



Content  
fundamentals for a  
TV show aimed at  
Indigenous children  
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A Literature Review  
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David Norris



## Introduction

The following literature review was undertaken to establish a foundation for the discussion of potential content (and the issues pertaining to the implementation of that content) for an educational television program aimed at Indigenous children aged 3 to 6. Specifically, the literature was read with an eye to identifying the most effective and relevant learning styles, teaching techniques and subject matters that will successfully engage, support and inform Indigenous children and their families in the transition from home/pre-school to school, and onwards into their early years of schooling. It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to provide a list of specific pedagogical strategies, activities or exercises targeting individual learning outcomes. Ideas for such activities are available elsewhere and are best determined by those experienced in delivering them – once certain broader issues relating to content have been considered.

Whilst it is acknowledged that extensive cultural differences exist between separate Indigenous groups – and that these differences must, in turn, be acknowledged within the TV show – this paper makes no attempt to distinguish between groups of Indigenous children (for example, those living in urban versus rural environments). Neither does this paper distinguish between children transitioning to school from a pre-school facility, and those transitioning directly from home.

This paper assumes that an educational TV show for Indigenous children is both warranted and needed. Furthermore, it assumes that all children possess the same learning capabilities, and that any disparities in this area are due solely to historical, social, cultural, financial and geographical influences.

Any ideas, suggestions or conclusions drawn from the research are meant solely as stimuli for further discussion.

The term Indigenous refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent from Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.

## School Readiness

*‘When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimize the shock so that the plant is re-established as (easily) as possible.’ (Cleave, Jowett and Bate, 1982, as cited in Margetts, 2009)*

The above quotation reminds us how important it is that a child’s transition to school be as psychologically undistruptive as possible. It has long been known that the smoothness with which this is accomplished has long-lasting impacts on a child’s school success (Perry et al., 2006). Unfortunately, the ‘shock’ of ‘transplantation’ can be greater for some than for others. This paper will focus on ways to mitigate that shock for Australian Indigenous children (or anyone unaccustomed to the institutional routines of western schooling) via the medium of television.

School readiness can be difficult for Indigenous children who are raised with different worldviews, different languages, different learning styles and different expectations to the ones routinely experienced in the westernised Australian school system (Penman, 2006). The impact of these differences in regard to school readiness will be examined in greater detail later in this report. Firstly, it is important to identify what the current school readiness benchmarks are; for they represent what the TV show will attempt to communicate. The Australian Early Development

Index (2009) lists school readiness benchmarks as:

### *Physical Health and Wellbeing*

- Never (or almost never) dressed inappropriately for school activities, and do not come to school hungry or tired.
- Are independent regarding their own needs, have an established hand preference and are well coordinated.
- Have an excellent ability to physically tackle the school day and have excellent or good gross and fine motor skills.

### *Social Competence*

- Have excellent or good overall social development, very good ability to get along with other children and play with various children, usually cooperative and self-confident.
- Always or most of the time show respect for others and for property, follow rules and take care of materials, accept responsibility for actions and show self-control.
- Always or most of the time work neatly, independently, and solve problems; follow instructions and class routines; easily adjust to changes.
- Are curious about the surrounding world and are eager to explore new books, toys or unfamiliar objects and games.

### *Emotional Maturity*

- Often show helping behaviours including helping someone hurt, sick or upset, offering to help spontaneously, and inviting others to join in.
- Rarely or never show anxious behaviours, are happy and able to enjoy school, and are comfortable being left at school.
- Rarely or never show aggressive behaviours and do not use aggression as a means of solving a conflict, do not have temper tantrums, and are not mean to others.
- Never show hyperactive behaviours and are able to concentrate, settle to chosen activities, wait their turn, and most of the time think before doing something.

### *Language and Cognitive Skills (school [not home] based)*

- Have all the basic literacy skills including how to handle a book, are able to identify some letters and attach sounds to some letters, show awareness of rhyming words, know the writing directions, and are able to write their own name.
- Show interest in books and reading, maths and numbers, and have no difficulty with remembering things.
- Have at least half of the advanced literacy skills such as reading simple words or sentences, and writing simple words or sentences.
- Have all the basic numeracy skills and can count to 20, recognise shapes and numbers, compare numbers, sort and classify, use one-to-one correspondence, and understand simple time concepts.

### *Communication Skills and General Knowledge*

- Have excellent or very good communication skills and can communicate easily and effectively, can participate in story telling or imaginative play, articulate clearly and show adequate general knowledge.

There are, of course, other school readiness needs to consider. Firstly, knowing what to expect upon first arriving at the physical school setting. Secondly, knowing the rules and social expectations of the new school culture. Margetts (2009) lists various ‘challenges and discontinuities as children commence school’, such as:

- changes to peer group
- need to find new friends
- changes to the role and involvement of the parent
- differences in teacher behaviour, attitudes and expectations
- more formal rules and routines
- greater structure in daily scheduling
- the distinction between work and play
- fewer art and tactile experiences
- greater focus on verbal and symbolic activities
- location of toilets
- different building sizes
- different classroom equipment
- the size and organisation of the classroom.

In terms of potential TV content, the above benchmarks and soon-to-be-faced experiences form a ready-made guide. In other words, they represent the educational information we must (in some way) portray on screen if we hope to help prepare children for school; especially children who would otherwise have little (or no) access to the information.

Some of these ‘benchmarks’ will be easier to portray than others. Certain aspects of physical health and wellbeing (for example: ‘excellent or good gross and fine motor skills’) may be difficult to teach via the ‘removed’ medium of television. The most that could be done in this case might be to demonstrate these skills and encourage children to engage in activities which utilise them. The more ‘formal’ benchmarks (i.e. language and cognitive skills) should be easier to convey (a few examples are given in a later section, but the specifics of how to achieve this is, again, beyond the scope of this paper).

