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Using Culturally Relevant Texts and Grant's Holistic Framework to Connect Indigenous Early Readers to SAE Print-Based Texts

An Overview of a Reading Recovery Research Project Undertaken by Education Queensland

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The principled foundation of Education Queensland's *Literate Futures: Report of the Literacy Review for Queensland State Schools* (2000) is that in New Times, becoming literate is a highly complex task for the beginning reader and for the parents, elders, principals and teachers involved in providing instruction. Such complexity is brought about by the diversity in Queensland communities and the range of texts that young readers must be able to access, understand, use and critique before they are considered to be literate members of an information society. We already know that for students from socially and culturally diverse community groups schooling is what McNaughton (2003) terms as 'risky business'. In other words, these are the students who are most likely to be disaffected by schooling and in turn least able to enhance their life pathways and opportunities. Amongst those acknowledged to be most at-risk in Australian education systems are groups of Indigenous students (see, for example, Ritchie & Edwards, 1996; Batten et al, 1998; Nakata, 1999; McRae et al, 2000). Over the last sixteen years, a number of studies have suggested that it is what education systems and teachers are doing, or not doing, in schools and classrooms that bring about much of this disadvantage. For example, Malin's (1990a) two-year ethnographic study compared and contrasted teachers' responses to Indigenous students' and Anglo students' culturally based skills, assumptions and values. He concluded that aspects of the teacher/student and Anglo student/Indigenous student relationship resulted in some Indigenous students being academically and socially marginalised. Separate studies by Gibson (1998) and Cronin and Diezmann (2002) highlighted the ways that education department and school foci created further disadvantage for young gifted Aboriginal students.

In an attempt to better understand some of the issues at-risk Indigenous early readers faced in learning to read Standard Australian English (SAE) print-based texts, one group of Education Queensland Reading Recovery teachers embarked upon a one year project¹. This was not because Aboriginal English or the students' local dialects of English were not valued; rather that competencies of SAE were also valued and seen as fundamental to giving the students skills to participate in the wider society where they might be able to access different forms of

¹ This project is an initiative of Education Queensland. It was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs for improving literacy and numeracy in Queensland schools. The original conceptual framework for the culture of these books belong to Ernie Grant, without whose support and teaching this project could not have been developed.

power. At its most general level, their research explored why it was that Indigenous students tended to spend longer in Reading Recovery Programs² than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Following the thesis of Rose, Gray and Cowey (1999, p. 29), who suggested that employing culturally irrelevant basal texts in reading programs for Indigenous students may lead to these students perceiving ‘reading as a ritual practice of the school that has no pleasurable or communicative function’, the team explored the following three interrelated research questions:

- ❖ What is a culturally responsive framework for engaging Indigenous students with SAE print-based texts?;
- ❖ What constitutes culturally relevant print-based SAE texts for Indigenous students?; and
- ❖ Does the employment of a trial set of culturally relevant print-based SAE texts and framework for interaction affect the time sample groups of Indigenous students spend in Reading Recovery?

This year long project involved 13 schools located in community, urban and remote settings, 17 Reading Recovery Teachers and 38 at-risk Indigenous students. The Reading Recovery Teachers were split into three groups:

- ❖ SAMPLE ONE: students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had no access to the trial texts or to a culturally responsive interaction framework;
- ❖ SAMPLE TWO: students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had access to the trial texts only; and
- ❖ SAMPLE THREE: students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had access to the trial texts and professional development training in a culturally responsive interaction framework.

Initial data collection for phase one involved asking questions of and listening to those who formed an essential part of Indigenous learning communities: Indigenous students themselves, their Reading Recovery teachers, and Indigenous writers and artists.

