Program (a statewide testing system introduced by the New South Wales Government in 1989) have continually highlighted this low performance.

Disparate Levels

By the time students reached mid to upper primary the academic range was extensive. Those who were struggling in their work seemed to become increasingly aware of their position, and this brought about more shame, anger and opposition. Conversely, the Koori students who were coping better with their school work seemed to find that their apparent success was a betrayal of their group. This seemed to be a cultural characteristic. Often they opposed work they were capable of, choosing solidarity above individual advancement.

Lost Time

One of the very real effects of the student responses to the curriculum was the amount of time lost in each classroom. Time was lost on an individual basis, with those students offering most opposition spending time out of class on various levels of punishment up to suspension from the school. Absenteeism was also a major school problem. This was usually a result of: wagging (being away from school) without parents' knowledge; reluctance by the students to go to school and parents not forcing them to go, or not able to get them to go; to do with community business like funerals, common in the Aboriginal community. As well, time was lost throughout the school as teachers dealt with the constant opposition which they encountered.

Survival strategies

One of the collective ways the Koori students coped was to develop survival strategies. These were short term tactics which helped them get through the day without necessarily bringing forward positive academic results. These responses were typically combinations of: faking work, memorising by rote, doing whatever you wanted as long as you were busy, copying and sharing work and helping others get through the task at hand.

Rejection of the school curriculum

The other typical response to school was rejection. There was a delicate balance between the process of surviving the situation and getting out of it completely. Rejection could be: spontaneous and immediate, running from the classroom or the school; or the more permanent resistant stance of rejection of schooling itself. There seemed to be no shame associated with quitting school, but absolute shame in not being able to read in the classroom. Koori people commented that dropping out of school was culturally supported, not because the community wanted it to happen, but because it was expected and seen to be better than battling a system which was not going to get you through.

An Aboriginal teacher talked about this, explaining that when "[you're] being tough out in the community, you've got your self esteem out there, you're somebody." She said the parents then,

take the attitude of well, "Me kid can't read, he can't add up, so it's the teacher's fault, so I'm not going to send him to school. Let him run around The Centre if he wants to. Let them be king pin out there all on their own in the streets." There's not as much shame in that, different from a Whitefella not turning up at school.

When all the effects of the student responses are considered together, the Koori pupils were educationally at risk, both in terms of future academic success if they continued at school, or by opting out completely.

TEACHER RESPONSES TO THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Three primary influences on the curriculum are identified in this section; regularly occurring major crises, relationships with the community which reflected the same divisions in wider society and the mentality of 'peace at any price' with the students.

Serious crises

Added to the daily intensity of each classroom was a history of serious incidents with which the school had to contend. These incidents shook the teachers' collective and individual resolve. During these times the feeling among staff was one of not being on top of the situation at all. These crises brought significant effects to the school and classroom. Consider the following Research Diary entry:

This day in the end belonged to Ben who went berserk at lunch time. He charged into the office just at the end wanting to punch a kid and would not be pacified. When I got to the office he was screaming and kicking doors. Soula was stopping him from going into the office. When

he saw me he went out, enraged, kicking more doors. We got his cousin to ring his grandmother and I talked to her. We decided that he had to be brought home. He was now over the road behind cars. Debbie and I approached him but he was not going to go. His cousin tried to help but that was no use. I asked Soula to drive Debbie down The Centre to get Ben's uncle who could control him. Ben went and stood in the middle of the road. Cars came close to him. Some stopped. I had to intervene and dragged him screaming off the road. He returned and sat in the middle of the road. An Aboriginal woman had come running and I thought she might have been able to do something. I had asked a teacher's aide to stay meanwhile (she had been at her car) in case something had happened to him and I would be blamed. The three of us spent a hectic and totally bizarre fifteen minutes trying to stop him from going on the road. To our utter relief Soula returned with his uncle in the car. By this time Ben had raced to the Towers opposite. The uncle went looking for him. Ben had returned and was sitting in the toilets down the bottom, sobbing. Another aunty had come in. I left them to talk to Ben. Five minutes later his uncle brought Ben to the office, made him apologise and they went. We sat on the front step and got our breath back. (23rd November)

With the threat of such events always present, it was easy to be seduced by the quiet times, equating them with success regardless of what was actually happening in the classroom.

