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# A Study of Patterns of Participation of Arnhem Land Aboriginal Students in a Non-Aboriginal Urban Secondary School

Sally Ashton-Hay describes the learning experiences of a group of Aboriginal students from Arnhem Land.

Aboriginal students are identified as one of the groups most at risk in Australia today. They have low levels of achievement and school retention coupled with high levels of failure, absenteeism and behaviour problems. All available statistics support this perspective (National Review 1994 in Groome 1995:70). DEET (1991:165) also recognises the need for further research and material and curriculum preparation for the specific English language educational needs of Aboriginal learners.

Although our education system is largely failing Aboriginal learners, this project documents evidence of success. It is a study of four Aboriginal girls from a remote area of Arnhem Land who are learning ESL in a non-Aboriginal urban private secondary school on the Gold Coast. Even though the school accepts some international enrolments, staff have little experience or understanding of Aboriginal learners in this situation, including the researcher.

The purpose of the study was to identify patterns of participation reflected by Aboriginal students in a non-Aboriginal learning environment. Participation in the context of this study means to share, become actively involved in or take part in their school education. Although this report is condensed, the discussion of data is designed to assist ESL and mainstream teachers to meet the needs of similar students in such learning contexts.

The NLLIA ESL Bandscales (McKay, Hudson and Sapuppo 1993) provided a reference for monitoring the students' ESL proficiency. A summary of data collected relates to the following key points: patterns of

participation, avoidance strategies, and successful tasks. The study is told from the perspective of a 'Balanda', or white European, teacher and any offence caused is unintentional.

## Methodology

Diary studies recorded over a six-month period detail how four Aboriginal students participated, learned and

documented what constituted success for them in a non-Aboriginal school environment. Close observations were made in three settings:

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- English as a Second Language classtime
- ATAS (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assistance Scheme) DEET tutoring time
- during general school activities.

Video tapes were made of senior students working in selected mainstream classes, the four students on excursions and a general interview session with all the girls.

Although mainstream teachers were interviewed, samples of work assignments collected and literature reviewed, these aspects of the study will not be included here. The methodology also entailed a visit to the homeland community and several outstations in Arnhem Land.

## Description of the Students

The following descriptions provide information about two senior and two junior female Aboriginal students from a traditional environment. This section also provides an individual placement reference according

to the NLLIA ESL Bandscales and offers some brief comment about the individual's present participation patterns and English skills.

## Junior students

### Student Y

Student Y is 18 years of age and has repeated Year 9. She rarely spoke last year, never in front of a class and was unable to make a presentation or complete set tasks and homework. She is shy and often spends time in class copying from the text and then rubbing out. Initially, Y read at 1B level according to the NLLIA Bandscales although she has moved into a 2 and appears to be consolidating those skills through contextually-enhanced support (e.g., with pictures).

In attempts to assist Y's movement into the next stage (McKay and Scarino 1993), she was sent on various 'missions'. Some of these missions involved borrowing scissors, getting a needle and thread or making a photocopy. The missions were pre-planned with other teachers involved (favourite teachers of Y also) so that full support could be offered. After initial noun items were asked for, adjectival descriptors were added for greater complexity. She was required to ask for a sheet of light blue paper, some very strong glue and so forth. This step was instrumental in assisting Y's passage into a more participative, communicative stage.

### Student W

In contrast, student W is 15 years of age and new this year. She became Y's 'shepherd'. They attended all classes and worked together. W has a stronger foundation of basic literacy and numeracy skills in English which gives her greater confidence to express herself. She is a 4 in listening and speaking and moving into a 4 in reading and writing. She is able to gain essential information from straightforward, factual texts if they do not contain too much cultural content.

## Senior Students

### Student G

Student G is 19 years of age and enrolled in subjects which were activity based, thus indicating her preferred learning style. She liked Catering because she could cook; Art because she could draw and paint; ESL because there were games and some excursions; Communications because she could

practise keyboarding skills and Health and Physical Education (HPE) because she could play basketball.

G is mostly a 5 on the NLLIA Bandscales and appears to have reached a plateau in her learning. She keeps to safe areas of speaking and requires support in writing tasks. Her understanding of verb tenses and punctuation is uneven, as she does not

often capitalise the beginning of new sentences. She has difficulty with spelling and this also impedes her writing. The visual aspect of learning was important to her. For instance, she often asked "Please write down the questions so I can see them to answer." This importance became clear as I realised what a skilled hunter she was in her homeland environment, able to track and find all sorts of food.

