

Paper presented at the Aboriginal Education Literacy Conference, Adelaide, South Australia, April 27/28, 2000.

Professor Paul Hughes AM, - Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research, Flinders University of South Australia.

'RESEARCH, OUTCOMES AND ACTION IN PRIMARY ABORIGINAL LITERACY'

INTRODUCTION - WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY

We all know that there is a need in all schools for programs and strategies which will enhance the opportunities for English literacy development among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. As an Aboriginal person who has been involved in both policy development and service delivery I want to reflect on the research done and comment upon actions suggested.

As I was intimately involved in both of them I want to draw liberally on the reports of two major projects that investigated this area:

- 1) 'Enhancing English Literacy Skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students' by Margaret Batten, Tracey Frigo, Paul Hughes and Natascha McNamara done for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), plus,
- 2) 'What works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students', and:
- 3) 'Education and Training for Indigenous Students - What has worked (and will again)' by David McRae, Geoff Ainsworth, Jim Cumming, Paul Hughes, Tony Mackay, Kay Price, Mike Rowland, Joan Warhurst, Davina Woods and Vic Zbar done for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).

The DETYA project was part of the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program and is more commonly referred to as the SRPs, that is the Strategic Results Projects.

I particularly draw my base from a paper presented by Ms Tracey Frigo and myself for this presentation, namely - 'Indigenous Primary School Students Developing English Literacy Skills', at the AARE Conference, Adelaide, South Australia, 29 November - 3 December 1998.

What does the Student Achievement Data say?

The available research data from 1990 on would support the view that the Australian education systems and the Indigenous community, have not succeeded in lifting the performance levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in English literacy to an acceptable level yet. The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1994) reported from a specially commissioned project undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) that at all levels, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not achieve as well as non-Indigenous students. The meta-analysis of literacy and numeracy achievement in primary schools produced the following results:

- *one in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve at levels above the average for students as a whole;*
- *overall, about 45 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have significantly lower levels of achievement compared to about 16 per cent of other Australian students.*

In 1996 a National School English Literacy Survey (NSELS) was undertaken with a nationally representative sample of Year 3 and Year 5 students (7454 students in 379 schools) and a special Indigenous sample of Year 3 and Year 5 students (800 students in 51 schools). The definition of literacy used in the Survey was broadly based, covering reading, viewing, writing, speaking and listening, in line with the English profile framework. Student performance was assessed on a set of integrated tasks in each of the five areas. The performance of the Special Indigenous Sample was reported as follows:

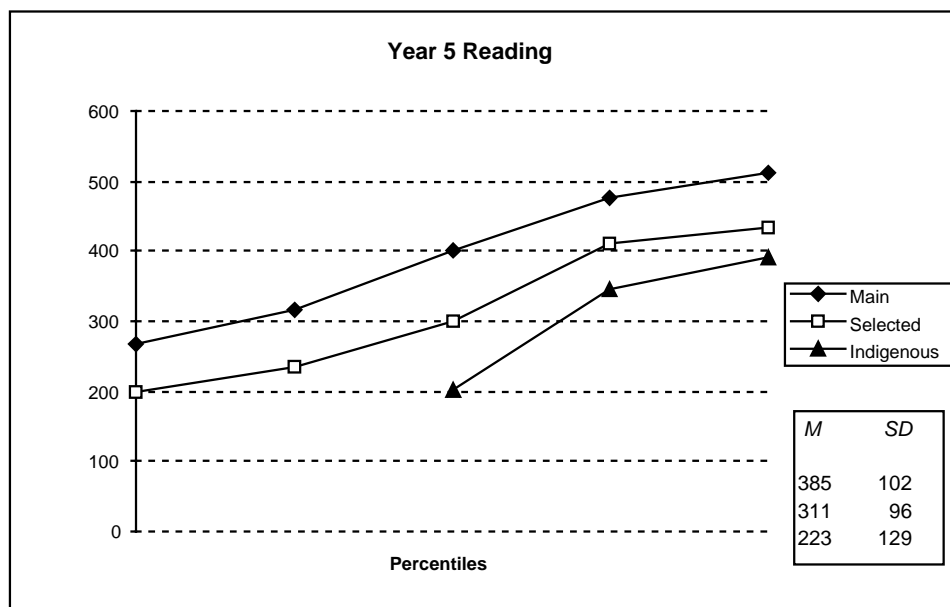
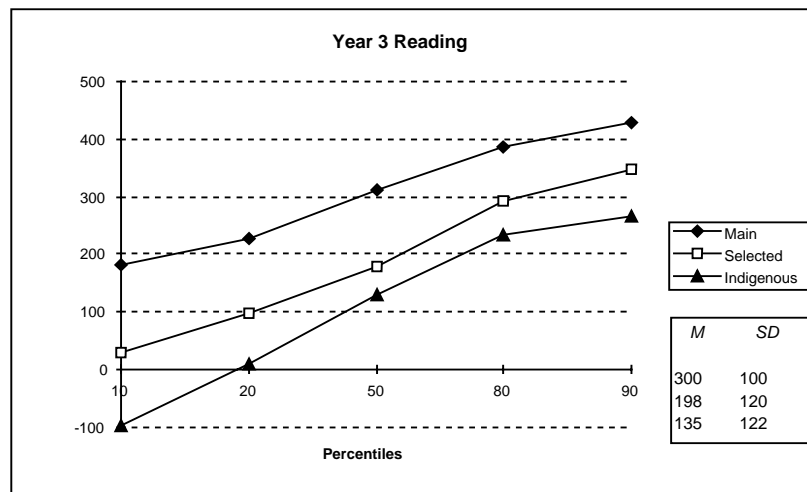
Students in the Special Indigenous Sample (drawn from schools with at least five Indigenous students in each of Years 3 and 5) have very low average levels of English literacy achievement (3 to 4 grade levels below the students in the main sample). . . At both Year 3 and Year 5, there is a considerable difference between the literacy achievements of the lowest and highest achieving students in the Special Indigenous Sample . . . students with very low levels of literacy skill in Year 3 make little or no progress over the following two years. (Masters and Forster, 1997)