Relationships with the Koori community

Community relationships similarly affected school practices. The belief held, that as Aborigines, they were fighting the wider system with the school as a key battleground ensured that productive school-community relations could not be taken for granted. The ongoing commitment to positive community relationships was previously described as a critical aspect of the school's undertakings. However, despite the success of initiatives undertaken in this area, undercurrents of tension based on black-white divisions were always present. These attacks from the community added considerably to the pressure that the teachers already

felt because of the nature of their classroom work. It precipitated a notion that student contentment was an overriding priority of the curriculum. Tradition, classroom experience and external pressure combined to convince teachers that quiet, happy students were the hallmarks of successful Greytown teaching.

Peace at any price

Community pressure was also strongly focused on discipline matters. Suspension was a constant divisive issue at Greytown. It was used as a last resort tactic, despite being a contradictory "solution" to the school's ethos and discipline policy. Teachers needed all the support

they could get to make it through the day and suspension of their most difficult students usually offered a respite for them. Yet they were under strong obligations because of Greytown traditions not to bring about situations where suspension was needed. Again, the result of this was a movements toward a supportive, protective classroom environment in which students were happy. Moreover, keeping students happy satisfied the majority of parents. For them suspension from school had been a constant historical threat used against them in mainstream education.

The issue of suspension and an illustration of the way community affairs were inextricably bound with the concerns of the school, came together in one dramatic incident. It was an incident which captured the toughness of Greytown life for all involved, and the shattering effect of community life on teaching staff and the running of the school. It started at lunch time when a Year 3 student had told the Principal (the researcher) to "get fucked" and stormed out of the school. There seemed to be no choice but to suspend him, and a letter was written for the AEA to take to his mother. In the Research Diary it was noted:

I thought a lot about Ben between yesterday afternoon and this morning. I always worry about suspensions and their ramifications. I wasn't prepared for what was to happen this morning. As I was sitting in the staffroom the secretary called me to the office. Ben's cousin was there, a nineteen year old. She said, "Ben's mother's dead." Heroin overdose. She was going into rehab this morning. I was shocked. "Paula." The letter. I stood there saying, "Shit, fuck, no..." My immediate and devastating reaction was that the letter had driven her to it. It was numbing.

There was evidence that all teachers at Greytown School worked under conditions which inevitably impacted on their classroom practice. The features of the classroom curriculum produced in the interplay of a school, its community and the opposition of its students will now be considered.

THE OUTCOMES OF TEACHER RESPONSES

Compromises the academic curriculum

Teaching in this distinct context called for a curriculum which would "work" with the students. However in this context "work" meant avoiding classroom practices which the students would oppose. The ability to adapt and change in a very unpredictable environment was a key to "successful" practice. Regrettably, flexibility usually meant that the teachers did not achieve what they had planned to achieve. Indeed, after a while, planning became increasingly focussed on improving classroom discipline, and this led to a compromised curriculum as far as academic outcomes were concerned.

The nature of the student opposition described earlier repeatedly meant that lessons presented which aimed at advanced outcomes were met with the strongest opposition. No matter how well intentioned and well planned the lessons were, teachers had to be prepared to give up and try something else. So regularly did this occur that within the research interviews the terms bail out and bail out lessons were frequently mentioned. Predictively, the bail out activities would move the lessons away from the high risk academic areas which were most strongly opposed by the students.

The curriculum which was produced at Greytown School was one of compromise. Unintentionally teachers moved their curriculum, and had their curriculum moved, in directions which would ultimately continue to contribute to the educational disadvantage of their students. Challenging reading and language activities were the first to go in this process. Standards were dropped as lessons were offered (for example, handwriting, simple maths processes which all students could do, language work involving minimum reading; copying from the board, non-academic subjects such as art and Physical Education). Teachers found small group activities were particularly difficult, so they consequently relied on whole group work, pitched at one level. Thus all students received a compromised curriculum, regardless of academic level or potential, or whether individually they were offering opposition.