If school readiness requirements were expressed as questions asked by children, they might include:

- What is school for?
- How do I get there?
- What does it look like?
- What do you do there?
- Are there any rules?

- Who is the teacher?
- What does the teacher do?
- Why should I go to school?
- What happens if I don't know something?
- What happens if I get something wrong?

One way to answer these questions might be to represent, on screen, an actual school; one that models both its physical and social environment. Since no two schools are exactly alike it would have to be a 'generalised version' of a school, and thus (it may be argued) may instill unrealistic expectations in children, who may then be disappointed or confused when first experiencing their own (actual) school. The benefits of such an approach, however, could outweigh its drawbacks: if, for example, the question *What happens if I don't know something?* was dramatised in a narrative involving characters experiencing this very doubt, it might allow young viewers to 'pre-navigate' – safely and privately – the social, emotional and educational ramifications of an experience they may soon face in real life.

It is important to note that, in terms of early childhood development, the literature places social and emotional school readiness criteria on an equal par with language and cognitive criteria. As the Getting Ready (2005) report states: 'Social-emotional development is the foundation for cognitive development. It's not either/or'. Some research reported that many teachers and parents regard the social and emotional criteria to be more important (see Perry et al., 1998; Robinson et al., 2007; NSW Parenting Centre, 2003). At the very least it seems that any attempt to prepare children for school assumes that a child's transition to school is most effective when:

- the situation, equipment and people are familiar
  - the child feels secure in their new environment
  - the introduction to the new situation is gradual
  - the child's prior knowledge and experiences are utilised.
- (Margetts, 2009)

Thus, modelling (on screen) a realistic social and emotional experience of school culture could provide an emotional road-map that would demystify school and increase a child's willingness to attend it. If modelled well, it could create solid foundations for other types of learning. This idea becomes particularly relevant when remembering the culture shock Indigenous children may experience if not adequately prepared for school. A kindergarten teacher, speaking of Indigenous children entering school for the first time, relates how 'they didn't know how to behave in a class and didn't realise that there were routines to be followed' (What Works, 2010). Unfamiliarity with different social and cultural expectations at school can cause emotional effects that may work directly against learning, such as feelings of shame and frustration. When asked about the ramifications of having to think in 'two different systems', Tracey, a Year 5 Indigenous student said, 'You'll get pulled up all the time. Especially in a white man's system you have to think ... You're shamed' (Howard, 1998).

## Indigenous Contexts

If it is accepted that these various educational goals represent prerequisites for the successful transitioning of all Australian children into school, it becomes clear that the primary question regarding content lies not with the goals themselves, but with how they might be communicated to Indigenous children who might find them so foreign that they struggle to accept and assimilate them.

The literature overwhelmingly suggests this communication should be tackled using familiar Indigenous contexts. Penman (2006) writes: ‘the evidence strongly supports that providing an education that is relevant to students – that is, one which addresses and respects issues of Indigenous identity and culture – leads to better outcomes.’ Hughes and More (1997) report that ‘Aboriginal people generally hold the view that education for their children must acknowledge their culture, help Aboriginal children to learn and know their culture, and support their cultural identity.’ Craven et al. (2007) write that ‘Given a body of evidence-based empirical research has demonstrated that self-concept shares a causal and reciprocal relation with achievement, [we] hypothesise that enhancing self-concept will have a causal impact on Aboriginal students’ achievement.’

A Board of Studies NSW paper (2000) lists the following Indigenous technologies as potential stimulus for educational activities: fibrecraft, bushfood, housing, the spear, trade, watercraft, and women’s technology. Whilst this list is potentially endless, and the topic of ‘technology’ could be replaced by practically any topic, it does prompt questions (some of which are listed in the study cited) that reveal how learning, in both numeracy and literacy, might be constructed around culturally relevant material. Such questions include:

- What is technology?
- Is technology important in our lives? Why?
- What is *modern* technology?
- Is *all* technology modern?
- What technology do we use at school / home etc?
- How do you spell ‘spear’?
- Can you draw a bike with *two* wheels, then a car with *four* wheels?

The same study extends this idea by providing concrete and practical mathematics activities that are embedded within culturally appropriate learning styles – in this case visual. According to the study, the unit ‘provides opportunities for students to investigate integrated mathematics and visual arts through exploring Aboriginal lifestyles and perspectives’ (Board of Studies NSW, 2000). Some of the key learning areas are:

- *Asks and responds to mathematical questions using drawing, making, describing, acting, guessing and checking and retelling.*
- *Sorts and describes objects in terms of their features such as size and shape.*
- *Manipulates groups of objects by combining and separating.*

Students are, for example, asked to look at a picture then place a counter on the biggest tree; or place a counter on an emu that is standing closest to a tree. In another task, students practice drawing concentric circles in the dirt or sand, then are given five pre-cut circles of different sizes that they must order from largest to smallest.

In another study, Mousley and Perry (2009) note that there are numerous everyday materials and physical objects that can aid the teaching of mathematical concepts, such as composition of numbers and associativity. They give the example of a calendar being used to develop time concepts as well as number and pattern comprehension. They also note that ‘the use of such aids needs to be functional and of immediate, meaningful use to the children.’

Mitchie et al. (1998) point to our tendency when considering western and Indigenous science to ‘express them as two separate worldviews’. This paper discusses ways in which these knowledge domains are compatible and might be taught, side by side, in the classroom. The authors point out that knowledge of seasons, animal habitats, animal behaviour and animal reproduction are common to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous science. They provide examples demonstrating how Indigenous knowledge informs the ‘association of events’, such as: ‘as soon as the first fruit (of *Pandanus spiralis*) drops to the ground the flatback turtle starts to lay its eggs. At the same time the red-flowering kurrajong (*Brachychiton paradoxus*) has lost all its leaves and begins to flower. This indicates that sharks are giving birth to their young and the early dry season is over’.

