# Cultural Practices of Pedagogy: Literacy Contexts for Young Aboriginal Students in Inner & Outer Regional Australia

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*Literacy provides an important focus for understanding the political and ideological interests and principles at work in the pedagogical encounter and exchanges between the teacher, the learner and the forms of meaning and knowledge they produce together (Giroux 1987:17)*

## Introduction

For Aboriginal students *'becoming literate'* in the dominant society is complex and challenging. As researchers of young Aboriginal[1] students and literacy issues, and particularly through our work in the Baiyai[2] project and more recently the Narang Guudha[3] project, we have found evidence of the ways in which the cultural practices of pedagogy are being played out in the day to day realities of Aboriginal students in their classrooms. This data has enabled the researchers to consider the implications of the Wood's et al comment that "when children begin school they begin to acquire the identity of 'pupil' a secondary socialisation that is not necessarily negotiated but dependent on the expectations of the system and those who work within the system rather than the individual" (Woods, Boyle & Hubbard, 1999:117). Although this is something that happens for all children, when they come from a minority group within a dominant society they face an additional layer of adjustment. In particular in the case of Aboriginal students, Eades (1993:5) suggests that "Education systems in Australia still have a long way to go in recognising the home language of Aboriginal children and accommodating the special needs of Aboriginal speakers of English."

As a result, our ongoing research has been examining the relationships between 'school' cultures and 'home' cultures at the points where teachers and students intersect. In this article the cultures we refer to are not just delineated by race or ethnicity (Wong & Patterson, 2000:5) but also include the whole range of sociocultural groups that are characterised by such things as economic status, family structure, religious convictions and particular physical, emotional and psychological needs. Lankshear et al (1997: 12-13) acknowledge, the term culture is complex, in that it has a wide range of everyday and technical uses. Culture involves "the making and sharing of meanings, the capacity to frame and use concepts and to think conceptually and through this, the capacity to create: to 'add to' the world we find ...it is a consequence and a function of the social dimension of human life."

The focus of this paper is specifically on the nature of the cultural practices of pedagogy in schools where we conducted our research, in classes containing approximately 20-25% young Aboriginal students. We examine how implicit beliefs and understandings embedded in these different cultural knowledges of 'school' and 'home' can impinge on the 'meanings' being made by each of the participants.

## Terms & Classifications

Before exploring these notions more fully, we want to be very clear about the ways in which we are using some important terms and classifications. These relate to key aspects in recognising and beginning to understand the complexities of the literacy contexts in which Aboriginal students are expected to function and learn. The necessity for clarification of terms comes about because when searching the literature related to Aboriginal

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[1] We recognise that Indigenous communities in Australia comprise both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, the focus for the research from which this article is drawn is on Aboriginal students and communities.

[2] *Baiyai* is Wiradjuri (Wiradjuri people are Aboriginal Australians who have lived and live in areas of southern and western New South Wales) language meaning 'meeting place of two parties'. Researchers observed Aboriginal students in classroom contexts, focussing on interactions that may otherwise pass unnoticed in busy classrooms. These were analysed and interpreted in a way that enabled the research group to construct a picture of classroom exchanges that were causing difficulties for Aboriginal students and their teacher. See Munns, Simpson, Connelly and Townsend (1999) for a full description of the project's beginnings, theory and research concepts.

[3] The *Narang Guudha* (Wiradjuri language meaning 'little child') research explores and aims to identify why young Aboriginal learners, in urban/rural town settings (now referred to as inner and outer regional settings) who seem to begin their formal education with as much enthusiasm and readiness as any other group of children, are the ones who are at greatest risk of not achieving adequate literacy. skills, to function effectively in today's society. See Simpson & Clancy (2001) for more information on this project.

students and literacy we found that there was often a lack of shared understanding in the ways that some terms and classifications were being used.