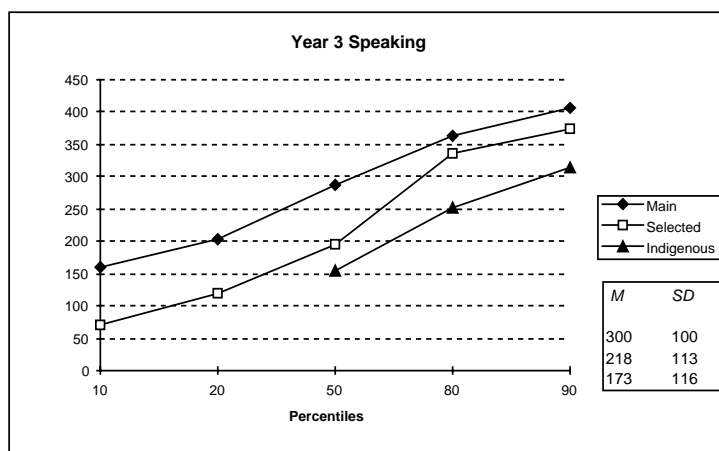
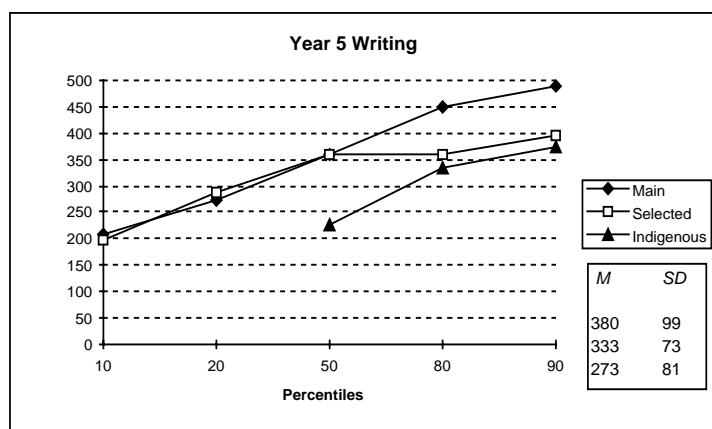
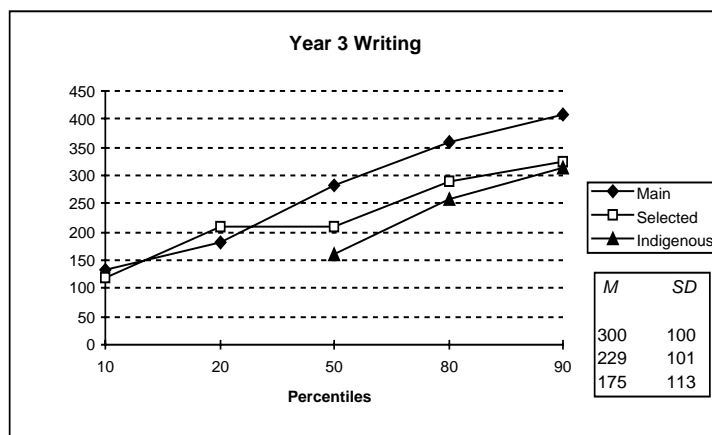
In 1997 ACER conducted another research project that would report on the literacy programs and teaching strategies used in twelve primary schools where it was believed that Indigenous students performed better than average on literacy tasks than recorded in the NSELS Special Indigenous Sample survey. We were trying to find schools with good outcomes and report how that could be achieved in other schools. Again the same criterion of literacy and measurement scales used in the NSELS Survey was used again to give authentic comparisons.

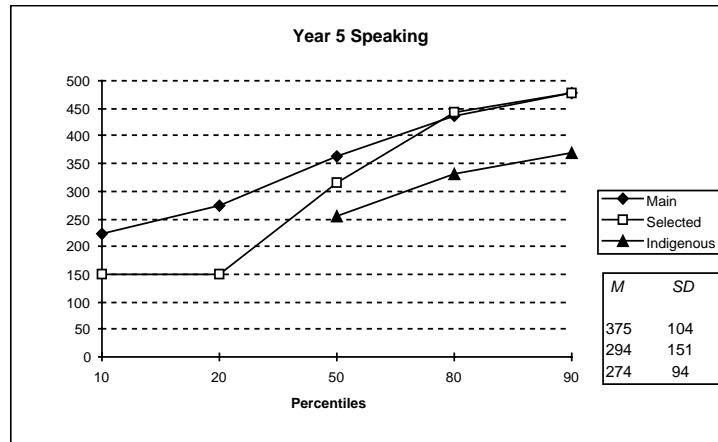
With the help of education departments and Catholic Education Offices, 12 primary schools were selected to take part in the case studies. These were schools which, on the basis of state-wide testing and knowledge of individual school practices, were considered to have programs which provided for the enhancement of the English literacy development of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Three schools were selected from each of Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales.

School profiles were compiled primarily from information obtained through interviews with the school principals and other people in leadership positions who were able to give a broad overview of the operation of each school. The main emphasis in the principals' interviews was on school policy and programs as they related to the literacy development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Further interviews were held with each teacher of the classes and the AIEWs. Two Indigenous researchers, myself and Ms Natascha MacNamara (University of Wollongong), conducted the interviews. The interview summaries of our visits provided great depth and a number of qualitative research insights into the operation of the schools.

Much rich data was collected on teacher and school background as well as the literacy habits of the students, which can be found in the full report, and I will comment on it later. However for this paper I want to particularly highlight the outcomes in reading, writing and speaking based on using the NSELS scales as follows:







It can be easily seen that even in the 'selected best schools' the outcomes of Indigenous students was clearly below the general averages.

What does the literature say?

Despite this gloomy performance picture on a national scale, there were numerous instances quoted in the literature reviewed to 1998 in the ACER project of smaller scale successes. These include descriptions of programs and strategies that have brought about improved academic outcomes in individual schools or groups of schools, and descriptions of teaching strategies that have been found to be of use in enhancing the performance of Aboriginal students in reading, viewing, writing, speaking and listening.