Lowering expectations - Abandoning students

Greytown School often had to abandon and leave behind many of its most oppositional students. Teachers found that they had to make decisions to forget about some of their students so they could continue to try to teach the rest of the class. These decisions were not taken lightly, but like much of Greytown's classroom work, were about doing what had to be done to get through the period of time. This was seen by other teachers to be part of their daily tactics, and accepted in the structure of the school.

RESEARCH FINDINGS - A SAD PARADOX (V1)

In summary then, the changes brought about at Greytown School were primarily aimed at improving the school relationships of the Koori pupils. This was arguably a very sound educational decision. While the school's attempts to make Koori students feel good when they walked through the gates of the school, and the efforts made to reduce the cultural distance between Blacks and Whites had brought a degree of acceptance by students and the community, the data indicated that gains in school relationships would not, in themselves, guarantee improved educational outcomes for the students. The data indicates that the

positive school relationship came to be seen as an end in itself, and in the process the educational outcomes were restricted for the majority of its students.

Johnston (1996) comments:

There is an interesting and rather sad paradox within the research. There are two stories being told... a narrative of teachers who over a decade have reflected upon their relationship with their Aboriginal students and community and struggled to devise programs that acknowledge Aboriginal culture and address problems of poverty and racism. The other narrative is where these same teachers defuse opposition and conflict by lowering their expectations of student success and sheltering their students from high-risk learning

situations, especially in the important areas of literacy. The researcher describes these two stories as the 'public face' and the 'private works', and suggests that the active intervention in poverty and racism at the whole school policy level (the public face) might actually mask the reality of failure as far as student outcomes is concerned (the private works).

MOVING BEYOND MUTUAL SURVIVAL STRATEGIES (V1 & V2)

The first step in a process of considering how teachers and the school could work at moving beyond the point of both teachers and students protecting their vulnerability within the classroom would be to raise an awareness and understanding in teachers of those specific points of student opposition. The data identified that a pattern was set early in the school lives of the Koori students and that curriculum compromise in the first years at school produced effects throughout primary school and into high school. From an awareness that the nature of the curriculum was failing the students, teachers would need to shift from the general feelings of inevitability and an uneasy belief that nothing else could be done.

It was revealed in the data that key factors influencing Koori students' responses to their classrooms were the fear of the curriculum, the need to avoid shame, and subsequent feelings that surviving or rejecting school were the main options. In light of these key factors the following considerations were proposed as a means of reducing the likelihood that students would be placed at an educational disadvantage. These were that;

- (a) in the earliest school years teachers need to develop a curriculum for the Koori students clearly aimed at encouraging risk taking,
- (b) teachers need to accept the responsibility to develop an approach to literacy which is not underpinned with a subtle deficit logic.
- (c) the assumption that insisting that students engage with the

curriculum will compromise the buddy-like relationship teachers have built up needs to be challenged. Teachers need to find ways through student opposition while keeping in place a curriculum which offers educational success.

IMPLICATION FOR LITERACY FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS (V2)

The research implications from this learning context offer educators in the field of literacy learning raise many significant questions. In light of the research findings we can ask;

- (i) what is considered to be the essence of literacy processes, and how does this sit with the findings of this research.
- (ii) what discourses are evident in the literature that attempt to explain the lack of success in literacy of students from minority backgrounds, do these offer a way forward in light of the findings from this research?

The Essence of Literacy Processes

What is central to the successful acquisition of the processes of reading and writing is the development of the knowledge bases of what is known as the three cueing systems:

semantic (the meaning system at word, sentence and text level),
graphophonic (the shape patterns and sound-letter relationships) and
syntactic (the patterns, rules and conventions of the written language

system).

A vital aspect that surrounds these three systems is that they create meaning most effectively when the reader can draw confidently from his/her 'sea' of prior knowledge. Some theorists believe this is encompassed within the semantic system. Others give it its own priority and even add to it the notions of the pragmatics of language (those variables specific to the context - physical, emotional and social, that the learner operates out of). This has particular implications for Aboriginal learners as the broader societal implications play such a vital role in the learning context of the classroom.