The title of this paper uses the designations of inner & outer regional Australia to denote the areas under discussion. However, without definitions, the use of these terms to develop a shared understanding of the language being used is highly problematic. Close examination of the research literature, information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and government documents showed that there has been little consistency in the way geographical location classifications are understood.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) there has been an expressed need for a standard classification that defines locations such as metropolitan, urban regional, remote, rural and other terms that in general refer to the urban/rural dichotomy. Currently, these terms can have very different meanings both within and across Government Departments, in the media and for the general public. Often their usage lacks consistency, they are not clearly defined, and sometimes they are used interchangeably.

For this paper we are using the classifications, which appear below. The Department of Health and Aged established these in 1999. They have been further developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) in an attempt to bring about nation-wide uniformity in locality classifications. This system was chosen because once formally adopted by the ABS, it would be a nationally recognised and endorsed system that will allow for consistency in interpretation and understanding.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001:14) indicates that: The New Remoteness Areas for the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Structure are:

**Major Cities of Australia:** Census Districts with an average ARIA[4] index value of 0 to 0.2
**Inner Regional Australia:** Census Districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 0.2 and less than or equal to 2.4
**Outer Regional Australia:** Census Districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 2.4 and less than or equal to 5.92
**Remote Australia:** Census districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 5.9 and less than or equal to 10.53
**Very Remote Australia:** Census districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 10.53 to 12
**Migratory:** areas composed of offshore, shipping and migratory Census districts.

Similar problems relating to meaning arise with the terms literacy, language and Aboriginal students. It is not always clear whether the literacy being referred to is literacy in the Aboriginal culture and language, or literacy in the dominant culture and Standard Australian English. When the term 'language' is used in relation to Aboriginal people, it can be referring to Traditional Aboriginal language/s, Aboriginal English or Standard Australian English.

Our working definition for literacy is one established by Luke (1993:8) who suggests that "literacy is a social practice which is 'done.'" Such a view is supported by Anstey & Bull (1996:40) who extend this idea by suggesting that "Literacy is ... an active, dynamic and interactive practice which can be used to get meaning." It is about "understanding the details of everyday life and the social grammar of the concrete through the larger totalities of history and social context" (Giroux 1987:16), it is "not approached as merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent" (Giroux 1987:7).

The term Traditional Aboriginal Language/s, refers to what Susan Kaldor describes as 'tongues.' She asserts that, "Each of the [Aboriginal] groups or 'tribes'[5] had its own tongue[6], transmitted over countless generations and, to members of the tribe, recognisably different from that of any neighbouring tribe. Prior to European contact, there were probably 500-700 such tongues spoken on the continent, corresponding to an estimated

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[4] The calculation of ARIA (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia) Score involves measuring the shortest road distance between a Populated Locality and five categories of Service Centre. The ratio of the shortest distance to the mean shortest distance, for each category of Service Centre, is calculated. The five individual values are then summed to arrive at a single ARIA Score for the Populated Locality. The highest total ARIA Score a Populated Locality can have is 12 and the lowest is 0 (zero). Brisbane has a score of zero while Lajamanu in the Northern Territory has a score of 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001)

[5] The term 'tribe' is widely used in anthropological and linguistic writings and seems indispensable in spite of some difficulties one encounters in any attempt at its exact definition (Berndt and Berndt 1977, 32-37)

[6] The word 'tongue' is used here as a neutral term that embraces both 'dialect' and 'language'.

similar number of tribes" (Kaldor 1982:31). Some of these languages continue to be the first language of some Aboriginal people.

In Australia, Standard Australian English is the language of power used by the dominant society, and is generally recognised, accepted and used particularly in the fields of education, business, law, media and government (Eades 1993:1-2).
The use of an umbrella term such as 'Aboriginal' fails to recognise that within the Aboriginal communities there are important differences to consider. There are Aboriginal people living a range of lifestyles, which include Traditional, Transitional, and Contemporary. Within this range of lifestyles, there are a variety of community types, which include: inner city, outer city, resettlement, isolated, home, homeland, remote and island communities. The site of this research is a resettlement area of NSW, where Aboriginal people have been relocated from small remote and very remote locations to an inner regional location, where they live a contemporary lifestyle.