The Strategic Results Projects conducted in 1999 for DETYA have added some more rich data to this collection. Whilst the SRPs could not be classed as detailed research they were monitored and conducted as a form of action research. Their greatest contribution to our knowledge base comes in the form of those involved documenting what they set out to do, how it went and analysing the outcomes. Whilst many of us in 'the business' continually talk about what we do, we have never documented it on the scale done in the SRPs. Of the 83 projects however only seven had literacy as their primary concern and four others were literacy related covering health matters and literacy or language learning resources.

From here on in this paper I want to report in some detail on what we found out from the teachers, schools and students in the ACER project and add to it with comments on what we found in the SRPs. For the first time in the history of Aboriginal Education we have a store of real knowledge drawn from those who actually do the teaching and learning. However it must be noted that I am discussing all of this in a general way with some specifics added from the above projects. Clearly there is a myriad of local situations and actions that have local and human affects and can either support or hinder what happens. I do hope though that what I present as an Aboriginal person with some experience in 'the business' can contribute to base knowledge in this area.

THE MAJOR FACTORS IN WHAT CALL 'APPROPRIATE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING'

All the schools in both the ACER study and the SRPs were well aware that their Aboriginal students struggled to acquire English literacy skills and that their performance levels were too often below those of non-Aboriginal students. The success of the schools lies in the concerted efforts they were making to find ways of engaging their Aboriginal students in learning and enhancing their literacy performance.

Three positive operational characteristics that could be identified in all the schools were:

- the degree of pastoral care and support afforded to Aboriginal students;
- the awareness of and respect for Aboriginal culture; and
- the schools' educational priorities.

The degree of pastoral care and support afforded to Aboriginal students:

The pastoral care of students took many forms. There were practical initiatives such as breakfast programs, to give students the energy to undertake the morning's educational program because it was in the morning that most of the focused literacy work was done. Homework centres were introduced in some schools so those Aboriginal students could do their work in a supervised and supportive environment. Bus services sometimes operated in order to reduce the rate of absenteeism of Aboriginal students.

One of the most important forms of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students came from the AIEW, who provided the link between home and school and supported the children's learning in the classroom. One of the interviewers in the ACER study reported on a conversation with an AIEW who commented on the change that had taken place in her approach to home-school liaison:

The AIEW said that she had previously been seen as the person with the big stick who visited the parents when the children were in trouble. She was now moving to visit the parents when something good was happening or just to drop in occasionally.

The school, in which this AIEW worked, was involved in a pilot program that was attempting to improve the effectiveness of the care and support of students. Another of the case study schools, participated in a pilot program, called the Inter-Agency School-Community Centres Project, a joint initiative of the New South Wales Departments of School Education and Health and Community Services. The project is designed to develop and test models of inter-agency coordination to support families with children five years of age and under, with the view to preventing disadvantage at school entry. The aim is to work with families to encourage and support them in their parenting role, to actively promote community involvement in the provision of services for children, and to encourage and assist parents to access services.

In all of the above the AIEWs were critical to the process a both advocates and educationalists. The same can be said for all of the SRPs.

The awareness of and respect for Aboriginal culture

The second of the features, which characterised all of the schools, was an acknowledgment of the need to recognise the cultural and linguistic context of their Aboriginal students as an adjunct to their school learning. The principals and staff of the schools possessed a generalised knowledge of Aboriginal culture, acquired through reading and experience. They were conscious of the need to compensate for the lack of books and encouragement of reading in many of the Aboriginal children's homes, as well as the need to increase non-Aboriginal students' knowledge of Aboriginal culture.

In both the projects I am drawing on it is clear that the school libraries were increasing the amount and scope of the Aboriginal material they held. However, it was noted that in the schools there was a general lack of specific knowledge and materials related to the immediate locality and its communities. The schools' dilemma was appreciated. Whilst there is now much general Aboriginal Studies and cultural information available there is a decided lack of particular information for most local situations. The schools were grappling with, to what extent could they understand and accommodate the cultural backgrounds of their students, and to what extent could they focus on the individual classroom needs of their students and the English literacy imperatives of the curriculum? A similar dilemma arose with language, and the juxtaposition of Aboriginal English and standard Australian English in teaching and learning. There was a general acknowledgment of the importance of modelling standard Australian English without devaluing Aboriginal English, but more local data was urgently needed to do this properly at the classroom level.

Two educational priorities common to all the schools were a real concern for the development of the individual student, and a determination to improve the literacy levels of the students. As one of the interviewers in the ACER study said, 'The thing that stood out very clearly in all of the schools that I went to was that the literacy focus was the 'big deal'. It was the paramount thing they were all on about'. The emphasis on literacy came from within the school and from outside, in the form of system input. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, the system focus centred on the introduction of the First Steps program. An outcome of the program observed in Western Australia, where it was first introduced, was the increase in collaborative work within and across levels by the teachers. This led to a consistency of teaching approaches and monitoring processes across the school, both of which would, it was felt, impact positively upon the literacy progress of students through the school.

The schools' educational priorities

The third priority noted in the schools was the concern with individual student development, an acknowledgment of differences between students, linked to high expectations of students and a belief that all students would learn. A strategy employed in one of the schools, which exemplifies this priority, was teacher-student matching. New students were assessed immediately and a program developed by the support and class teachers and the teacher aide. The most appropriate person on a one-to-one basis did follow-up on the student's progress. In this way, different people could meet the

different needs of the children. The support teacher, who would follow the student's progress through the year levels, provided continuity.

In all the schools, the interviewers in the ACER study commented on the high quality of leadership exhibited by the principal in the identification and realisation of the educational priorities, and the commitment and professional expertise of the staff. The same was noted also in the SRP schools.

Additional contexts that affect literacy learning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders come from diverse backgrounds. Their experiences may include a number of factors, which interact with their school experiences to affect literacy learning. The literature in the ACER report contains a number of articles which document strategies which have been found to be successful in promoting the literacy skill of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary school children.

