

This is the first edition of the School of Education UNE Research Series. This series is designed to share current educational research with professional colleagues. Co-editors Dr Izabel Soliman and Dr Judy Miller welcome feedback on this edition and on suggested content for issues 2, 3 and 4 in 2005. We can be contacted on email isoliman@une.edu.au and jmiller7@une.edu.au.

In addition to feedback on the relevance of this series, we are keen to hear from colleagues regarding Professional Development Offerings by Academic Staff of the School of Education.

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What's New at the School of Education?

Professional Development Offerings:

PDHPE HSC Enrichment Day held at UNE June 22nd 2005.
Contact Mr John Haynes (02) 6773 5091 or jhaynes2@une.edu.au

Research in Progress:

Dr K. Afamasaga-Fuata'i, Dr D. Brien, Dr T. Brown, Dr H. de Ferranti, *Balancing career paths.*

Dr N. Harrison, *Secret Transmissions: The relationship between learning and teaching at university.*

Dr Cathryn McConaghy, Dr Lorraine Graham, Dr David Paterson, Di Bloomfield, Linley Lloyd, Kathy Jenkins, Dr Judy Miller, Dr Gerry Corrigan, Dr Neil Taylor, Dr Joy Hardy, *Bush Tracks: An Investigation of Rural Teaching Transitions.*

Dr Joy Hardy, *Fears and Desires in Australian Environmental Education.*

Dr Gerry Corrigan, Ms Kathy Jenkins, Dr Neil Taylor, Mr Jonathon Sargeant, *Pedagogical efficacy of beginning primary teachers of science and technology.*

Dr Izabel Soliman, *Perceptions of Teaching for Intellectual Quality in the Middle Years of Schooling.*

Dr Judy Miller, Mr John Haynes, *Measurement of the effectiveness of a developmentally based physical education curriculum for students from Transition to Year 10 schooling years.*

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INCORPORATING ABORIGINAL ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This research is based on interviews with Aboriginal adults about their experiences at school. Over a series of three extended interviews, each participant identified four key points about their learning and teaching experiences: firstly, they were motivated by their relationship to the teacher, secondly, they were concerned about being judged and misinterpreted at school, thirdly, they were often torn between the demands of home and school, and most importantly, they suggested that Aboriginal English can play a powerful role in producing successful outcomes for Aboriginal students. It should also be noted that each participant in this research went on to study at university.

INTRODUCTION

Following twelve years in Aboriginal education as a primary and secondary teacher, I decided to undertake research to find out how I could improve the learning outcomes for Aboriginal students in my classroom. I conducted a series of interviews with nine Aboriginal students at university about their experiences at school. What did I discover from this research? There were four key findings related to the students in this project (see Harrison 2004a, 2004b).

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Aboriginal students work for the teacher not because he or she is an authority, but because they respect him or her.
2. Aboriginal students can 'turn off' school because they think the teacher or other students are judging them.
3. Aboriginal students sometimes have obligations to family that may override their commitment to school.
4. Most students need to be able to see themselves in the language of the classroom. One way in which Aboriginal students can do this is through the inclusion of Aboriginal English in the program.

I will expand on each of these in the following pages.

1 The teacher's style

Aboriginal students are motivated by the teacher's style and by whether they like and respect him or her. This research shows that successful learning for both the student and teacher is not a consequence of a good theory or method but the product of an unconscious influence of the teacher's speaking style upon the pupil. Hudspith (1997, p. 99) reports that what really counts is that the teacher talks to the child in a nice, kind and calm manner, which makes him or her feel relaxed. That is, many Aboriginal students are motivated by their relationship to the teacher as much as they are by the lesson content and appropriate teaching methods.

But of course things are never as easy as this. While Aboriginal students are motivated by the teacher's personality and style, they have also learned from history to fear the teacher as an authority. They have learned to be suspicious of the teacher through stories from their parents and friends as well as through direct experience with teachers who 'sound like they know a lot' and speak 'proper English'. Teachers can do two things here. Firstly, they can avoid acting and sounding like an authority when speaking with Aboriginal students. Secondly, teachers can incorporate the use of Aboriginal English in their classrooms, but more about this under point four below.