While these definitions are not definitive or static, they do provide a workable framework for constructing a meaningful discussion about the acquisition of Standard Australian literacy for Aboriginal students.


## Research Focus

A search of relevant literature- which included Harris 1980; Gray 1985; Walton 1986; Malin 1990; DEET 1997; Masters & Forster, 1997; Batten, Frigo, Hughes & McNamara 1998; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland, and Reid, 1998; Simpson, 1998; Commonwealth of Australia 1999; Dunn 1999; Munns, Simpson, & Clancy, 1999; Munns, Simpson, Connelly, & Townsend, 1999; and Simpson, Munns, & Clancy 1999- shows that although there has been extensive research and large amounts of funding to support literacy development for Aboriginal students, it is not being matched with the achievement of educational outcomes for these students. The reasons for this are complex and in part relate to noticeable gaps identified in the research, which relate to the complexities of literacy acquisition for young Aboriginal students in inner and outer regional areas of Australia.

Although there is considerable research that acknowledges that literacy learning is enculturated (Heath 1983, Wells 1986, Bruner 1990 and McNaughton 1995) there is minimal research in this area that relates specifically to young Aboriginal students in inner and outer regional Australia. For example Dunn (1999:103), indicated that "While literacy research in minority communities is common in other countries, research concerning urban/rural town Aboriginal people in Australia is sparse." This claim is further supported by Batten et al (1998:3) who asserts that, "More is written in the literature about the schooling of Aboriginal children in remote situations than in urban settings, but most Indigenous people do live in an urban environment National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1995."

The *Narang Guudha* research was carried out by a team comprising an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researcher. This combination enabled the gathering and interpreting of data to be considered from both cultural perspectives. The research provides a focus on the cultural practices of pedagogy and the implications for young Aboriginal learners in early childhood settings. It does this by exploring the relationships between acquisition of sociocultural practices and the learning of designated literacy skills.

Through this research, it has become evident that, "As a form of cultural politics, literacy both illuminates and interrogates school life as a place characterised by a plurality of conflicting languages and struggles, a site where dominant and subordinate cultures collide and where teachers, students and school administrators often differ as to how school experiences and practices are to be defined and understood" (Giroux 1987:17).

This paper explores the actualities of this quote by concentrating on three key experiences that depict some of the lived realities of six year old Dean, during his early years of schooling.

# The Story of Dean

From his first day in the school setting Dean identified strongly through both conversations and action, that he was Koori[7]. He worked hard to make connections between his home culture and school culture, and would bring items of cultural significance from home, to share with the other children. He would use these in attempts to engage in conversations that would enable him to use cultural knowledge with which he was familiar. For example he brought in an audiotape of Koori Dreamtime Rhymes that he wanted the teacher to play. When this didn't happen he was obviously disappointed and didn't really understand why the tape wasn't played. Children often brought in items from home that were shared with the rest of the class. At other times he would watch carefully to see what was happening around him and try to fit in but there were clearly occasions when he just couldn't work it out. When this happened he would try to start up a conversation, or to involve another child into a different activity, or to wander off and look for something else to do or to attract the teacher's attention, sometimes by behaving in an inappropriate manner. However, when he could relate the school task/topic to his own home and cultural experiences he participated willingly and fully, with positive outcomes. Dean often linked his school tasks with his known experiences. On one occasion when working on a handwriting activity that involved fish, Dean pointed to a fish on his sheet, saying 'Im Koori food. Me Koori boy. Me eat Koori food'. He completed this activity to the satisfaction of all concerned. He would also act out didgeridoo playing with anything that resembled a didgeridoo shape such as a cardboard tube or a long wooden block, and would often demonstrate cultural forms of dance when moving around the room. At the same time as all this was happening the class was also engaged in activities to develop their learning in relation to literacy skills. For example, they worked regularly with phonic materials and associated worksheets that were often based around assumed cultural knowledge e.g. Western nursery rhyme characters. These were the kinds of activities that failed to engage Dean. Because he was constantly struggling to understand the cultural context of the classroom he often had little enthusiasm left to deal with the complex learning of literacy skills that was required of the children. Dean's known and cultural experiences are not the same as many of his peers or that of the teacher, so it becomes difficult and sometimes testing, for them to share meanings and understandings within the daily functioning of the classroom.