The same authors (Mitchie et al., 1998) state that ‘curriculum by itself does not change teachers’ practice; what is also needed are curriculum support materials developed to:

- make border crossing (between cultures) explicit for students
- facilitate border crossing
- substantiate the validity of students’ personally and culturally constructed ways of knowing
- teach the knowledge, skills and values of western science in the context of societal roles (social, political, economic etc), including the role of a hegemonic icon of cultural imperialism.

The authors go on to give examples of such curriculum support materials. One of these is a story titled *There’s an emu in the sky* in which three children from different cultural traditions try to understand the motions of the sun, moon and stars. The children in the story ‘seek the wisdom of their elders and traditional legends in their communities, to seek scientific explanations in the context of making meaning and generating understanding.’

Note: the above examples are mentioned solely to illustrate the range of Indigenous contexts available to aid teaching, and are not meant as specific TV content.

## The Issue of Diversity

Complicating this idea of embedding learning within Indigenous contexts is the diversity of Indigenous cultures and languages. As Hughes and More (1997) explain, ‘There is not now and never has been, one Aboriginal culture in Australia. Aboriginal people, especially young Aboriginals, are living out an extremely wide range of cultural patterns and styles.’ Thus, when it comes to finding familiar, real-world examples to aid the teaching of Indigenous children,

one size will definitely not fit all. Any to attempt to pin down ‘Indigenous models’ risks oversimplification and stereotyping. Rabbitt (1999), writing about university students, reports that ‘Indigenous people can and are often offended because the course does not recognise the diversity among Aboriginal people. If people are strongly offended or it continues they will leave.’ Despite the age of the students in Rabbitt’s report, her point is no less relevant to us; especially considering there will (hopefully) be parents as well as children watching. The ‘off’ button is always just a click away.

One way to avoid this problem would be to present content in, and from, a range of unique, local Indigenous contexts. Part (or all) of each TV episode could be set in a different community (from around Australia), using that community’s people, language, cultural practices and artefacts to aid that episode’s teaching. Despite restricting the depth with which any unique Indigenous culture could be represented, this approach would help avoid generalisations and enhance children’s learning by both reinforcing their wider cultural identity and exposing them to different peoples and practices that they might otherwise never encounter. In this sense, it stands to reason that all children could equally benefit from such an approach – including those of non-Indigenous and migrant/ESL background. Considering that the requirements for school readiness are the same for all children – representing, at their core, an acceptance and understanding of a new (learning) culture – it can be argued that any additional presentation of unfamiliar cultural perspectives would enhance any viewer’s school readiness by:

- expanding their worldview
- increasing their exposure to and acknowledgement of difference
- giving them ‘practice’ in relating to others
- encouraging cultural connections and comparisons
- encouraging personal inquiry and interest
- instilling an expectation to see cultures other than their own in the classroom.

Mitchie et al. (1998) make a similar point: ‘Inclusivity is not simply including minorities in learning the hegemonic context, an assimilationist perspective, but rather a celebration of the difference between groups which leads to understanding the diversity. A major outcome is the understanding that there are other ways of looking at the world.’ Also Hooley (2008): ‘The culturally inclusive curriculum does not transform the regular curriculum into an indigenous science, an indigenous mathematics, an indigenous language and the like, but brings different cultural perspectives to bear on particular issues for ongoing investigation and reflection ... Whether an escarpment is a particular shape because of geological formation or the digging of large animals can be discussed and be recognised as cultural explanations of the same phenomena.’

Despite a lack of homogeneity in Indigenous culture there may exist some shared experiences and subject matters that help shape a ‘wider’ Indigenous identity. Ian Anderson (cited in McDonald, 2004) reports that Indigenous people often refer to issues of race when discussing identity: ‘Aboriginal identities are formed within the context of colonial relations’. If race (and racism) forms a common thread to Indigenous identity, issues pertaining to it may require consideration in terms of content for the TV show.

Further ‘shared Indigenous experiences’ will be discussed in coming sections.

## Traditional Indigenous Perspectives and Learning Styles

The literature also reports the existence of ‘some recurrent learning styles which are more likely among Aboriginal students’ (Hughes and More, 1997). Before discussing these, it seems prudent – if we are to attempt to identify the ways in which Indigenous children learn most effectively – to first present what the literature reveals about the ways Indigenous people traditionally see the world.

Zubrick et al. (2006) tell us that Aboriginal knowledge systems centre on intimate relationships that do not focus so much on *what* things are, but *who* they are and how they are related. For Aboriginal people, spiritual and physical worlds are continuous and interactive – everything has spirit, feeling and law. ‘Trees, animals, rocks are related to us as brothers, sisters, aunts’. Time is also fluid: past, present and future are all in one place, space, time – more circular than linear. The most important events have already happened; each day is a renewal of the ‘Dreaming’. The transfer of knowledge is via stories, expressed not only through speech, but art, song, dance and ceremony.

Similarly, Hughes and More (1997) report that the Aboriginal universe is essentially one in which the value of things lies in their quality and relatedness. The world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in the Dreaming. Objects are related by spiritual essence, rather than by physical properties, making counting (for example) irrelevant. Aboriginal languages contain few numbers and few terms for contrasting/comparing physical objects. This ‘relatedness’ not only informs the understanding of objects, but also people. An individual’s sense of worth depends upon where he or she fits in. Hence an Indigenous worldview fosters cooperation rather than competition. Knowledge of the land, kinship and survival are not written down, but transmitted – usually via means of observation and imitation – to the young by older men and women of the society. This learning is unstructured and takes place within concrete contexts.