2 The teacher's judgements

Many Aboriginal students can be deterred from participating in class because they think the teacher or other students are judging them. This is understandable given that Aboriginal students hear so many stories from their parents and relations about how they have been judged in the past. My research indicated that many Aboriginal people have been trained through these stories to feel like they are never good enough. Furthermore, the students say that after a while, these judgements can become internalised to the point where they think that people are judging them irrespective of whether that is the case in reality. The judgements are always there in the student's mind and that can discourage them from talking in the classroom (Harrison 2004). Aboriginal students also learn very quickly that the teacher is assessing and judging their academic and personal performance, and they know that records are kept and passed from one teacher to the next, even if the next teacher does not know that child. Their perceptions and fears are reinforced when teachers talk about knowledge as if it has always been there as an objective fact in 'the world'. However, my research indicates that if Aboriginal students can use Aboriginal English in the classroom, they feel more confident about playing an active role in learning and they are also less self-conscious about making mistakes in front of the teacher and other speakers of Standard Australian English. I will return to this in point four below.

3 Obligations to family

Aboriginal students sometimes have obligations to family that may override their commitment to school. For example, Aboriginal children at primary school are sometimes required by their parents to stay home and look after a younger sibling, or to do the shopping. Some students sometimes feel torn between what they want for themselves and what other people (family and teachers) want for them. As teachers, we should not necessarily assume that education comes first in the lives of all students, rather obligations at home to cook and look after the siblings may be the first priority for some Aboriginal families. Of course, teachers should always expect a high level of academic achievement from all their students.

4 Self-recognition and Aboriginal English

My research indicates that Aboriginal students want academic skills, but they also want to maintain an identity outside the system. One way in which Aboriginal students can do this is through the inclusion of Aboriginal English in the classroom (see Board of Studies NSW 1995, Harrison, 2004b). I found that when Aboriginal students are able to speak Aboriginal English in the classroom, it helped them to relax and to engage in humour which they could not otherwise produce through the use of Australian Standard English. When students are at ease with themselves and others they can then concentrate on the knowledge and skills to be learned. As a researcher, I learned from the participants that when teachers

take Aboriginal English out of the classroom equation, they also take much of the enjoyment and humour out of the learning for Aboriginal students.

The teacher can encourage the use Aboriginal English initially through one-on-one discussions with Aboriginal students, and once they believe that it is acceptable to use their home language in the classroom, it can then be promoted in many other ways, such as the following:

- telling stories during News Time for primary students
- recalls, and oral and written narratives
- talking about family and community
- looking for other ways of seeking information from students apart from asking questions
- teaching all students the grammatical and semantic differences between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English.

Finally, students need to know when they can speak and write in Aboriginal English and when they should speak and write in Australian Standard English. The two contexts need to be clearly defined for Aboriginal students so that they do not mix the two. Meanwhile, non-Indigenous students learn that Aboriginal English is valued inside and outside the classroom by the school and its teachers when its practice is encouraged.

SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

Video: New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996, *A Place of Belonging: Working with Aboriginal English*, Aboriginal Education Unit, Sydney.

Board of Studies NSW, 1997, *Big Mob Books for Little Fullas: Emergent readers kit*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney.

Board of Studies NSW, 1995, *Aboriginal Literacy Resource Kit*, Aboriginal Curriculum Unit, Sydney.

Harrison, N. 2004a, *Indigenous Education and the Adventure of Insight: Learning and Teaching in Indigenous Classrooms*, Flaxton Press, Brisbane.

Harrison, N. 2004b. Self-Recognition and Well-Being: Speaking Aboriginal English in Healthy Classrooms, *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 33, pp. 7-13.

Hudspith, S. 1997, 'Visible pedagogy and urban Aboriginal students', in *Indigenous Education: Historical, Moral and Practical Tales*, eds S. Harris and M. Malin, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin.

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