The next part of this paper will turn to the first of the research questions, the one that asks ‘**What is a culturally responsive framework for engaging Indigenous students with SAE print-based texts?**’ Examinations of Indigenous and white Western culture have consistently drawn two conclusions: there are significant differences **between** Indigenous cultures and white Western cultures (see Malin, 1990a, 1990b); and just as importantly, there are significant cultural differences **within** each of these constructed categories (see Osborne, 1996). This presented three issues for the Indigenous text project team. Firstly, differences may have existed between the students’ Indigenous culture and the culture of the texts with which the students were expected to engage. Secondly, differences may have also existed between the students’ Indigenous culture and the culture of their Reading Recovery teacher. Thirdly, it was not possible to clearly define these potential differences because of the variation within. Despite these differences, the project team drew on the ideas of Osborne (1996) and adopted the following generalised three premises:

- ❖ the text’s content and the framework for interaction must start from the cultural understandings that the individual student brings to the reading lesson;
- ❖ the text’s content and the framework for interaction must affirm each student’s culture; and

² Reading Recovery is intensive, daily one-on-one reading and writing instruction designed to assist the lowest achieving children in Year 2 to catch up to their ‘average’ peers within 12-20 weeks.

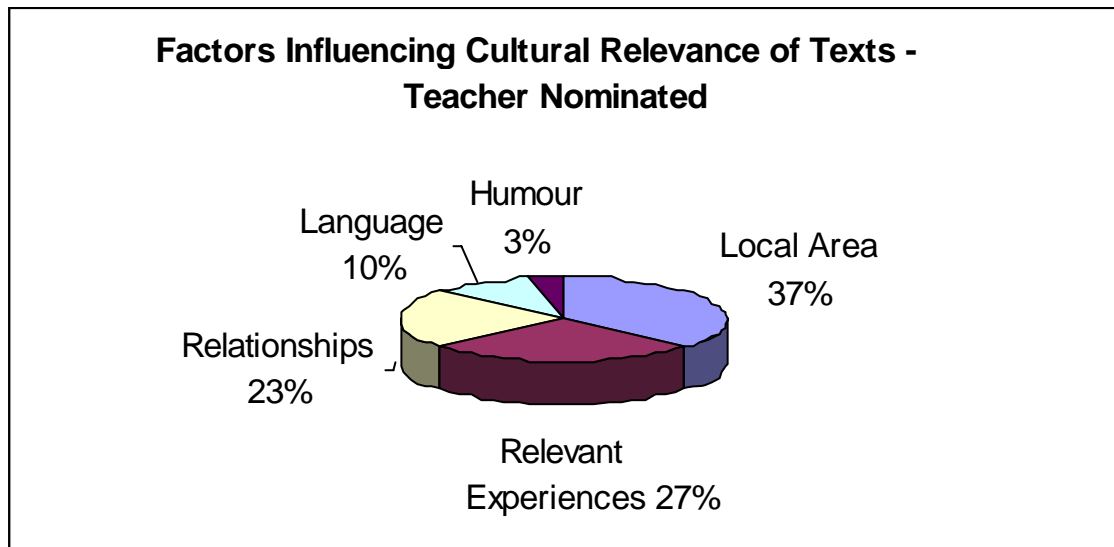
- ❖ Reading Recovery teachers must employ a framework for interaction that invites students to share aspects of their culture so that explicit links can be made into SAE print-based texts.

The project team also explored Ernie Grant's (1998) holistic framework of interaction for teachers to employ when working with Indigenous students. His framework outlines the importance of a holistic approach that emphasises the link between **Land, Language and Culture** and contextualises these in terms of **Time, Place and Relationships**. Together, these six interrelated elements provide a flexible but holistic framework for organising and presenting information on a range of topics. Grant (1998) explains that Indigenous communities' holistic view of the world is significantly different from what is considered the 'norm' in Western society. There is a particular emphasis on environmental cycles and patterns and the effect each has on the other. For example, each Indigenous language is formed out of a relationship between the flora, fauna and seasons of the land, which in turn becomes paramount in creating the cultural identity of the people who speak that language. Indigenous people actively make these connections because this is the world view into which Indigenous students have been socialised from birth. Grant (1998) argues that the links between these elements are often silenced by Western discourses, which tends to present a more compartmentalised organisation of knowledge in schools. The conflict of differing approaches, Grant (1998, p. 4) states, can be 'confusing and frustrating for all those involved' in the learning process. He suggests that if all the elements of his framework are evident in both pictures and words, then it is easier for Indigenous students to connect with the text. He maintains that teachers must assist students to orally build the field of knowledge, make connections between the six elements of their life experiences and the visual text. Using conversational rather than interrogative interactions, the teacher must assist the child to orientate to the written text (see McRae et al, 2000; Au, 2001). In this way the student's culture has been valued and celebrated and bridges have been built between the student's culture and oral language and the culture of learning required for engaging with SAE print-based texts (Nakata, 1999).