Malezer and Sim (2002) report that ‘an Indigenous Worldview is the relationship of priority, importance and responsibility to the human and physical world. The human and physical world being that which is real and of practical purpose. Indigenous educators rarely teach in an abstract or conceptual sense.’

Immediately apparent are the differences between this worldview and that of the modern west (which, amongst other things, rates owning property and having a good job highly in terms of social and personal importance). Also glimpsed are the types of Indigenous learning styles that extend from this view (oral, practical, context-based, story-centred, etc), again as opposed to typically western ones (written, abstract, book-centred, etc). Consequently a question arises: how do we respect, reflect and encourage this practical, context- and relationship-driven Indigenous worldview when much of the knowledge we need to impart is abstract, conceptual and context-free?

Before tackling this, it is necessary to examine more of what the literature tells us about Indigenous learning styles. In doing so, it is recognised that ‘it is important to avoid the notion of Aboriginal learning styles as a new way of stereotyping Aboriginal students’ (Hughes and More, 1997).

Stephen Harris (cited in Rabbitt, 1999) identified five major Aboriginal learning strategies:

- 1 Learning by observation and imitation rather than by verbal instruction (oral or written).  
Or learning by watching and copying rather than by talking.

- 2 Learning by personal trial and error (doing) rather than by verbal instruction with demonstration.
- 3 Learning in real life rather than by practice in artificial settings. Related to this is learning ‘wholes’, not sequential parts.
- 4 Learning context-specific skills versus generalisable principles; or learning skills for specific tasks rather than learning abstract, context-free principles.
- 5 Person-orientation in learning, not information-orientation; or a focus on people and relationships rather than on information.

Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (cited in Penman 2006), in their exploration of different Indigenous literacies, point to various strategies and approaches to learning that show significant cultural differences to western strategies:

- **learning is a two-way process** – children learn by doing things together; learning is a group, or family concern; children have obligations to each other
- **children are not punished for making mistakes** – learning involves making mistakes
- **listening is critical to learning** – and you don’t have to appear to be attending in order to listen and learn
- **asking questions is a more urban way of learning** – watching and listening is more traditional
- **learning is about moving about and looking** – not sitting still.

It is relevant to note here a study of young Aboriginal children in the western desert regions of Western Australia (Warrki Jarrinjaku, 2002, cited in Penman, 2006). These children are surrounded by a rich and linguistically complex environment where there are often two languages and several dialects spoken. They are also encouraged to understand and use a range of gestures and signs at an early age. This non-verbal communication, in addition to their literacy in understanding their natural environment and their complex social relationships, means that by the time they get to school they already possess a high-level of symbolic knowledge.

Hughes and More (1997) represent Indigenous ways of learning and learning styles as ‘dimensions’ or ‘continuums’ representing bipolar ‘extremes’. These continuums are presented in the following table (the headings ‘Indigenous / Western’, and ‘Home / School’ have been added):



Home	Indigenous		Western	School
	Global	↔	Analytic	
Imaginal	↔	Verbal		
Concrete	↔	Abstract		
Reflective	↔	Trial and (teacher) Feedback		
Group	↔	Individual		
Cooperation	↔	Competition		

Hughes and More go on to describe the continuum ‘ends’ typically associated with Indigenous learning as:

- **Global:** at the global (holistic) end of the spectrum, the student understands best when the overall concept is presented first, when the overview is emphasised or when a meaningful context is given.
- **Imaginal:** this learner learns from images (concrete or abstract), symbols and diagrams. These learners are effective at making up their own images, but may have difficulty explaining them verbally.
- **Concrete:** concrete learning emphasises examples that can be directly perceived by the senses. A concrete approach that makes learning meaningful and relevant may be necessary to teach a learner who is unfamiliar with the cultural setting or principle being learned.
- **Reflective:** in this style the learner completely thinks through the new learning before using it. This relates to the observation – imitation style of learning. Here learners do not attempt to imitate until they are certain they can do the task correctly.
- **Group:** here the group is more important than the individual. Learning is primarily to benefit the group as a whole. Also, the group learning process is valued more highly than the individual learning process.
- **Cooperation:** learning is best achieved in small groups rather than as competing individuals. Watson (cited in Hughes and More, 1997) found that urban Aboriginals learn best in small groups based on gender or Aboriginality.

Whilst the above lists of Indigenous learning styles may read (again) like ready-made guides for how to impart knowledge, the question remains: how can they be used to teach western-style abstract concepts? An answer may lie in the recognition that these apparently divergent domains are not incompatible. As Robinson et al. (2007) writes: ‘A strong orientation to English literacy is not necessarily incompatible with an orientation to, or respect for, Indigenous languages. “Culture” is not incompatible with explicit pedagogy even in the early years’. Similarly, Rogoff (cited in Robinson, 2007) argues that ‘traditional teaching and learning styles are suppressed at a cost, and they can be – and are being – effectively incorporated into modern formal education.’

## Which Culture Should be Modelled?

Our previous question ('How do we use Indigenous learning styles to teach abstract western concepts?') may now be couched in a different way: should we use or model those learning styles that enhance and reflect known Indigenous learning strengths, or should we use mainly western styles – i.e. those which Indigenous children are more likely to encounter when they start school? Or, asked another way: will a TV show using mainly Indigenous learning styles foster expectations that may not be met at school, thus exaggerating the very culture 'shock' (upon starting school) that the show hopes to reduce?

