

# Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners Project Rationale

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The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners Project was based on the need to create a device to effectively monitor the reading and writing development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose Home Language (HL) is not Standard Australian English (SAE). The focus group for this project was Junior Primary students, i.e. Preschool to Year 3.

This project was developed in response to the recommendations from the *Review of Education and Employment programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Education Queensland* (Hobbs, M. & Murphy, L:1999) which highlighted the need to develop processes which enable the tracking of literacy achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within a framework for continuous improvement.

Education Queensland now has a formal policy that recognises and guides practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners who are not proficient in Standard Australian English. It states:

Education Queensland recognises the valuing of the home language and culturally inclusive pedagogy and assessment strategies as fundamental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving literacy proficiency in Standard Australian English.

This policy affirms Education Queensland's (1999:16) commitment to:

literacy teaching built on recognition of second and/or third language learning; monitoring and reporting of student progress in ways that enable students, teachers and parents to collaborate in strategies for improving students' learning; training for teachers in cross-cultural pedagogy; and high levels of language and literacy proficiency of teachers and teacher aides with a second language background.

Education Queensland has collated current research and effective practices to develop an approach to literacy and literacy measurement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose Home Language is not Standard Australian English. Oral language development is a major aspect of literacy development. As such, it is the foundation for the development of reading and writing. The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners for Reading and Writing (Junior Primary) have been designed to reflect this oral language focus.

## **Background**

Education Queensland has endorsed the use of the NLLIA ESL Bandscales (McKay, P., 1994) to monitor the language and literacy development of students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) in Queensland. These "Bandscales" were devised as a tracking device for teachers of ESL students who are immersed in Standard Australian English-speaking classroom environments.

During 1997, the NLLIA ESL Bandscales were trialled in the Torres Strait<sup>1</sup> but were found to be ineffective as they were based on a specific ESL context which did not transfer to the remote language learning contexts of indigenous students.

Whilst the NLLIA ESL Bandscales are based on second language learning principles, for them to be used effectively by teachers of indigenous students, they needed to be adapted to suit the learning context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who speak a Home Language other than SAE. The following considerations needed to be factored into the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners for them to be an effective diagnostic tool.

### **Considerations for Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners**

Within the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners, deliberate attempts have been made to distinguish between the two identified groups and to specifically identify linguistic and cultural features of both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal peoples. Similarities in oral language traditions and similar language learning contexts make them appropriate to use for both cultural groups.

The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners are written specifically for educators of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children whose Home Language is not Standard Australian English. During the project's development, the following considerations were acknowledged and need to be given recognition in effectively implementing the Bandscales:

- language backgrounds of students;
- literacy learning for students whose home language is not SAE;
- cultural backgrounds of students and the influence of these in the classroom; and
- hearing impairment factors.

### **Current Monitoring**

At present in Queensland, it is mandatory to plot all students on the Reading Developmental Continuum (Rees, D., 1994) and the Writing Developmental Continuum (Raison, G and Rivalland, J., 1994) in Years 1-3. These continua do not recognise or cater for the vastly different cultural and linguistic experiences of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students whose Home Language is not Standard Australian English.

The First Steps Continua contains underlying assumptions about the learner, e.g. that students have a developed system of Standard Australian English, that students have a range of print literacy experiences in their home environment, that students have been exposed to writing implements. This is evidenced in the following examples from the initial phases of development in reading and writing:

*[The child] "Focuses on the meaning of a television program, story, or other text viewed, listened to or "read". Responses reflect understanding."  
(From Phase A: Role Play Reading, Key Indicator 3)*

If the child has had limited experiences with Standard Australian English, they will be unable to focus on meaning, listen for understanding or respond to texts used in the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> Trials were conducted by the author, who at the time was the ESL Advisory Visiting Teacher for the Torres Strait, Cape and Gulf School Support Centre.

*"Displays reading-like behaviour"*

(From Phase A: Role Play Reading, Key Indicator 3)

This assumes that the child comes to school with an understanding of print literacy and has been exposed to significant adults engaging in reading. In remote communities where there is little environmental print and Standard Australian English is not used in most interactions, this is not necessarily the case. Also, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have oral language traditions rather than literate so exposure to literacy in the first language is unlikely.

*"Assigns message to own symbols"*

(From Phase A: Role Play Writing, Key Indicator 1)

This indicator assumes that the child is familiar with classroom literacy implements and knows how to use them to create symbols. For communities with oral traditions, there is little need for writing implements, when information is passed on orally.

*"Shows beginning awareness of directionality"*

(From Phase A: Role Play Writing, Key Indicator 5)

Again this assumes that the child has an understanding of print literacy.

The beginning phase of the Writing continua continually makes assumptions that students will have a well-developed oral system in Standard Australian English. To be able to accomplish such tasks as "orally recounts own experiences", "talks about their drawing and writing", "tells adults what to write" and "states the purpose for their own writing", students need to be able to vocalise statements in their second language.

Whilst the First Steps continua may be valid to use with non-Indigenous students who speak Standard Australian English fluently, they do not recognise or cater for the different language and literacy learning context within which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engage, nor do they recognise or value the differing knowledge or skills which these students bring to the classroom.