### Student D

The other senior girl, student D, is between 6 and 7 in most skills. Her reading and writing are more on a 6 level as she struggled with informationally dense material and sophisticated vocabulary. She was becoming independent in her writing but still required some support to substantiate her arguments, prevent repetition and extend her vocabulary. D has well developed skills, is socially competent and generally the leader and spokesperson of all the girls in this group.

D had ambitions to graduate, enter university and eventually return home to help her people. She believed education was the key to helping her community. Both senior girls graduated and made

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## Patterns of Participation

The following patterns of participation emerged during the six months of diary studies and classroom observations.

- **Clannishness**

The four Aboriginal girls stuck together and supported one another throughout their studies and activities in school. They preferred to speak in their mother tongue and were somewhat hesitant about speaking in front of Balandas. After we began to know each other better they spoke more frequently in front of me and even taught me a few expressions.

Culturally, it seems important for a female learner to have another Aboriginal female to attend classes with and share the work. Y improved greatly with the addition of student W in her year level. Groome (1995:25) stresses the allegiance to kin. It appears that one student may 'shepherd' the other through school. The shepherd may not be the high achiever but rather the companion for the higher achiever.

- **Frustrations with Studies**

All of the Aboriginal girls experienced frustrations with their studies for several reasons. One is that they did not understand the "big words". Another is they didn't know how to set work out. They had little understanding or knowledge of genre styles and textual features. An example of this occurred when student W came and asked for assistance with her English assignment. She told me she was required to give a speech. I asked her to come in at lunch and we could put some ideas together. She still looked very confused and then asked, "But what's a SPEECH?"

The senior girls had difficulty with lexically dense texts. Often, they did not understand large words and had problems choosing precise vocabulary for their senior essays. At times, they became repetitive without adding any new evidence or illustrative examples. Student D was more attentive to the

nuances of language and once asked, "What is the difference between effect and affect?" When this was explained, she thought for a moment and then chose appropriately.

The junior girls lacked persistence and continuity in task completion. Homework was set but by the next lesson nothing further had been done. As well, notes, worksheets, mind maps, schemata, tables and graphs previously examined were lost and work had to begin

again from scratch. The juniors were reminded to use their school diaries and host parents were also notified to assist in this regard. I began to wonder if this was a kind of anti-participation pattern to keep the actual task at bay and

prevent completion of an uncertain activity or if the girls really did not understand the expectations and/or how to go about task completion. This did not generally happen with the senior girls.

- **Preference for Senior Female Teachers**

The Aboriginal girls stated in their video interview that they preferred senior or older female teachers. This seems to be a cultural preference as they are not allowed to be tutored by any male teachers unless they are in a group together and with a female teacher. The senior females of the clan are more experienced and respected. Females have more business together in the traditional lifestyle such as gathering certain types of food, preparing and cooking it and nurturing the younger members of the clan.

Eades (1991) discusses the wisdom and power attributed to older people in Aboriginal culture. The Northern Territory Department of Education also states that in Aboriginal society, children are expected to "learn from older, wiser people" (p. 12). Christie (1985) discusses how Aboriginal children learn through participation in the day-to-day activities of their families.

During the gathering of information for this research, one incident highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity. Two of the junior girls absented themselves from a physical education class because of its dancing component. Upon investigation of the reason for the absence, there was a reaction by the girls of shame

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and loss of eye contact. Further discussions revealed that it was not appropriate for young girls to be with boys or touch them. Usually at home, the girls played separate sport and are not used to being with boys in their culture. The girls would be allowed to dance as partners themselves, but not partnered by boys. The students asked me to explain this to their male teacher.

- **Preferred Learning Style**

As mentioned previously, the senior girls expressed a preference for practical classes. This is obviously a more successful way for these students to learn through kinesthetic, spatial and visual learning modes. It is also compatible with The Northern Territory Department of Education documentation on the differences

between learning in European society and Aboriginal society (1988). European society and learning involves "learn by being told" whereas Aboriginal society and learning involves "learn by doing". In European society, students are also "expected to learn by themselves" while Aboriginal society respects age and wisdom.

One learning strategy was to relate a task to their own culture and thereby draw on existing knowledge to make it more meaningful and appropriate. The girls also enjoyed an opportunity to use some of their own language, Djambarrpuyngu, in school tasks.