Health emerged as a major factor with the principal health problem experienced by many Aboriginal children, particularly those from rural and remote areas, being otitis media, which affects students' ability to hear and therefore to learn. Because of the insidious and variable nature of the disease, it is difficult to identify the specific effects of otitis media on learning, and it is clear that more research is needed in exploring these effects, particularly in relation to literacy development. The literature over the years contains a number of articles and resources which documents strategies for teachers to use with students who may have hearing loss (Nienhuys and Brunhip, 1988; Clarke, 1992; Howard, 1994; Yonowitz et al, 1995)

The social and cultural characteristics of Aboriginal community life, whether in an urban, rural or remote situation have also been related to the learning experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at school (for example, Harris, 1984; Malin, 1994; Hughes and More, 1997). Attention has been drawn to the characteristics of Aboriginal ways of learning in the pioneering work of Harris in a remote community. The theory of Aboriginal learning espoused in the early work of Harris has been developed, modified and expanded (not without contestation) in later research by Harris himself and by a number of others. While some later researchers have affirmed Harris's early findings others have pointed to the need to acknowledge the diversity in Aboriginal communities and the adaptability of learners.

Allied to this research were the studies of Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English, which pointed out the importance of taking students' linguistic background into account when planning educational programs. Aboriginal English is the first or second language of the great majority of Aboriginal people and there are a number of articles which explore the use of Aboriginal English in schools (for example, Christie, 1985; Eades, 1993; Eagleson et al, 1982; Mattingly; 1992).

COMPLICATING FACTORS AND STRATEGIES DEvised

In the ACER project we interviewers asked the Year 3 and 5 teachers to describe the most effective strategies they had found to improve the English literacy development of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Teachers were asked to comment on each of the three strands of the national English profile framework: reading and viewing; writing; and speaking and listening. The full report of the project contains a whole chapter of detailed quotes from these teachers which make very interesting reading. The rich and varied descriptions of literacy strategies provided by the case study teachers enable the reader to put together a series of pictures of classrooms where positive learning takes place. What is clear also is that, as with all types of teaching, there is no 'best way' of teaching English literacy to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It depends on the teacher and on the students and the interaction between them as individuals and as a class.

Some of the teachers remarked that they treated all the children in their classes as individuals, rather than as Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, and tried to cater appropriately for their individual literacy needs. Other teachers discerned particular characteristics of their Aboriginal students' approach to literacy learning, although a number commented on the differences between, for instance, this year's students and last year's. These comments suggest to me that there is a wide variety of abilities, both cultural and educational, across our students that teachers have to contend with. Added to these differences can be discerned in the teachers' descriptions between the children in different classes - for example, Aboriginal children who like talking to the class, and others who are shy and find it difficult to speak in front of a large class group. All of the above means that all of us as teachers have to be very professional in their planning each term and each year. There is no one simple way or comfort zone.

Some of the difficulties experienced by our children with literacy learning are the same as those experienced by some non-Aboriginal children from a low socioeconomic background where there may be lack of books in the home and regular reading to and with children is not commonly practised (Rowe, 1991). There are, however, additional factors that broadly but uniquely characterise the social/cultural context of Aboriginal family life, as identified in the literature and as exemplified in the case study interviews.

One of these factors is home language, with the need to recognise and understand the differences between Aboriginal English and standard Australian English. Another is the lack of appreciation by some Aboriginal parents of the link between regular school attendance and progress in learning. Our community gives more autonomy to our children's home life allowing ease in sharing and helping as part of a group as a natural thing. However this is an attribute that does not always blend well with the structure of classroom operation, which is more teacher, directed.

It has been said that good teachers of Aboriginal children will be good teachers of any children. We found this to be true. Many of the strategies mentioned most frequently by the teachers can be found, for instance, in the Schools Council Charter of Teaching: things such as explicit teaching; fostering motivation; adapting content to suit the students; understanding how students learn; responding to individual differences.

So, these teachers are 'good teachers' according to the Charter, and they are good teachers of Aboriginal children because they have a repertoire of teaching strategies

from which they draw those strategies they know have the greatest chance of bringing about literacy learning for these students.

As the teachers' descriptions reveal in the ACER study, there is as much diversity within the group called 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' as in any other group of students, and therefore the teachers needed to use a range of strategies to match the particular needs of the Aboriginal children in their classes. There is diversity in the strategies that teachers have described, but there are also common threads that run through these descriptions. For instance, 'group work' is frequently referred to as a teaching and learning strategy that works particularly well with Aboriginal students. But that common label can mean many things. 'Group work' in the descriptions teachers provided covered such things as; the teacher working with a small number of students; pairs of students; more than two students; parent and student/s; groups of mixed ability; groups at the same ability level; students adopting particular roles, then swapping roles; one student guiding another; brainstorming ideas before writing - and so the list goes on.

The above example illustrates the complexity and range of the teaching strategies used by the case study teachers in the ACER study with the Aboriginal students in their classrooms.

It should be noted that student health was not a particular focus of the school interviews in both the ACER study and the SRPs but it was mentioned by many teachers as a factor that had to be taken into account in their teaching practice. The prevalence of otitis media, and the hearing loss associated with the disease, meant that certain strategies had to be adopted by teachers with their Aboriginal students. Some of these were; making sure that those students sat at the front of the class, that instructions were given clearly and written on the board as well as being spoken. In one school, hearing tests were conducted regularly, and sessions were held with parents to help them with home treatment.

Other student background factors that emerged.

The home background of Indigenous students in the ACER study was seen as a critical factor in their approach to school learning. As noted in the literature review and endorsed by the case study teachers and principals, Aboriginal parents generally recognised the need for their children to acquire English literacy skills as long as the school also valued their children's cultural heritage. The main concern for teachers was that many Aboriginal homes did not provide the same linguistic preparation needed for school learning as non-Aboriginal homes. Although our children come to school with highly developed language skills, they are often not well versed in the language of the school. Our children generally are not used to the verbal social conventions of the school (such as greetings, saying 'please' and 'thank you') or to the question-and-answer structure of verbal interaction in the classroom. As one teacher said, Aboriginal parents 'send their children to school hoping, thinking, expecting that education happens in the classroom', unaware of the huge leap that their children have to make. I would comment that this situation is improving particularly in South Australia.