Despite their categorisation of learning styles, Hughes and More (1997) go on to say that 'the process of developing ways of learning and learning styles is primarily social ... There does not appear to be any evidence towards an innate predisposition towards particular ways of learning.' In other words, learning styles are themselves *learned*. This suggests they can also be *relearned*, or *added upon*.

This in turn suggests that there is no reason why both styles (ends of the continuums) cannot be utilised together. One practical method of combining them might be to present a given task (or educational benchmark) using, for example, a *concrete* learning style (e.g. separating three leaves from three sticks in an actual bush setting in order to make a pile of sticks), then repeat the 'same' task using an *analytic* learning style (e.g. separating three 'abstract' letters from three numbers on a 'context-less' table, in order to know the difference). In this way, knowledge of what has been learned in the first task can be carried across to the second task, allowing children unfamiliar with the second learning style to understand both its 'purpose' and solution before attempting it, enabling them to practice it with greater confidence, and thus comprehend it with greater ease.

By using both Indigenous and non-Indigenous styles of learning – in contexts familiar to both groups – it seems possible to prepare Indigenous children for the ways of western schooling whilst *simultaneously* maintaining and encouraging their Indigenous identity.

In a related idea, Hughes and More (1997) state that not only are children's individual learning styles not determined solely by cultural background, but there is significant differences in learning styles *within* any cultural group, and considerable overlap in learning styles of individuals *between* cultural groups. In other words, if a task using a *reflective* or *imaginal* learning style is presented, there will likely be numerous non-Indigenous children (including those of migrant and ESL backgrounds) whose learning strengths naturally incline towards the same style, and who will directly benefit by having their strengths recognised and encouraged. And those children whose strengths lie on the *analytic* end of the learning continuum will be exposed to new ways of doing things, thus expanding their learning experiences. In other words, 'Aboriginal students, like all students, should be helped to strengthen their weaker learning styles in order to use the right style according to the requirements of a particular task' (Hughes and More, 1997).

## The Importance of Oral Communication

*'The importance of spoken language as the foundation for all learning is often not fully recognised, and many young Australian Indigenous children are not able to make a strong start in the early years of schooling as the discourses of the family often do not match that of the school.'*  
(Warren et al., 2008)

A qualitative study by Warren et al. (2008) focusing on mathematics, and following a group of Indigenous students through Prep and Grade 1, highlights the dominance of oral communication among Indigenous children. The authors argue that the use of oral communication as a teaching tool is essential to Indigenous students' school success. They state that, for educators, 'understanding and accepting that Aboriginal English (AE) as a dialect of spoken English used by most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is vital ... While Standard Australian English (SAE) is the discourse of the school, teachers need to create a bridge for young Indigenous students between AE and SAE as they grapple with new language, new concepts and vocabulary presented for literacy and numeracy.'

In the study, teachers were required to focus on how to express ideas in both AE and SAE, identifying the differences between each and making sure both were valued. Teachers were asked to situate these discussions in a 'play based' context (whilst maintaining focused adult guidance) to allow students to engage with more formal concepts in a non-threatening environment.

Warren et al. reported that 'the initial results of this research indicate that oral language has a substantive role to play in the development of an understanding of number' and 'All teachers commented that focusing on student's oral language impacted on other areas of curriculum.' One teacher reported that, "Their descriptive language is so much more enhanced than in previous years. They use long sentences to communicate about everything."

The authors go on to note that 'these students were not only learning new concepts, but also learning how to talk and communicate more effectively in Standard Australian English with regard to these concepts. [The study] also provided a language model that demonstrated the ways in which westerners talk about ideas and the different styles of communication.'

The authors note that Indigenous students often arrive at school with little background in 'number' (recall that in traditional Indigenous worldview, counting is irrelevant) and that by focusing on oral language development in the initial phases of schooling these children will be given the chance to 'catch up' with their peers.

### **Some Other 'Modelling' Issues**

Keeffe (cited in Hughes and More, 1997) reports that for certain Indigenous teachers in the Northern Territory, 'the experience of attending schools where their own domain of the person is neglected or ignored is a difficult and traumatic experience'. The same Indigenous teachers reported that 'students who try to be educated in a context that does not support Yanangu ideas, usually fail. The students become full of shame (kunta), as their own ideas about themselves do not correlate with those of the school.' This shame originating from a 'loss of self' can be compounded by the shame caused by the stress and errors encountered when students are required to constantly 'code switch' between cultures and to 'think in two different systems' (Howard, 1998); an effect which in turn causes, amongst other things, confusion, lowered confidence and resistance to educational risk-taking.

In order to discuss methods of addressing these issues it seems relevant to again mention the recent *Young Children and the Media* report (Rutherford, et al., 2010). Citing others, this report states that 'preschool-aged children generally lack the processing space and attention skills required to understand implicitly presented material, such as events that are implied but not directly shown

on the screen. The ability to make complex inferences about a story's implicit content appears to develop only at around 7 to 8 years.' This is important because it suggests that a dramatised portrayal of (for example) a child being asked a question by a teacher to which they do not know the answer may not contain enough information to allow young viewers to consciously connect the dramatisation back to the idea that 'it is okay not to know everything', let alone to the concept of 'shame'. For such connections to occur and the information understood (for the teaching to be successful), the reality of 'shame' may need to be explicitly addressed as a concept in its own right – where its causes and consequences are examined openly and honestly.

The same *Young Children and the Media* report (Rutherford et al., 2010) relates that 'Researchers focusing on the educational outcomes of Sesame Street have argued that where the educational content of a program is integral to the narrative (story) content, children's processing and understanding is increased. Understanding of the story enhances comprehension of the educational content'. When we remember that 'Australian Indigenous individuals and communities continue to value their ancestral stories and oral traditions very highly,' (Mitchie et al., 1998) this point becomes crucial.