- **Nominal Imperatives**

Student W, in particular, used this pattern of participation to great effect. Often she would say, "Sheet!" when she required a sheet of paper. Other imperatives included "whiteout", "rubber", "scissors", and "paper". W was capable of expressing her needs in complete sentences and a bit of playful reminding would often bring about a more appropriate request as well as ensure an harmonious relationship.

Teachers can use humour to enhance or denigrate individual status and reinforce an ethos of cordiality. Used in this positive way, humour was found to be a very effective and satisfying means of developing relationships with these Aboriginal students. Hudspith (1994:26) discusses the power of humour in creating

and maintaining affable relationships within classroom groups.

- **Nurturing**

The girls shared one another's tasks. The seniors looked after the juniors and often drew artistic designs to enhance their work, typed assignments on the computer for them, made suggestions and offered help. This was a most important part of their

relationship and the means by which they supported each other, especially in another environment. This pattern aligns with Malin's (1990) and Groome's (1995) findings on nurturant attitudes.

- **Peer Problems**

The junior girls had some difficulties with male

students in their year 9 level. The boys apparently made unkind remarks and laughed at their rehearsals for recitation in front of the English class. This resulted in their refusal to recite in front of the male members of the class. A special consideration was made and, as a result, the girls recited "The Ancient Mariner" for the females only.

- **Avoidance Strategies**

Several avoidance strategies were used during the data gathering.

### *Rubbing Out and The Rubber*

This was a technique used to appear busy, by keeping the head down, thereby avoiding eye contact with teachers and the possibility of being called upon. Student Y copied text which she could not understand because her literacy set was as yet undeveloped. The purpose of this pattern of behaviour seemed to be to avoid participation in educational experiences which caused uncertainty and insecurity.

This particular pattern of behaviour was more evident in the junior girls. They spent a short time writing something, copying notes or sentences from a text and a rather long time rubbing them out. This seemed to mask the fact that they did not understand what to do or how to do it. It also tended to support Malin's (1990) notion of invisibility in a classroom. The rubber

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was also shared as a kind of bond and security symbol. The rubber became increasingly important as the degree of difficulty in work increased.

### *Lack of Completion of Assignments*

Another avoidance strategy used by the junior girls was the lack of continuation and/or persistence with some lesson materials. These were continually forgotten or lost. In addition, due dates for assignments were not always met. This avoidance strategy could have been the result of the mismatch in the educational environment and requirements. On my visit to homeland schools, it was a very different situation. There was no homework, no assignments and little pressure to complete set work. This pattern possibly indicated that these students did not really understand how to participate successfully, and thus required more time to understand the expectations, educational system and culture.

### *Non-Attendance*

The other avoidance strategy used by the junior girls was non-attendance in the class that threatened their law or cultural standards (i.e. the HPE class). Rather than confronting the male teacher or being explicit about the situation, the girls chose to withdraw from that class and attend ESL instead. Perhaps this was because they felt protected in ESL with a senior female teacher or it may just have been a soft option. All of these strategies were also used more frequently by the junior girls than the senior girls.

### **Successful Tasks**

Having described these avoidance strategies, it is necessary to emphasise that, on the whole, there were successes due to a combination of factors. These included: literature reviews, the detailed diary studies and reflective thinking about the participation patterns of these Aboriginal girls. Time and trust (Ashmore 1993) gradually developed over the duration of this project which caused some positive changes in the nature of the interactions.

One of the most successful tasks was the magazine project for Year 9 English. The junior girls finally decided to design their own BUSH TUCKER magazine and include aspects of their own cultural heritage. Once the theme had been decided, the task became easier because they could relate to it through aspects of their own knowledge. The component generic parts then became the stumbling block. This

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was overcome with patience, a sense of humour, trial and error, explanations and modelling. Most of all, the use of familiar subject matter, especially that dealing with Aboriginality, motivated the girls.

Curriculum which involved Aboriginal voices and/or popular role models such as Cathy Freeman or Christine

Anu constituted another success. The students' interest peaked and both groups of girls really became engaged in their learning experiences. They enjoyed Aboriginal songs, biographies, art, history, stories, writing their own stories with Aboriginal dreaming, Australian animals, and any material about Australia in general. The girls really enjoyed getting out on excursions.