With regard to literacy, one of the main gaps in Aboriginal children's home preparation and support for school learning was the lack of books and reading to children. An AIEW commented that the art of story telling had died out in Aboriginal urban and rural communities: 'you know how the old people used to tell you the stories. Well, the stories are no longer being told'. This comment prompts me to ask - is this situation a factor now, particularly with students who live in urban situations? I also ask what has replaced the cultural factors now? Clearly television, videos and computers have taken over and more work needs to be done in looking at how these help or hinder literacy development.

In all of the studies to date it is clear that Aboriginal parents were willing to hand their children over to the school to be educated, but our parents were reluctant to come to the school to discuss educational matters with the teachers. The main responsibility for communication with the homes of Aboriginal students often fell to the AIEWs. We found further evidence that these positions are of critical importance in schools with Aboriginal students. The scope of the role is broad, encompassing classroom assistance, home-school liaison, developer of resources, organiser of homework centres and breakfast programs, keeping an eye on students' health, and being a general contact for anything to do with Aboriginal issues and events. When you consider the extent of these responsibilities, it is amazing that AIEWs have been able to operate so well until recently with inadequate role descriptions and specifications of skill requirements and little or no preparatory training.

A 1995 research project commissioned by the Commonwealth government (Davis et al.) sought to remedy these deficiencies through its recommendations about definition of skills and competencies and provision of appropriate training programs. Some of these recommendations, such as mandatory training programs, have already been translated into action. However, none of the AIEWs interviewed at the ACER case study schools had received any preparatory training, although all had been involved in some training on the job, including training in the literacy programs used in the schools, such as First Steps and Reading Recovery.

The AIEWs spoke of their role as intermediary between teacher and student, and between teacher and parents. In the classroom, it was important to interpret a teacher's requirements and assist students with their class work and, at the same time, to support the teacher in recognising and valuing the cultural background of the Aboriginal students. Much of the communication with parents in the home was connected with issues such as absenteeism, but several of the AIEWs spoke of the need to make contact with parents about positive things in the children's educational lives.

Contact with the home was not always easy, when students were particularly difficult or parents resentful of what they saw as interference. As one interviewer said, 'There's still a lot more things that AIEWs could and should be doing out there amongst the community in the debate' about education, but that they were often placed in a difficult position 'because they leave themselves open for a whole pile of fights and arguments'.

One of the areas connected with student background that concerned both teachers and AIEWs was the persistent absenteeism and lateness of some Aboriginal students. They

found it particularly hard to convey to these students and their parents that educational progress did not occur just because a child came to school most of the time - that it was important to be there even when not considered convenient, such as in winter time, or on Fridays when homework was collected, or on Mondays when new work started, and first thing in the morning when the intensive literacy work was begun.

One teacher described her difficulty with one Aboriginal student, who she regarded as 'one of my highest ability children' but who appears unmotivated, arrives late, misses out on class discussion, and will not do written work which he sees as 'not important'. The teacher said, 'I find it extremely frustrating that I'm not reaching his soul'.

The introduction of the bus service mentioned earlier to pick up Aboriginal students from their homes has proved helpful in reducing absenteeism. Homework centres for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have also gone some way towards ensuring that these students kept up with their work and received the guidance and support with literacy development that non-Aboriginal children received at home.

A key student background factor that had a profound effect on Aboriginal student learning was home language. Learning was often dependent on the extent to which teachers were able to appreciate the richness of Aboriginal English as a language in its own right, and work out ways of helping students to code switch - to make the transition from the Aboriginal English used at home to the standard Australian English used in the classroom. It was particularly surprising to me that many teachers were not very aware that their students did have a home 'english'. However it was an absolute rule that teachers and AIEWs constantly and consciously modelled standard Australian English while at the same time acknowledging the value of the cultural and linguistic background of their Aboriginal students. They affirmed that their students' familiarity with and control of standard Australian English was essential if the students were to make satisfactory educational progress. Some of the teachers in the ACER study found the 'Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools' (FELIKS) professional development package helpful in assisting students to acquire code-switching techniques.

Aboriginal Students in the Classroom

The teachers in the ACER study schools identified learning characteristics in their Aboriginal students that were similar to those referred to by Harris and elsewhere in the literature. Two characteristics in particular were mentioned repeatedly: learning by working and sharing with a partner or small group rather than working alone; and hands-on, concrete learning rather than abstract learning. In addition, other characteristics of Aboriginal children's preferred Ways of Learning were referred to by teachers on many occasions during the interviews.

Two that were noted as particularly important were responding to visual stimuli in the context of learning, and building a learning structure based on the student's own experience. The positive response of Aboriginal students to visual stimuli came through strongly when teachers were talking about the 'viewing' component of literacy - how these students would attend to the visual stimuli and give increased attention to reading

that was linked to the viewing. Computers were often used in the classroom to provide a link for Aboriginal students between a visual stimulus and literacy learning, at the same time as providing a hands-on experience. One teacher comments:

Visual learners. Whatever you can learn that's visual and hands-on is going to be positive . . . Writing is difficult by and large for Aboriginal students. And I think that is because - again I come back to all that literate stuff that goes on in [non-Aboriginal] homes - the kids we've got here, by and large, don't see a purpose in writing. With the exception of computers - they make it easier. And I think that's because of that visual feedback that they get immediately on the screen.

Teachers often spoke about the necessity to use the student's own experience as a starting point for learning. One teacher remarked on the usefulness of the First Steps and English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students (ELAN) programs for this reason. She believed that the program was 'great for all kids' and 'particularly good for Aboriginal kids because . . .

'one of the big underpinning factors is that you must build on existing knowledge'.

This teacher went on to explain that Aboriginal students did not have literacy support in the home. Because there are gaps in the literacy knowledge of some students which were not always easily discernable, and varied from individual to individual it was imperative that all students in a class have some shared experience. So in a class of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, all literacy learning must take the classroom as its starting point. This teacher emphasised this by saying:

Everything that we do, the experience is in the classroom, so that everyone has got that same shared experience. If I take an experience outside of school, I can't assume that all those kids have the same understanding of that experience. So it's got to happen in the classroom.