Combined with knowledge systems is the specific need in reading to utilise the strategies of forward referencing, backwards referencing, predicting, confirming, guessing, using illustration and self-correcting. Whilst these strategies are vital for meaning making through the process of decoding messages from print (and many other forms of media), another set of complementary encoding strategies for creating messages (that is, going to print) are used in writing: awareness of function, form and audience, drawing on phonemic

knowledge, understanding the features of print (directionality, spacing, and linguistic features- full stops, paragraphing etc), re-reading and self-correcting.

Whilst there is little dispute among literacy learning theorists about these knowledge systems and strategies, there is much debate as to how these should be presented to learners and what aspects of the processes should be given most emphasis. However, for this paper's purpose, these debates will be left aside so that the issue of 'risk taking' clearly evident in the research can be fully explored.

According to many literacy learning proponents, the notion of the learner 'taking risks' or approximating to the conventions is a central tenet for success. Cambourne (1990:6) states that:

Learning is a process which involves making connections ... (with their world-social experiences). The learner is the one who must make the connections ... (ie create their own constructions). Learning involves a high degree of social interaction ... (models of others).

Reutzel and Hollingsworth (1988:412) add that;

As a direct outgrowth of using language as an exploratory tool for learning, children often make mistakes in reading and writing. However, to risk and make mistakes is a natural consequence of learning and developing language facility.

In respect to writing, the concepts of risk taking have been fully incorporated in the work of Graves (1983) who spearheaded the process writing movement of the 1970 and 1980s. The process approach to writing held that language users can learn as much from getting language wrong (producing a non standard form) as they can from getting it right.

Research in the field of psycholinguistics parallels the belief in 'approximations' as 'windows' into the development of readers. The research showed that all readers make errors, and that their 'miscues' were not only rational and explicable, but that, in conjunction with self-correction, they also constituted a powerful strategy for learning.

Thus given that 'risk-taking' is so central to the literacy learning process, how then can educators concerned to support Aboriginal

literacy learners reconcile the dilemma presented in the research from Greytown. If we reflect on the previously mentioned theory of cultural discontinuity (Au, 1993), we find explanations that cast the Aboriginal learners into the mould of 'other' - the culture of the home is mismatched with the culture of the school. What has been outlined above as the way learners learn to be literate may need to be redefined

as 'the way western, white learners who share a similar set of cultural understandings 'learn to be literate'. The cultural assumption here is that the notion of taking a risk is predicated on the fact that often 'the risk' 'the guess' or 'the approximation' is close to the text's meaning, because the learner and the author share a common set of world meanings. As Goodman (1989) explains "readers predict as they read (they construct, they invent) and use cues from their reading to confirm or disconfirm their predictions." However readers' ability to predict accurately is dependent on their schema or 'their world inside their heads' (Smith, 1975) which reiterates the integration of society and the experiences of the individuals in a social context.

In beginning to conceptualise new practices, we need to avoid essentialist positions such as those that say:

... it is an Aboriginal belief that doing or saying something wrong can effect moral or spiritual consequences. Because of these expectations (compliance and consequences for mistakes) Aboriginal children are rarely asked to attempt tasks they are unlikely to accomplish." (Cairney and Ruge, 1996:12).

Instead, it is more productive to argue that there is no single set of clearly definable behaviours that are essential traits of Aboriginality. The notion of what constitutes Aboriginal cultural ways is a complex issue which cannot be adequately dealt with here. However, despite this, it is possible to say that from the point of view of the Aboriginal learners at Greytown school, who is meeting quite new world views in their classroom, the taking of risks, approximating and predicting will more often than not lead their approximations to be further from conventional understandings than their Anglo-Australian peers. This causes them to receive a lesser degree of confirmation and positive feedback that they are 'doers' of this learning task, and a greater likelihood of experiencing the cultural notion of 'shame'.

Cambourne (1988:33) explains that a vital condition of successful literacy learning is that of engagement.

Engagement will occur learners are confirmed as a 'doers' (believe in the expectation of themselves and their teachers) of the tasks being demonstrated or the task they are immersed in, and that the demonstrations will further the purposes of their lives and within the conditions of responsibility, use and response, there exists no fear of physical or psychological hurt if their approximations are not fully 'correct'.

