

Aboriginal English

MARK WILLIAMS

"Aboriginal children are without question the most seriously disadvantaged group in Australian education on virtually every available indicator. The National Policy on language seeks to establish mechanisms for national support of the cultural and linguistic dimensions which are necessarily involved in schooling for Aboriginal children, and which are so crucial to their prospects for attaining an appropriate and successful education."

Joe Lo Bianco
(National Policy on Languages)

699

MANY ABORIGINAL children are seriously disadvantaged in their quest to gain an appropriate education in the present education climate. Aboriginal children encounter factors that inhibit their education due to aspects that are beyond their control. The present education system communicates with Aboriginal children in language forms and structures that are neither relevant nor compatible with their cultural learning styles. We believe that Aboriginal children have a unique and particular way of "learning" and "communicating" which is the result of a culture that is moulded from family, community and socio-economic influences.

Rural and urban Aboriginal people often speak a variety of English in their home and family situations that may range from standard Australian English to a dialectal form of English that reflects their identity and culture. This is referred to as Aboriginal English. The form and structure of this language exhibit some speech patterns of standard English as well as speech characteristics and words originating from Aboriginal languages. Therefore, Aboriginal English speech patterns often differ markedly from standard Australian English. Aboriginal English is a very effective medium of communication which has evolved to meet the particular needs and circumstances of its speakers. Aboriginal English also varies across the state due to the people, their culture and community. There are other urban Aboriginal people who use speech patterns which are no different from standard Australian English.

Aboriginal people who converse in Aboriginal English at home and in their community are confronted with different oral, written and body language forms when they enter schools. In terms of language, teachers are generally unaware of the presence of Aboriginal English. This may well affect Aboriginal children's learning experience in schools. Concepts are delivered in language forms that some Aboriginal children have difficulty comprehending as the way they speak and process information can be very different to other children. The Language that

teachers use reflects their upbringing and culture. Their conceptual knowledge has been developed in standard English as are the texts and the curriculum. The delivery of information to children of different cultural and language backgrounds results in confusion, anxiety and misinterpretation and is often culturally biased.

Rarely do texts contain information in a language that Aboriginal children can recognise and identify with.

The extent of how much a child learns is directly related to the experiences the child brings to that situation. Non-Aboriginal children are more likely to succeed at school because their language and experiences are similar to that of the educator.

Many people still believe that in terms of standard English as being 'right' and anything else being 'wrong'. There is not, and never can be any justification for calling one 'right' and the other 'wrong'. I teach them standard English and they use it in the classroom and when they speak to me. But they don't use it in the playground. They revert to Aboriginal English or the vernacular.

Ed Brumby
(Language Problems and Aboriginal Education)

Aboriginal children who speak dialectal forms of English need to acquire mastery over the more formal varieties of Australian English to enable them to function effectively throughout Australian society, and to gain full access to educational and social opportunities. Teacher education and professional development is needed to enhance teacher awareness, skills and effectiveness in this area.

The Aboriginal Education Section in South Australia has been conducting some research to establish how Aboriginal children best learn. We believe that there are teachers who unconsciously devalue the language Aboriginal children bring to school.

It is therefore a major aim of Aboriginal education to make the education system aware of the value and importance of an inclusive curriculum for Aboriginal students which will not only recognise and value the language of Aboriginal children but will teach standard English in a manner which does

not destroy or inhibit the child's home language and cultural base.

Aboriginal English research, documentation and dissemination of information is seen as a major priority for Aboriginal Education. The need for accurate documentation of how rural and urban Aboriginal children learn (such as the case studies in this book) could create significant educational changes in terms of the methodologies and strategies that teachers employ in their classrooms. The non-traditional, rural and urban populations of Aboriginal communities constitute 75% of total Aboriginal numbers in South Australia. We need to cater for these children's education by providing relevant curriculum materials in language forms that are compatible to their cultural learning styles.

There is a need for:

- appropriate research defining Aboriginal English and citing case studies,
 - documented good practice and case studies illustrating how teachers utilize the child's own language to facilitate effective learning,
 - the development and implementation of an Aboriginal language policy in South Australian schools and
 - comprehensive inservice and professional development to be available to teachers of Aboriginal children.
-
-