The ways of learning described in the ACER publication, and the accommodation made by teachers to incorporate these learning preferences in their teaching strategies, are not new educational ideas. Teachers have used group work, hands-on learning, starting from the student's own experience, and visual stimuli to help many non-Aboriginal children to engage in learning, but the teachers interviewed in the ACER study said that these were particularly applicable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

These teachers did not believe, however, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students could be neatly characterised as a group. A number of the more experienced teachers referred to their teaching of other classes of Aboriginal children in other schools, where they encountered different learning characteristics and used different teaching strategies. Within their present classes, they identified a range of learning styles and achievements among their Aboriginal students, while acknowledging some common elements. So both commonality and diversity were embraced in their views about approaches to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Teachers mentioned a wide range of other resources that they had found useful in the form of teaching guides and materials, including some professional development programs – they were:

- FELIKS (Fostering English Language in Kimberley Schools)
- Supporting ELA (English Language Acquisition)
 - ELIC (Early Literacy Inservice Program)
 - Reading Recovery
 - SWELL (Statewide Early Literacy Learning)
 - STAR (Story Telling and Retelling)
 - Teachers' Guide for Remote Schools
 - Pause, Prompt and Praise
 - Guided Reading
 - Walking Talking Texts

TEACHING SPECIFICS IN ACTUAL CLASSROOM LITERACY PROGRAMS

I would like now to turn to the particulars of teaching the particular english literacy areas of reading/viewing; writing; and speaking/listening. In this section I draw totally on the specifics provided by the teachers in the ACER project.

English Literacy Development in Reading/Viewing

Reading

A range of different approaches to reading were used in the Year 3 and Year 5 classrooms, including individual reading, peer reading, teacher reading to students, student reading to teacher, student reading with teacher, silent reading, and choral reading. Small group reading was mentioned at both levels:

It is a heterogeneous group and it models good syntactics. It involves good semantics and it allows the children to experience that role modelling and questioning of peers with the others. I think that the most valuable part we do in reading is small group reading. (Year 5)

At Year 3 level, the use of Big Books was described, and at Year 5 mention was made of the technique of building up a topic around a book 'to allow them to really get to know the book. Get to know the language'.

At both levels, Aboriginal children were reported to have benefited from learning word attack skills. A Year 3 teacher described how she developed word attack skills and used the techniques of phonic decoding and 'prompt and praise':

I ... encourage them or teach them to read ahead with their eyes looking ahead, rereading strategies, and looking at the picture clues. If they stumble on a word then we talk about phonic

decoding, how they can break the word up to work out what the word is, and sight recognition. I use the prompt and praise technique with them when they are reading...so if they get to a word that's difficult, I prompt them by saying, 'Can you sound it out? What's the first letter sound?', and then they sound it out. I prompt them again if they're still struggling, 'What do you think the next sound is?' until they actually decode the word themselves and then you praise them at the end.

Teachers stressed the importance of other strategies in teaching Aboriginal children to read: allowing them the time to progress at their own pace, the use of repetition, and, in particular, the need to engage the interest and attention of the children through word games, the use of humour, acting out stories, and the use of books that were relevant to the children's own experience.

An underlying theme of these descriptions, essential if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were to acquire reading skills, was the need for explicit teaching. Allied to this was the need for practice in reading and constant exposure to books:

Give them plenty of access to books at school. You can't expect them to have ... like I don't expect them to have access to books at home, so books at school. Things that they can look at, books that they can read, library, plenty of time in the library ... It's probably the area that I work on the most with reading ... them reading, paired reading, me reading, each day, just to give them exposure.

Viewing

Viewing was used less as a literacy strategy in Year 3 than in Year 5. At Year 3, there were differing reactions reported for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children - some were easily distracted during viewing, others were absorbed. The Year 3 teachers who incorporated viewing into their literacy teaching used it in a variety of ways: linking a video to a topic; following viewing with retelling or acting out; listing the things the students liked and did not like (the former was much easier for Aboriginal students than the latter). One Year 3 teacher felt that the visual image had a particular appeal to Aboriginal children that could then be followed up with explicit teaching:

Viewing hasn't been a very big component in their work, but what I've done this year has convinced me that because it's so visual and it can give that visual image of a lot of things that are out of the experience of Aboriginal kids, we need to do that. In fairly small chunks, and then follow that up with explicit teaching.

Viewing was a much more integral part of Year 5 literacy teaching. One teacher described different uses of viewing - taking notes during three viewings then writing a report, verbal retelling, and questions and answers about a video.

Some Year 5 teachers found that viewing videos was a good way of establishing a link to the outside world, important for students whose world was limited to their own small town. *Behind the News* was useful in this way, facilitating discussion of world and Australian topical issues.

Another successful strategy, described in detail by a Year 5 teacher, was the dual use of books and videos. This teacher found that Aboriginal students responded much more positively and actively to a book if they also viewed the video of the same story. Through the Book Club at the school, the teacher was able to acquire a collection of books and videos of the same films at a cheap price.

The following is a list of particular comments from the teachers for reading and viewing - they make for useful tips:

Reading

'relate it to the children's experiences'

'phonic decoding, how they can break the word up'

'they're in small groups, and they read with me'

'I do what we call small group reading'

'They need to hear adults reading to them'

'they're beginning to get that enjoyment'

'making sure that you have books that they can relate to'

'working in groups and partner work is very, very important'

Viewing

'discuss it afterwards either in small groups or the whole class and then act it out'

'tie the story or piece of writing into what happened in another area'

'this is one time when they don't get distracted'

'So the viewing is really the input, if we're doing other activities'

'bring issues in that they would have otherwise very little exposure to'

'they respond a lot more to the book when they've seen the video'

'they pick so much up and find it much easier to verbalise'

'see what the big wide world's like out there'

English Literacy Development in Writing

With writing, as with the other literacy areas, teachers used a range of strategies to improve the performance of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. One Year 3 teacher listed the following types of writing she used with her class: narrative

writing, journal writing, poetry, transactional writing, procedural writing, report writing, expository writing, and personal recounts. Of these, the Aboriginal children enjoyed most their journal writing, stories and poems.