There are numerous other cultural and social issues affecting Indigenous children's early school experiences that may require similar 'explicit' attention. Some of these may involve experiences such as:

- feeling left out and confused (not knowing where they belong) when not allowed to join in certain school activities because of their age
- having to learn to talk differently in the two systems
- having to constantly navigate or 'code switch' between two cultures
- being too scared to try for fear of not doing well / unwillingness to report that they don't understand the work
- seeing school as being completely separate from home life
- feeling that the more assimilated they are, the more accepted they are
- being criticised by the teacher for the way they ask a question, rather than listened to in terms of what they want to know.

(Adapted from: Howard, 1998)

This last point invites us to make a distinction between the learning styles favoured by children and the teaching styles used by educators.

## The Role of Adults and Teachers in the Show

*'Having a strong and positive Indigenous identity is important to good educational outcomes, but not by itself. The children must also have a positive self-identity as a student.'* (Penman, 2006)

It seems obvious that a child's identity as a student is affected by their teacher. And (just as obviously) if it is decided that we model a 'real' school, then teachers must also be modelled. If this path is chosen, there is research to support its effectiveness. Noble (cited in Rutherford et al., 2010) proposes that 'parasocial interaction' (a sympathetic adult host to guide and elicit children's participation in the educational content) is crucial to content for this (preschool) age group.

As an example of ‘best teaching practice’, the study by S. Hudspith (cited in Malin, 2003) of ‘Mrs Banks’ – a Darwin-based primary school teacher of Indigenous students – reads like a step by step guide. Mrs Banks’ teaching style, according to Hudspith, was explicit and interventionist; she expected all her students to do well, and regularly told them so. As a result she was loved and respected by both the students and their parents; her students felt confident in their abilities and in themselves, performing better than they had in previous years. As part of her teaching, Mrs Banks helped children to understand that different teachers had different expectations of classroom behaviour, and that all of those teachers must be respected. She also encouraged connection with the children’s homes by having them learn their own and each others’ ‘country’ of origin, and regularly invited visitors (often family members) into the classroom, who were themselves placed into the larger field of land and kin relationships. ‘In this way, Aboriginality was embedded in the mundane aspects of classroom activities and relationships; Aboriginal identities were tacitly reaffirmed in the taken-for-granted ways in which people related to each other and the group’ (Malin, 2003).

Harslett et al. (1999) writes that effective teachers are appreciated by Indigenous students and their parents as good listeners when they take time to find things out about them, when they don’t jump to conclusions, are non-confrontational, don’t chastise or humiliate students in front of others, and negotiate classroom rules and behaviour. Harslett et al. go on to list various other characteristics of good teachers and good teaching practice in regard to Indigenous students. These include:

- the importance of having high expectations of students
- the importance of humour when relating to students
- the ability of teachers to be flexible and sensitive to difference
- the preparedness of teachers to encourage students to take risks while at the same time being sensitive to students not wanting to betray the group by being successful, nor to be shamed by failing.

Fanshaw (cited in Harslett et al., 1999) describes teachers able to accomplish these things as ‘supportive gadflies’ who are ‘warm and demanding’.

When asked in interviews what they liked most about being in their favourite teacher’s (Mr Hart’s) classroom, Indigenous children in a metropolitan Perth primary school gave two main types of answers, in order of frequency:

- 1 ‘He helps’, ‘He explains’, ‘He makes work easier’, ‘He helps you understand’
- 2 ‘He makes the lesson fun’, ‘He gives you exciting things to do’, ‘He isn’t boring’. (Harslett et al., 1999)

A third type of answer involved responses like ‘He lets you be independent’ and ‘You can go and get other kids to help you.’ These last responses are significant in light of Malin’s call for teachers to be aware that ‘Aboriginal children are less dependent on parent and adult guidance and more accustomed to self-regulation’ (Malin, 1998).

The key elements of Mr Hart’s philosophy are ‘student independence, responsibility and respect’. He negotiates a ‘code of honour’ with the students, making sure that they have ownership of

the classroom rules – which they all consider fair – and thus empowering them to self-regulate behaviour and become responsible for their own learning.

While these teaching styles and methods describe what might be seen as universally effective teaching practices, they highlight the positive impacts teaching methods that are sensitive to Indigenous learning styles can have on Indigenous children's education.

In a less positive light are stories of student disengagement due to teaching style. Malin (2003) relates how 'shared misunderstandings' between Indigenous pupils and their teachers is the cause of much stress and anxiety for students, resulting in reduced student engagement and achievement. These misunderstandings include 'insufficient response time allowed [for students] during questioning' and 'misinterpretations [by teachers] of students' attempts to engage about the tasks at hand; resulting in them being reprimanded and excluded from all recognition' – a result that heightened disillusionment and lowered perceived self-ability. Malin adds: 'In a sense, these students' opportunities for academic learning was bartered for their "good" behaviour where "good" behaviour was interpreted differently depending on the respective cultural backgrounds of the students and teacher.'

The above example raises the issue of whether we need to consider modelling not only good teaching styles, but also those that lead to unsuccessful learning outcomes. This is not to suggest *bad* teaching is modelled, but rather to ask whether it would be beneficial showing teachers enforcing typical western classroom 'rules' such as sitting still and listening and putting up your hand before asking a question – as well as depicting the consequences of breaking such rules. Precisely how such 'negative' situations might be depicted on screen, and whether or not they would add anything to student understanding, is difficult to predict.