There are many cultures, including Aboriginal culture, within the community who have little knowledge about the subtleties embedded in the school culture - the 'unspoken' rules, the organisation of time, the expectations of the system, the organisational structures. It is also correct to say that, many teachers are not aware of the cultural subtleties embedded in Aboriginal culture. On many occasions Aboriginal children in the classroom, find their cultural mores (traditions, customs and behaviours) go unnoticed. This can have a profound impact on their lives, because it can appear that their culture is being negated without explanation, which in turn often causes confusion, discontent and unhappiness.

The experiences discussed in this article all relate to food, largely because they are common examples of exchanges that are played-out in classrooms. It is, however, important to note that issues discussed here are not restricted to food. Similar types of situations are also played-out on a regular basis in all areas of classroom interaction and participation, especially where assumptions are made in the context of the dominant culture. Such assumptions fail to consider the cultural subtleties that form an integral part of Aboriginal children's lives.

## 1. Sharing

> Dean was always generous with sharing his food. As a consequence most of his food for the day would be all gone at recess. This however did not worry him. Come lunchtime he would simply see what the other children had, then help himself. Such actions caused tears, confrontations and arguments and resulted in the teacher intervening and reprimanding Dean.

Within the school culture there are implicit rules about food, in that children are expected to eat their own food, which has been sent from home. Sometimes a child might ask to swap or may just ask for a particular piece of

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[7] 'Koori' is a term that is culturally accepted and used when referring to Aboriginal people from most parts of NSW. It should be noted that Aboriginal people living in other parts of Australia accept and use different terminology.

food. This gives the child with the food an opportunity to decide what they will do. In essence, it is about 'ownership' of food and control over what is done with it.

In most Aboriginal families, children are taught about sharing and caring and it is expected that sharing is a part of everyday life. At home if another person has food it is assumed it is all right to help yourself and vice versa. This is not the case when children bring their own food to school, where it is expected that each child will eat their own food. Like Dean, other Aboriginal children might share all of their food at recess and have nothing left for lunch. However, they do expect that the children with food will share with them at lunchtime. Problems arise because in the school context, this notion of sharing is sometimes construed as stealing, especially when a child seems to just 'take' something or if the 'owner' of the food is unwilling to share.

## 2. Cultural Responsibilities

> The class was working with the letter 'p' and as part of their work they made popcorn. When it was ready the children lined up to receive their share of popcorn. Dean stood and watched for a short time then very deliberately put himself at the end of the line. When he received his popcorn he brought it straight over to the researcher, gave it to her, then returned to the end of the line (some children were already lining up for a second helping) to receive some for himself.

All the children, except Dean, were anxious to be near the front of the line, as they did not want to miss out on the popcorn. This meant there was considerable jostling as they organised their places. Within this classroom context as they had been told there was some popcorn for each of them, they took this literally and did not seem to consider offering some, or sharing with anyone else in the room. Dean saw it differently. Within his home culture respect for older people, ensuring guests are looked after and the sharing of food, are integral parts of his life. It is something that is done automatically. Without hesitation, Dean carried out his cultural responsibilities in what would be considered an expected way, before looking after himself.

## 3. Assumed Understandings

> All the students in the class were engaged in a spelling test. Dean had chosen not to do it. (There were days when he found it difficult to conform to classroom expectations. On these occasions he was encouraged to select a book from the book corner to read quietly rather than disrupt the other students.) As the children finished their work and were on their way out to recess, they were offered a small piece of food as a reward. Dean waited eagerly to receive his food, but was not offered any.