Another Year 3 teacher talked about her Aboriginal children's concern with spelling, trying to get the words right, dislike of getting things wrong:

Trying to get it [right] you see, because they want so much for it to be the same as what the other kids are doing. So they go to many lengths to have it perfectly spelt ... It's really hard. They'd rather not say anything or write anything than get it wrong.

The Year 5 teachers mentioned strategies for writing that were different from those used in Year 3. The strategies that were found to work well with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the higher level were:

- writing about topical issues or events (World Environment Day, the Aboriginal Reconciliation Convention, school rules such as the wearing of hats);
- using the computer for writing and revising;
- development of word banks to help vocabulary development;
- peer conferencing about their stories;
- multi-faceted sources of stimulus for writing.

The importance of modelling and explicit teaching was mentioned once again:

If you give them a framework and you demonstrate what you want done, and even go through and do part of it with them and then leave a little bit for them to complete - so that they know exactly what's expected.

For writing here is another list of particular comments from the teachers:

'really enjoy writing fables ... making up their own with a moral to it'

'tie in the writing with ... viewing'

'I don't expect them to do more abstract things'

'they go to many lengths to have it perfectly spelt'

'try to keep things that are topical'

'use the computer with them, because you can revise over it'

'We have developed a lot of word banks'

'have a peer conference time'

'if you pick something that they relate to ... they're going to write'

'give them a framework and you demonstrate'

'They're good at imaginative stuff, because it's non threat'

English Literacy Development in Speaking/Listening

Speaking

At Year 3, daily news telling was a common way of developing the speaking ability of the students. Because of the shyness of some Aboriginal students, various ways were used to encourage their participation and increase their confidence, such as working with a partner, then a small group, and then speaking to the whole class. In contrast, one Year 3 teacher said that the group of Aboriginal children at present in her class were socially at ease and confident, and speaking in front of the class was an area at which they excelled.

Another Year 3 teacher remarked on the importance of understanding the difference between Aboriginal English and SAE, so those teachers could help their Aboriginal students to acquire code-switching skills. She spoke also of the need to incorporate modelling and scaffolding into the teaching process.

A series of small tasks in varied contexts were described by a Year 3 teacher as useful in developing the speaking skills of Aboriginal children: giving instructions on how to make something; greetings and farewells; taking an oral message to a teacher in another classroom; taking a telephone message; and improvisation in role plays.

The Year 5 teachers delineated some different strategies. One was the use of a small group in which the learner works with two more able students who model the appropriate speaking behaviour, then the learner makes a statement that is taped, replayed, and rated by the learner and by the modellers.

A successful strategy, described in some detail, was the introduction of an English Speaking Board (ESB) activity in one of the schools. Each student chooses a poem to be read, as well as a passage from a book, and a topic to speak about. There is a lot of practice in the classroom before the final performance in front of an ESB representative. Aboriginal students had progressed from being uncertain and reluctant to being confident performers.

Listening

Some of the listening activities were linked to speaking activities, such as procedural tasks (instructions, directions, taking messages). At Year 3, a teacher said it was important to follow listening activities with comprehension activities to ensure that the idea of listening for understanding was incorporated into students' learning. Another technique was to introduce a structured listening activity into the reading groups in the form of responding to questions (given to students beforehand) after listening to a taped story.

A Year 5 teacher said it was necessary to teach the Aboriginal students how to listen:

You listen by focusing on the person. You listen by asking questions in your mind: 'What is the person saying? What are they telling me? What have I got to remember here?'

Another Year 5 teacher found the use of games to be an effective technique for teaching listening skills to Aboriginal students, games such as word tennis, drama games, tapping patterns. These games were repeated time and again until the skills were developed. At the same time, students' auditory memory was strengthened.

In these areas the teachers had these comments to make:

Speaking

'working with a partner first and then going into the small group then the whole group really works well'

'I do a lot of paraphrasing which is modelling their speaking'

'easier for most children to give an oral report rather than write'

'they need to be able to code-switch'

'I get them to get up and talk in front of the others'

'to say 'Look up all the time', I'm making them emotionally unsafe'

'He gives his own feedback on what he's said'

'the first bit comes out but the end is chopped and clipped'

'Just the confidence. They find that they can do it'

'getting them to articulate what they have learnt'

'We're not actually teaching them a new language, we're just helping them to verbalise'

'group work or partner work. They speak up in their groups'

Listening

'you have to make things a lot more explicit'

'listen to instructions, that's something we do all year long'

'We do different listening games with activities'

'a structured listening activity in the reading groups'

'the cue cards are for the children to listen'

'You listen by focusing on the person'

'it's motivation stuff ... things that they can relate to'

'They tend to work quite well with a partner'

'Playing a lot of drama type games'

SO WHAT DO WE CONCLUDE FROM ALL OF THIS?

Firstly what do we now know as the essentials required in a school?

A message that emerged from the ACER study and the SRPs was that the responsibility for English literacy acquisition is a joint responsibility, shared by the parents and teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the principals of the schools attended by the students.

Some of the key aspects of this area of responsibility highlighted in both reports are that:

- Principals and teachers in all schools must recognise and give high priority to the modelling of Standard Australian English for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students - in all situations, both inside and outside the classroom. Teachers must understand the linguistic functioning of their students and help them to code switch from Aboriginal English to Standard Australian English.
- Teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can operate more effectively if they are made aware of their students' social and cultural backgrounds, and if they are given some guidance about teaching strategies that work well with these children. This can happen through formal and informal professional development at system and school level.
- The introduction of a core component on Aboriginal education in all teacher education courses is necessary for all of us. It is not the be all and end all that we in the 'business' have stated in our Aboriginal Education Policies because I have found that teacher education students cannot be totally prepared from this until they get out there and actually 'own a kid'. But it is a very good idea long due for actual implementation in all Australian Universities. Wouldn't it be nice if the Union made it a prerequisite for employment generally?
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers are worth their weight in gold. Again they are not the be all and end all of Aboriginal education, but they are still the 'glue' that holds it together! It is essential that for the future all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers must receive appropriate training and support in order to fulfil their role as classroom assistants and in home-school liaison.
- Research has shown that parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, in general, support the school's emphasis on the teaching of English literacy. As partners in this process, our parents must encourage regular school attendance so that our children can actively participate in and benefit from the learning process. Without this we will surely continue to fail.