### Further Challenges in Modelling Teaching Styles

In their study of Indigenous teachers instructing non-Indigenous (preservice) teachers in an Indigenous Australian Studies course, Malezar and Sim (2002) report that Indigenous teachers rarely teach in an abstract or conceptual way. Rather, they 'personalise the approach through anecdotal experiences using cultural, community and personal experiences' and 'prioritise strong human qualities of caring and sharing in the classroom.' Though the 'students' in this example are much older than the ones we hope to influence, the point remains: when it comes to imparting Indigenous knowledge and culture, a teaching style correspondent to that culture will likely be the most effective – even when teaching students from a different culture. In a related point, the MCEETYA discussion paper (2001) suggests that 'greater focus needs to be placed on schools being made "ready for children" rather than children being made "ready for school"'.

Indicated here is a potential schism between teaching styles that best enhance Indigenous self-concept and styles that will be found in most western classrooms. Nowhere is this schism more apparent than in the results of an 'experiment' undertaken by Malin (cited in Harslett et al., 1999). Malin arranged Indigenous and non-Indigenous panelists into groups to (separately) observe an Indigenous teacher and non-Indigenous teacher at work in the classroom. The panelists were then asked to identify which was a 'good' teacher. The results were consistent with cultural attitudes. The non-Indigenous panelists considered the non-Indigenous teacher to be innovative, organised, prepared, efficient, and task-oriented. The Indigenous panelists found the same teacher

to be authoritarian, insensitive, bossy, condescending, unapproachable, and concerned with tasks at the expense of relationships and learning. Conversely, the non-Indigenous panelists found the Indigenous teacher to be disorganized, under-prepared and detached; whereas this teacher was seen by the Indigenous panelists to provide not only the appropriate level of control, but a more relaxed environment that was conducive to learning.

Considering this – and assuming the TV show seeks to model good teaching practice – our question becomes the same one asked of the learning styles: *which style should be modelled?* An Indigenous one which best engages Indigenous children, or a western one which they are more likely to encounter? Is it our intention to educate western teachers how best to teach Indigenous children, or is it to educate Indigenous children in the techniques and manners of non-Indigenous teachers?

Seemingly, it would be optimal to achieve *both* these things. If possible, it would be ideal to model both Indigenous and non-Indigenous styles of teaching in order to educate both children and teachers simultaneously, cross-culturally. The benefits of achieving this would be:

- Indigenous children will have their culture and learning styles reflected in how they are taught, thus enhancing their engagement, reducing their culture shock, and strengthening self-concept
- Indigenous children will be introduced to new teaching styles and practices they will inevitably encounter in a western school culture
- non-Indigenous educators will be provided tools and methods to use and emulate, which successfully engage and teach Indigenous children.

### Is the Content Challenging?

The fact that children live up to what is expected of them is a recurrent theme in the literature. As Roshni Dullaway, a Grade 1 teacher in Doomadgee State School in Queensland, puts it; ‘If you come with low expectations then you’re going to get low results’ (What Works, 2010). Claire Kelly, Principal of St Joseph’s School, Wyndham, WA, says; ‘You can make it easy for kids by not having high expectations, but if they’re not learning they’ll be bored and won’t see a purpose in what they’re doing’ (What Works, 2010).

Rabbitt (1999) states: ‘Particularly when working with ESL students, it is imperative to ensure that the words chosen are simple to ensure clarity and meaning. Conversely the standard of English used must also challenge and expand the student’s vocabulary.’

This need to provide content that is both accessible and challenging is supported by the *Young Children and the Media* report. The report tells us that, according to some researchers, ‘young children’s attention to television is primarily driven by their comprehension of the program’s content’ – rather than being driven by ‘more formal features that elicit orienting reactions such as movement or scene change’ – and that that these ‘formal features will become less attention-worthy once children become familiar with them, while attention to a program that is challenging but somewhat understandable should increase until that content is optimally understood’ (Rutherford et al., 2010).

This in turn suggests that the act of challenging students to move beyond what they are currently capable of is best achieved *gradually*. Roshni, the Grade 1 teacher mentioned earlier stated: ‘When we’re starting to teach about language we’re aiming for command of Standard Australian English, but we go through stages. First, you need to raise awareness in children that there are many languages around. Then we show that every language is equally valued and respected. But, then we need to separate out those languages so that children know what’s ‘school talk’ and what’s ‘home talk’. At the end of the day we want them to be in control and be able to switch codes’ (What Works, 2010).

### The Role of Family and Community in the Show

*‘When Aboriginal people meet each other, the most important information is not what you do or where you work, but how you might be related – where’s your country, who’s your family’* (Zubrick et al., 2006)

The literature is unanimous and unequivocal on the position that family and community are essential to Indigenous children’s success at school. The inclusion and representation of families and communities in the show may well prove to be the deciding factor in its success.

According to Zubrick et al. (2006), knowledge of family, and taking part in family and community activities, form an essential part of an Indigenous child’s early schooling: ‘Aboriginal children’s learning occurs in families and communities, from and with adults and children with whom they have significant relationships. Learning about kinship systems is an important aspect of children’s development as it gives a place and role in society’. Farrar et al., (2007) write that ‘the new concept of school readiness recognises that early childhood development is influenced by characteristics of, and relationships between, the child, the family and the broader social environment’. In an interview on ABC Radio National’s *Ockham’s Razor*, Margot Prior (2010) says that ‘Literacy learning begins very early and it begins at home, and before school entry, so preparing for reading readiness involves parents as well as child care and pre-school experience. Parents need support to provide a rich and varied reciprocal language environment, and to include reading books, as well as telling and discussing stories.’