With the exception of Dean, the children in the class understood that food could sometimes be offered as a reward. This meant they knew that to receive the reward they had to at least have a go at the spelling test. The idea of food being used in this way was quite foreign to Dean. In most Aboriginal families it is assumed food will be shared with all present and that individuals do not have to perform a special task or behave in a particular way in order to receive food. This was not the case here, when the teacher provided food as a reward. In this particular instance, the teacher expected all the students to participate in a set of tasks in order to receive a reward. This raised a problem for Dean, because he did not understand this notion of sharing. The implicit assumptions underpinning this action puzzled and upset him. Once the cultural dimensions of this interaction are understood, it becomes understandable that some Aboriginal children are left wondering - "How do I know what the teacher wants?"

## Discussion

From these examples it becomes very noticeable that while Dean was reprimanded for behaviour that was deemed inappropriate in the school culture, when his behaviour could be interpreted as thoughtful or

considerate it drew no comment. Such experiences encapsulate for Dean the enormous difficulties he faces in becoming literate in the school culture. They demonstrate how he is having difficulty in developing a sociocultural 'identity kit' which is "acquired through scaffolding and social interaction with people who have already mastered this way of being and way of learning within the social and cultural community" (Hill et al, 1997:271). When children have a home-based discourse, similar to the secondary discourse of school it can facilitate language. For many Aboriginal children this is not the case. It is the cultural pedagogy, the assumed knowledge, the implicit processes of teaching practice that make it so difficult for young Aboriginal children to function and learn effectively within school cultures.

Dean is as Gee suggests, one of those "Children from non-mainstream homes [who] often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses - including those concerned with school - in their homes, due to their parents' lack of access to these discourses. At school they cannot practice what they haven't yet got and they are exposed mostly to a process of learning and not acquisition. Therefore, little acquisition goes on" (Gee 1987:9).

Although Dean works hard to be accepted, he struggles to come to terms with what he knows and understands about how the world works in his home culture and the way it works in the school culture. As a young child he is confused and unable to contextualise what is happening. He constantly finds himself in conflict with the teacher and can't understand the responses he gets for doing things he thinks are 'right'. Quite often this results in him becoming frustrated and angry.

Because schooling and the school culture is underpinned by assumptions of knowledge and understanding of the dominant culture, much of what happens is never made explicit. This, aligned with the imbalance of the power relationships between the child and the system, which is represented by the teacher, contribute to the difficulties faced by Aboriginal children in classrooms. If Aboriginal cultural mores were to be understood, considered and appreciated by the teachers, opportunities would arise for the building of more positive relationships with students as well as making a significant contribution to achieving equitable educational outcomes as set down in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000-2004.

## Conclusion

Schools are complex socio-cultural settings that function in ways that can marginalise those who are unfamiliar with the territory, the unspoken and unwritten rules and regulations. In considering ways of making this culture more accessible for Aboriginal students it is imperative to understand Gramsci's perception of literacy as a double edged sword; that it can be wielded for the purpose of self and social empowerment or for the perpetuation of relations of repression and domination (Giroux 1987:2). Only by recognising "The characteristic nature of the shifting forms of accommodation, resistance, and interrogation that define the particular quality of the complex interaction between teacher and student voices" (Giroux 1987:24) can we begin to realise "the importance of always analysing dominant school culture as part of a specific historical, social and pedagogical context" (Giroux 1987:24). As Luke (1994:6) suggests we need to consider that "competence in literacy [therefore] not only entails how to read and write identifiable genres of texts, but it also requires strategic knowledge of how to read social situations and institutional rule systems..." (Emmitt & Pollack, 1997:196).

Until there is recognition and general acceptance that "Our culturally adopted way of life depends on shared meanings and shared concepts, and on shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretations" (Hilton, 1996:7), there will be little change for Aboriginal students. When young Aboriginal learners are empowered to successfully read the language and literacy contexts in which they find themselves can they move on to become proficient in the skills required to work with Standard Australian English. The ability to read the world first and then the word of the dominant culture will enable Aboriginal students to function and achieve their own goals while becoming an integral part of that society.

In order to bring about significant change in the educational experiences and improved literacy outcomes for young Aboriginal students, it is evident that there is a need for more research in inner and outer regional locations of Australia that considers the cultural practices of pedagogy.

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