In response to the second research question, '**What constitutes culturally relevant print-based SAE texts for Indigenous students?**' the project team employed a number of Indigenous authors and illustrators and one non-Indigenous author and illustrator to produce a trial collection of Reading Recovery texts. The texts tended to be narratives or personal recounts. What was common to this collection of trial texts was that they drew on community practices that were familiar to the students, used aspects of the students' own languages and integrated relevant visual representations. In other words, these texts attempted to reflect the world of the students so that they could more successfully predict the concepts, language structures and episodes and more successfully match the text and illustrations.

The authors and illustrators worked with the Reading Recovery project team and tutors to revise their work before producing some trial texts. Text titles included *Guppies* (Written by Rachel Malthouse, illustrated by Julie Haysom), *Sliding* (Written by Gloria Beckett, illustrated by Julie Haysom), *The Old Willow Tree* (Written by Elizabeth Hilton, illustrated by Ron Hurley & Danielle Long), *The Black Bean Tree* (Written by Dot Walker, illustrated by Julie Haysom), *Flies* (Written by Dot Walker, illustrated by Kane Raybould) and *Making Sop Sop* (Written by Dot Walker, illustrated by Noel Cristaudo). The graph, presented below, summarises and quantifies what the teachers in the trial nominated as the factors apparently influencing the cultural relevance of these texts to the students. It is noteworthy that nearly ninety percent of the teachers' nominations centred on representations of the students' local

area, relevant experiences and appropriate representations of relationships within the extended family – a direct support of the Grant framework.



Such nominations stand in stark contrast to so-called ‘mainstream’ readers that tend to ignore representations of an Indigenous student’s world. Published texts that include Indigenous Australians tend to take up one of two stereotypical constructions: Indigenous people as traditional or Indigenous people as lazy, alcoholic and/or criminal (Rowan, 2001, p. 65). Such limited perspectives systematically prevent Indigenous students from showing what they can do with language, and according to Luke and Kale (1997, p. 13) set out the conditions for these students to fail, even before they begin. Such texts can lead to children’s ‘refusal to participate in reading and writing activities’ (Clay, 1991, p. 98). Moreover, research from Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) suggest that access to books that are unrelated to students’ lives sends a clear message that Indigenous students are not valued in society, and that books have little to offer them that is personal, relevant and affirming.

Quantitative data collected by the project team concluded that most teachers rated the texts as **highly effective in motivating students to read** and **highly effective in relating to students’ lives**. The perceived effectiveness of such texts was, however, considered to be somewhat stronger for students in remote school than for urban Indigenous students. The following quotes from Reading Recovery trial teachers working with urban and rural Indigenous students, and using the trial texts, were typical.

Reading Recovery Teacher’s Comment (Working with an Urban Indigenous student):
Being in an urban setting and having two ‘urbanised’ children with very loose ties to cultural groups, I found that they didn’t get as much out of some of the texts as may have been expected. However by having a large number of books with Indigenous people (characters) probably changed their perception of books and of reading and writing. T in particular responded well to the Indigenous characters. It encouraged him to discuss the books more and to initiate conversations about his own experiences. This was a big success as in the past he was very timid about speaking and reluctant to talk about his life outside school. Having the books may have put more value on his lifestyle in his eyes.

Reading Recovery Teacher’s Comment (Working with a Rural Indigenous student):
J has expressed enjoyment and interest in many of the new texts. Some books have provided the

impetus for comments which reflect an understanding of his Indigenous background. During 'The Aboriginal Dance Troupe', J commented that Aboriginal women were not allowed to play the didgeridoo. [Also] he's commented on the Aboriginal illustrations in some texts. In these beginning weeks J's attitude and motivation have been [positively] responsive to the new texts.