Recognising that the fear of shame as a consequence of taking risks which do not confirm the learner as a capable 'doer' of the literacy tasks at hand, may well be part way to a solution for teachers struggling to support young Aboriginal literacy learners. However,

there is much more to understand about the theory of cultural discontinuity and its intersection with success in the learning of literacy.

THE DISCOURSE OF APPROPRIATE PEDAGOGY

At the micro level of the classroom, many pedagogical suggestions are offered for addressing Aboriginal learners lack of success. In The Aboriginal Literacy Kit, (Department of School Education NSW, 1995) it is argued that cultural appropriate resources are essential for success. Furthermore, respecting and valuing the students themselves and acknowledging the health difficulties (specifically the hearing condition known as Otitis Media), and the understanding and respect for the language dialect of English that the students bring to school (Aboriginal English) are also implicated in the equation for success for Aboriginal literacy learners.

However, what the research at Greytown demonstrated and what is also reflected in a three-year ethnographic study conducted by McCarty (1987) at a native American school, was that there are difficulties in systematically incorporating the students' language and culture into existing educational structures. In McCarty's study the community attempted to develop innovative programs that reflected and built upon community expertise and practices. The findings of the study suggest that, while the school had been successful in the main goal of developing local leadership to transform an economically impoverished community, it had been less successful in meeting the educational goals. McCarty (1987:501) pointed to broad structural problems such as poverty and the lack of local funding and warned that:

influences on the student achievement transcend the classroom, and are deeply embedded in the institutional structure defining the relationship of the school and community to the larger society.

Landson-Billings (1995) argues that the terms culturally appropriate, culturally congruent and culturally compatible, which are commonly used in the research literature, all suggest that mainstream school culture should merely accommodate students' home culture, rather than respond to it. She (1995:463) suggests that;

culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness.

In many cases limited success has been achieved when attempts at developing culturally responsive curricula where language and culture of minority groups have been incorporated into the curriculum. The emphasis has been on the content and has not been directed at the

classroom interactions and processes (Foster 1992). This was evident in the Greytown research. Delpit (1988) offers an explanation for this limited success by suggesting that allowing children from minority groups to maintain their language and culture is doing them no service if it is at the expense of teaching them (quite explicitly) the codes (for example, linguistic and behavioural) that they need to succeed in the mainstream culture.

What becomes apparent then is that there are arguably two aspects that need to be embedded in a pedagogical approach that attempts to bring about literacy success for Aboriginal learners. These are the fostering of identity and self-esteem, and access to power. This means equipping minority children with the skills necessary to live in the wider society. In implementing these ideas, he saw certain values as prerequisite: difference is never equated with deficiency; cooperation is fostered not competition; cultural respect is seen as essential to developing a pluralistic society; and the school's function is directed towards increasing a child's options rather than changing them.

CONCLUSION

What the Greytown research has demonstrated in respect to literacy learning is well expressed by Foster (1992:309) when he claims:

that teachers need to possess both theoretical and practical knowledge of how to use cultural, linguistic and sociolinguistic information to develop ways of teaching that not only respect cultural diversity but insure high levels of literacy

There is still much to understand about the issue of literacy among minority groups and this is demonstrated in the failure of Greytown's teachers to bring success with literacy to Aboriginal students. However, no longer can the failure be attributed to deficits with the child and the family. What Greytown's research has told us is that classrooms are not simple places. They are dynamic interactional spaces where according to Bruner (1986) culture is negotiated. If culture is embedded in literacy practices, then it has to be asked: "Whose culture is being reflected in the literacy pedagogies employed?"

The reality according to Gee (1990:67) is that there is "no access to power in society without control over the social practices in thought, speech and writing essay-text literacy and its attendant world view". This places before literacy educators of minority children an enormous responsibility to develop alternative educative pedagogies that empower these learners.

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1 The view of curriculum articulated here is one where teachers, students, subject matter and the milieu are all equally implicated in the construction of a learning context (Grundy 1994: 32-39).