One of those excursions was a hunting trip. The Aboriginal girls offered to teach other ESL students how to hunt for bush food. This was an exciting experience and the girls were very proud to share their special knowledge. They taught others how and where to look for mangrove worms, periwinkles and mud crabs.

Successful participation tasks for the senior girls involved completion of major essays. Vocabulary, punctuation, generic and textual features, elaboration and details were refined over and over. The seniors were diligent, accepted criticism and made necessary adjustments in their own time. D began receiving VHA (Very High Achievement) assessments for her work which pleased her immensely.

Perhaps the greatest success of all was when the seniors graduated and made history. This was the first time anyone of their clan had graduated from high school. It was a tremendous achievement after four years in a non-Aboriginal urban secondary school.

## **Conclusion**

The project was a valuable experience for those involved. A deeper understanding of the cultural clashes which cause difficulties between Aboriginal and Anglo education today was generated. Patterns of participation have been identified and related to other researchers' findings. These involved avoidance strategies as well as successful tasks in learning. These successful experiences indicate that mismatches between educational expectations and culture need not prevent favourable educational outcomes. This study should assist and encourage other ESL and mainstream teachers to meet the needs of similar learners and encourage further successful patterns of participation.

## **Recommendations**

It is appropriate to close with some recommendations for ESL and mainstream teachers who may be interested in meeting the needs of similar Aboriginal learners in such contexts.

### **1. BE AWARE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.**

This is an area easily overlooked and/or taken for granted. There are major cultural differences which contribute to mismatches in education and communication. Read literature, attend and promote inservice programs, share with others and note student behaviours.

### **2. BE SUPPORTIVE IN CLASSROOM AND LEARNING SITUATIONS.**

Ensure visibility and avenues for participation in classrooms and schools. Be sure to include lots of modelling, examples and illustrations. Encourage students, take time to develop a personal relationship of trust and use humour in a positive manner.

### **3. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO SHARE ASPECTS OF THEIR OWN CULTURE AND VALUE THIS KNOWLEDGE.**

Include Aboriginal voices in units of work, assignments, in class and around the school. Involve visiting Aboriginal speakers, cultural groups and/or go on excursions which affirm Aboriginality. Students may wish to share culture through class discussion, art, teaching others special knowledge or performing dances for assembly during a cultural week at school. Try to find ways to encourage this sharing.

### **4. DESIGN APPROPRIATE TASKS TO ENABLE STUDENTS TO UTILISE AND DRAW UPON THEIR OWN HERITAGE AS WELL AS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR OWN CULTURE.**

Include examples of successful and popular role models (Cathy Freeman, Christine Anu, Ernie Dingo) and use songs, poetry, drama, stories, sport, art etc. Discuss Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander issues and achievements.

### **5. DESIGN APPROPRIATE TASKS AND ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT FAVOURED LEARNING STYLES.**

Include activities such as word guessing games; treasure hunts; map exercises; computer assisted language learning activities such as games, text writing, exercises and other software such as Talking Book, Interactive Picture Dictionary, etc.. Allow time for aesthetic expression and excursions.

### **6. UNDERSTAND THE USE OF AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES.**

Note the patterns of participation in class and around the school, conference with mainstream teachers and try to assist students to move beyond stages where they may plateau. Encourage active participation through interactive and activity-based methodology.

### **7. PROVIDE EXTRA TIME FOR MODELLING, EXPLAINING, GIVING PLENTY OF EXAMPLES AND ACTIVITIES WHICH ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING OF WESTERN WRITTEN CULTURAL GENRES.**

Teachers may assume that all students understand what a "speech" is, for example, when in fact they do not. It may be helpful to backchain and re-check comprehension in junior students particularly.

### **8. KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR SUCCESSFUL AND ENGAGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND TRY TO BUILD ON THOSE EXPERIENCES.**

Interface familiar, or Aboriginal, subject matter which links aspects of heritage to learning experiences. Note activities which engage learners and try to design lessons involving similar subject matter or learning styles. Include and value opportunities for students to use their native mother tongue or Yolngu Matha language.

**9. TAKE TIME TO DEVELOP TRUST AND NURTURE IT. USE HUMOUR IN A POSITIVE MANNER WHICH ENHANCES RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN CLASS GROUPS.**

Aboriginal students need to know that a teacher can be trusted, cares and wants to assist with their learning. Humour can aid in removing barriers, opening avenues for deeper relationships and in developing a sense of trust.

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