Common among the teachers' comments, regardless of geographic location, were observations that Indigenous students' participation improved when aspects of their culture were realistically acknowledged and their identity was positively affirmed. Comments pertaining to spontaneous child-initiated conversation were also noted. The provision of literature that authenticates Indigenous students' world imparts a sense of worth and covertly affirms to these students that literature has value for them as individuals.

The third research question explored **the measurable effect the employment of the trial set of culturally relevant print-based SAE texts and framework for interaction had on the length of time a sample group of Indigenous students spent in the Reading Recovery program.** The research method involved quantitative and qualitative data collection from three groups of students who were matched according to ethnicity, sex, age, reading and writing profile. These profiles were based on the Clay Observation Survey tasks that were administered to Reading Recovery students pre- and post-intervention.

Despite the small sample size of 17 Reading Recovery Teachers who worked with 38 students across 13 schools, three sets of preliminary findings emerged. The first set of findings related to the students' time in the Reading Recovery Program. Students from sample one (students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had no access to the trial texts or to a culturally responsive interaction framework) took a full 20 weeks to catch up to their 'average' peers and exit the Reading Recovery Program. In contrast, students from sample two (students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had access to the trial texts only) took on average 18.5 weeks to catch up to their 'average' peers, some 1.5 weeks less than sample one. This compared to 16.5 weeks on the program for sample three students (students whose Reading Recovery Teacher had access to the trial texts and professional development training in a culturally responsive interaction framework), a 3.5 week reduction on sample one participants.

The second set of preliminary findings related to Teacher prompting and student reading errors. Students who used the trial texts, that is, students from samples two and three, required less prompting from their Reading Recovery Teacher than when other texts were used. The third preliminary finding was that Teachers from remote schools and community schools considered the trial texts were more culturally relevant to their students than did Teachers from urban schools.

While it would be advantageous to repeat this research with a more significant sample size, the data suggests the validity and feasibility of providing culturally relevant texts and professional development training in Grant's (1998) holistic framework to classroom and Reading Recovery Teachers who work with at-risk Indigenous students.

In terms of the qualitative data collected by the project team, a range of opinions were recorded. The research team found that Reading Recovery Teachers who had access to the trial texts and who had participated in professional development training in Grant's (1998) holistic framework rated the texts more highly. The following quotes were typical.

Reading Recovery Teacher's Comment: Wow! Out of all my students, M has responded best to research texts. He always chooses them to take home to read plus I've had notes from his Mum saying how much more he is enjoying reading now.

Reading Recovery Teacher's Comment: X responded well to most research texts with some favourites emerging. He will choose these books to read back in the classroom quite frequently. Classroom teachers and my Reading Recovery Tutor at an observed lesson have remarked on his enjoyment of texts.

Reading Recovery Teacher's Comment: Y was really motivated to progress, was actively involved in stories and loves Indigenous Text Project books. [Y] asked lots of questions about [the books].

Conclusion

This research project suggests that there is much to gain from working with the learning community; that is, with the students themselves, their Reading Recovery teachers, Indigenous elders, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers and artists. This project has shown how this learning community has been able to produce culturally relevant texts and employ a culturally relevant framework for interaction between Indigenous students and their Reading Recovery teachers that has measurable benefits for the students' literacy progress. Such differences are important for they help to set up Indigenous students' access to life chances and life choices. While this project does not suggest that at-risk Indigenous students should be given culturally relevant texts exclusively, it does point to the need for those working with culturally diverse students to continue to cast a critical lens on the appropriateness of resources and teaching interactions to ensure that they are providing the most effective teaching experiences.

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Indigenous Early Readers now available through EQ Shop

Education Queensland is pleased to release Set 1 of the Indigenous Early Readers series. A limited number of the trialled readers have been selected for print and can be purchased through EQ Shop Online
<education.qld.gov.au/marketing/promotion/advertising/accessed/early-readers.html> Multi-title ten packs are available from \$64.95 (plus GST) and single-title four packs are priced from \$28.95 (plus GST).