What do we now know as the essentials of literacy learning required on the classroom floor?

They namely are:

- explicit teaching, with the use of modelling and clear explanations of tasks and expectations;
- gradual progression along a learning path, with a lot of practice, ensuring that the student has developed confidence as well as the ability to perform at one literacy level before proceeding to another, as exemplified by teacher modelling of an aspect of literacy, followed by work in a small group or with a partner before attempting an individual task;
- exposure to a range of literacy tasks, not just to the ones that the students find the easiest;
- code switching, as an essential aid to the command of language and literacy;
- much group work of one kind or another;

At this time I want to add a couple of observations for you to ponder on and discuss.

- In thinking about all that I had heard from being involved in the projects I one thing stands out – that is – ‘direct systematic instruction’. My experience tells me that our community does not operate in this way in regard to school stuff. We certainly did in cultural matters! Traditionally children were taught things in a very direct systematic way. But we do not have an experience and history of doing this as it applies to primary school learning. Many non-Aboriginal parents do from the pre-school days – that is regularly read and talk to their children in systematic way, directly instructing in a rote and repetitive way. We know from the research that this helps enormously.
- Whilst all of the research has included a wide range of programs that go by any number of names I cannot help but conclude that we are making all of this too confusing for all. My experience suggests to me that we could simplify all of this by applying ESL methodologies across the mainstream to all of these programs thus giving them a consistent approach that we could all apply.

Final Comment

I want to particularly refer teachers and other educationalists like AIEWs and managers that reading the publications I have worked with in this paper is a very good thing. In fact it is most necessary if you as an educationalist are to keep up with what is current. So I restate them:

- Enhancing English Literacy Skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students: A Review of the Literature and Case Studies in Primary Schools. ACER Monograph No 54.
- What works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students.
- What has worked (and will again)? The IESIP Strategic Results Projects.

As I have said earlier in this paper – ‘for the first time in the history of Aboriginal Education we have a store of real knowledge drawn from those who actually do the teaching and learning’. I would go further and say – if our people and all educationalists really want to go forward then we all need to study the facts and do something about them. What is the saying of our time? – Just Do It! – sounds ‘cool’ – but it is dependent on real action by real people – that is, you and I.

References

- Batten, M., Frigo, T., Hughes, P. and McNamara, N. (1998), *Enhancing English Literacy Skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students: A Review of the Literature and Case Studies in Primary Schools*. ACER Monograph No 54. Melbourne, Vic: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Christie, M. J. (1985). *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education*. Geelong, Vic: Deakin University.
- Clarke, M. (1992). Hearing loss in Aboriginal children. *Aboriginal Child at School*, 20 (1), 38-50.
- Davis, C., Woodberry, J. and Buckskin, P. (1995). *Ara Kuwaritjakutu Project: Towards a New Way, Stage 3*. South Melbourne: Australian Education Union.
- Eades, D. (1993). *Aboriginal English*. Pen, No. 93, 1-6.
- Eagleson, R. D., Kaldor, S. and Malcolm, I. G. (1982). *English and the Aboriginal Child*. Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre.
- Gray, B. (1990). Natural language learning in Aboriginal classrooms: Reflections on teaching and learning style for empowerment in English. In C. Walton and W. Eggington (eds), *Language: Maintenance, Power and Education in Australian Aboriginal Contexts*. Darwin: NTU Press.
- Harris, S. (1984). *Culture and Learning: Tradition and Education in North-East Arnhem Land*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Australian Studies.
- Harris, S. (1989). Culture boundaries, culture maintenance-in-change, and two-way Aboriginal schools. *Aboriginal Child at School*, 17(5), 3-18.
- Howard, D. (1994). Culturally responsive classrooms: A way to assist Aboriginal students with hearing loss in urban schools. In S. Harris and M. Malin (eds), *Aboriginal Kids in Urban Classrooms*. Wentworth Falls, NSW: Social Sciences Press.
- Hughes, P. and More, A.J. (1993). *Aboriginal Ways of Learning, Learning Strengths and Learning Patterns*. Adelaide: Education Department of South Australia.

- Malin, M. (1994). Make or break factors in Aboriginal students learning to read in urban classrooms: A socio-cultural perspective. In S. Harris and M. Malin (eds), *Aboriginal Kids in Urban Classrooms*. Wentworth Falls, NSW: Social Sciences Press.
- Masters, G. and Forster, M. (1997). *Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey*. Canberra: DEETYA.
- Mattingley, C. (1992). The authenticity of Aboriginal English. In D. Myers (ed.), *The Great Literacy Debate*. Kew: Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- McRae, D., Ainsworth, G., Cumming, J., Hughes, P., Makay, T., Price, K., Rowland, M., Warhurst, J., Woods, D. and Zbar, V. (2000). *What works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students*. Canberra, ACT. Australian Curriculum Studies Association and National Curriculum Services.
- McRae, D., Ainsworth, G., Cumming, J., Hughes, P., Makay, T., Price, K., Rowland, M., Warhurst, J., Woods, D. and Zbar, V. (2000). *What has worked (and will again)? The IESIP Strategic Results Projects*. Canberra, ACT. Australian Curriculum Studies Association and National Curriculum Services.
- Munns, G. and Connelly, J. (1996). 'When are you fellas gunna teach these 'ere little black kids how to read and write?' *Literacy for Aboriginal students: Learning from past failures*. Paper read at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Singapore.
- National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (M. Yunupingu, Chair). (1994). *Discussion Paper*. Canberra: AGPS.
- Nienhuys, T. and Burnip L. (1988). Conductive hearing loss and the Aboriginal child at school. *Australian Teacher of the Deaf*, 28, 4-17.
- Yonowitz, L., Yonowitz, A., Nienhuys, T. and Boswell, J. (1995). MLD evidence of auditory processing factors as a possible barrier to literacy for Australian Aboriginal children. *Australian Journal for Education of the Deaf*, 1(1), 34-42.