Community programs that foster links between home and school learning provide evidence of the power of families to help children achieve early school success. A central aim of such programs is to acknowledge parents as first teachers. One such program is the *Families as First Teachers* (FAFT), implemented by the Kuranda District State College, North Queensland (as found in the National Report to Parliament, Indigenous Education and Training, 2006). In this program, ‘learning strategies and activities (“what works at school”) are modelled to families so they can assist their children with literacy and numeracy learning and homework projects. In FAFT workshops teachers make and use learning resources that utilize items readily found in homes. Through this process families are provided with the skills to support their children’s formal learning development. This creates a cycle of success whereby adult’s literacy and numeracy skills are enhanced’.

The same report lists the outcomes achieved from the FAFT program as:

- increased attendance rates of up to 40%
- improved school readiness for Year 1 and Prep students
- a significant reduction in negative behaviour and an increase in positive behaviour
- increased number of family members attending workshops, illustrating strong community support
- increased numbers of children enrolled and engaged in preschool.

Another program is the Learning Together (Literacy) Project, based in Western Australia. This program 'uses a strength-based, preventative, capacity-building approach in the provision of literacy and early learning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous families with children under four years of age' (Walker and Shepherd, 2008). The positive outcomes here include:

- improved parent and child engagement
- parent enrollment in further study
- improved connections for families with a range of children's and family services
- increased parent confidence and understanding in supporting children's learning
- enhanced opportunities to improve their socioeconomic circumstances.

These programs showcase the far-reaching benefits that family involvement in a child's formal education can bring – and not just to the children. In terms of potential TV content, they immediately suggest it would be beneficial to model strong parental involvement. As noted above, this would serve the dual purpose of supporting both student and parental education.

A NSW Department of Education and Training report (2003) recommends the following things for parents and children to do together in order to prepare for school:

- Practice some words in English.
- Practice different ways of asking for help.
- Talk about what school might be like and why children go to school.
- Meet with parents and children who know the school. Talk to teachers at school.
- Find a lunchbox and other food containers that are easy to open.
- Talk about eating at school; what to eat when, and bring home what they haven't eaten.
- Talk about how school and home are different.
- Talk about when parents will pick children up from school.
- Talk about hygiene at school and teach children to practice hygiene at school.

The Possum's Corner Childcare Centre information brochure (2010) lists further ideas:

- Encourage left to right eye movements by pointing to pictures or print from left to right as a story is read, by counting a row of items from left to right touching each item in turn.
- Allow lots of free time drawing on blank paper so that a mature pencil grip can be encouraged and use a variety of drawing and writing materials.

- Encourage your child to copy shapes; practice drawing within these lines or boxes.
- Use the alphabet when your child is trying to write about their artwork, and encourage them to copy the letters once you indicate the letters to use.
- Praise your child's work and effort and involvement.

Whilst it is acknowledged that these are very specific and may or may not be appropriate for our purposes, they illustrate the kinds of strategies that could be modelled for parents.

There are other examples from Indigenous parents themselves. Perry et al. (1998) report that, on the question of *'What should be done to help children get ready for school?'* Indigenous parents (as well as being concerned with formal skills and knowledge) emphasised 'adjustment and disposition.' To them, the important readiness activities included:

- building up respect for teachers
- telling children, 'you're a big boy/girl'
- telling children that they'd be with a group of other kids and it would be fun.

The depiction, on screen, of parent-child interaction would not only allow an approach to school readiness from two different angles (TV to child, and TV to parent) but also reduce the possibility that 'teachers in prior to school settings and schools, and parents ... [would be] working towards the same end (a successful transition to school) but in quite different, possibly even conflicting, ways' (Perry et al., 1998).

Another important area to model might be that of parents interacting with teachers and schools. As Penman (2006) writes, 'If parents do understand and feel involved with the school they will provide better support for their children.' Frigo and Adams (2002), in their research following Indigenous children in 13 schools across Australia, note that: 'Some parents are not involved with the school ... sometimes due to a lack of confidence or uneasiness which may have resulted from their own school experiences.'

For the show's purposes, modelling parent – teacher interaction would serve (again) to educate both parties: parents would learn how to approach schools if they were unsure how to do so, and teachers would learn how to approach parents and invite them in. A tutor from one of the schools in Frigo and Adams' (2002) study relates how the school handled this issue:

*'We actually went into the community and had a class a few times ... Twice we went and we had a couple of the parents come down 'cause they knew we were there – come to watch their children – work at the hall. I think it was probably dads mainly because that was sort of going to bridge into the community and where the parents are to feel – I think less threatened by a different culture ... I think just to encourage them – I think to let them know ... they are a very positive force in their education and that we can often learn from them.'*

The same tutor goes on to say that:

*'Once the home gets that message that the families are very welcome, a lot of the problems sort of fade away...It's very important that the principal is seen as a friend who reaches out and, if the community can't be drawn into the school, the school reaches out and get drawn into the home.'*

The success of a TV show aimed at Indigenous children may well rest on how readily it is ‘drawn into’ Indigenous homes and, equally, how well it draws Indigenous families ‘into the school’.

### **Summary of Points to Consider:**

- The need to address, directly and explicitly, certain (culturally-based) social and emotional issues that might cause confusion for Indigenous children, or their reluctance to take educational risks.
- The need to model the school environment, including the physical space and classroom culture.
- The need to deliver educational content using both Indigenous and western learning and teaching styles.
- The need to teach educational content using unique Indigenous contexts.
- The need to develop content that incorporates, connects and values both Indigenous and western worldviews.
- The need to create a bridge between Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE).
- The need to develop pedagogical methods that either reduce the need for children to ‘code switch’ between cultures, or make ‘code switching’ easier.
- The need to develop educational content that is accessible yet challenging.
- The need to include Indigenous families and wider Indigenous communities as part of the show’s content, including modelling parental educational assistance at home and parental contact with teachers and school.



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