# 1. Language Backgrounds

## Languages

The first language of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland is not Standard Australian English. Within Queensland, a variety of traditional and modern languages and/or dialects are spoken by indigenous peoples.

Traditional indigenous languages have been maintained in some Aboriginal Communities of the Cape and Gulf, eg. *Wik Mungkan* in Aurukun or *Lardil* on Mornington Island. Likewise, in the Torres Straits, *Kala Kawaw Ya* is still the first language of children on Boigu, Saibai and Dauan Islands.

Since European contact, modern languages have emerged as a result of trade and settlement. Pidgin languages which contained simplified language structures occurred as a form of communication between the different cultures. These pidgin languages developed into creoles, ie. distinct languages with their own set of grammatical structures and other linguistic features, when a generation spoke it as a first language. Australia has several creoles which have been spoken for at least three generations. These include Torres Strait Creole, spoken in the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland, and Kriol, spoken in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Aboriginal English, a dialect of English, has also developed as a result of European contact. In many Aboriginal communities throughout Australia including both urban and rural settings, Aboriginal English is the regional dialect and a valid variety of speech.

In linguistic terms Aboriginal English is a dialect of English. That is, it is mutually intelligible with Standard English, and it is rule governed or systematic... There are a number of Aboriginal English dialects, or more accurately a continuum of Aboriginal dialects, ranging from close to Standard English at one end (the acrolect), to close to Aboriginal Kriol at the other (the basilect). (Eades, D.,1999:33)

## Transparency

These modern Australian creoles/dialects contain much English vocabulary and conversations may be superficially understood by an English-speaking listener, especially if the context is known. As the languages/dialects have developed, English vocabulary has derived different concepts or meanings. "Sometimes understanding what Kriol/Aboriginal English speakers are saying is more difficult because of the English base. It can lull the unwary into a false sense of security because similarities are heard but differences are missed." (Berry and Hudson, 1997:7). This language similarity or transparency may cause difficulties for students, unless they are aware of explicit differences between the languages/dialects. This can be seen in the following example from Shnukal (1995:2) from her Consultancy Report for Thursday Island State High School:

Because it [Torres Strait Creole] superficially resembles English, teachers assume that the students should be able to cope easily with English. However, students say they are continually translating from English into the Creole and vice-versa and are often embarrassed when called on to perform in English.

This transparency has much influence on literacy learning. Comprehending texts in reading is based on an understanding of Standard Australian English and its associated culture. Students who speak a Creole or Aboriginal English may have a different conceptual understanding of vocabulary used within the text and gain a different meaning based on their language and culture. For example, in Torres Strait Creole, "to *draun*" (from "drown") means to submerge one's head under the water but not die. Obvious confusion would occur for a child reading a Standard Australian English text about drowning. If the purpose of reading is to gain meaning, an understanding of the explicit differences between the creole/dialect and SAE is essential.

Likewise, in writing, students need to have a developing competence in Standard Australian English to be able to write effectively. As well as vocabulary differences, students need to learn the differences in sounds, language (or grammatical) structures and generic structures which vary between the languages/dialects to lead towards improved literacy learning.

Acceptance of the Home Language as a legitimate language/dialect is necessary if teachers are to value its use in the classroom. Due to historical factors however, there

...is usually a greater acceptance for traditional Aboriginal languages than for those based on English. Unfortunately many people, including some Aboriginal people, have mistaken ideas about Aboriginal English and Kriol. They believe that they are not real languages and use derogatory terms such as "rubbish language".

When teachers fail to accept and acknowledge the home language of the students two things happen: the students' self-esteem diminishes and the teachers' strategies are aimed at correction and compensation for perceived language deficits. The result is less effective teaching and learning and growing frustration on the part of both teacher and student. (Berry, Hudson, 1997:8)

For this reason, the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners includes advice to "accept and value the Home Language" throughout the documents.

In the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners where a Creole/Aboriginal English example has been written, an orthography (standardised spelling) which is different from the Standard Australian English form has been used. The orthography used is a standard linguistic orthography, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have not traditionally been in written form, eg "draun" (from "drown"). In this way, identification of the Home Language/dialect as a language form distinctly different from Standard Australian English has been achieved.

## 2. Literacy Learning

### Oral Language Traditions

Traditionally, Torres Strait Islander cultures were oral. Language was passed from generation to generation in spoken, rather than written form. Likewise, Aboriginal languages are also oral. As Malcolm (1999:2) states:

Aboriginal people are heirs to a rich, orally transmitted cultural tradition. The oral skills which are imparted to them as children both embody Aboriginal culture and provide them with the means of maintaining it. These skills are, for many Aboriginal children, the primary means of approaching experience and knowledge, that is, they are fundamental to learning.

Modern Australian indigenous languages/dialects are also oral, although recently there have been moves towards writing in these languages in some areas. On the other hand, many Asian and European-based languages, including Standard Australian English have literate traditions, with children being immersed in and exposed to literacy practices prior to school.

The school focus on literacy learning continually makes assumptions about the learners' backgrounds, especially towards prior literacy experience.

Most children with a literate tradition have been exposed to print and print usage for five years before entering school, i.e. they are, in reality, in their fifth year of literacy development. Many of the more recent teaching practices aim to build upon the knowledge of print that these children already have. Children with an oral tradition have not seen print used by significant others in order to meet their everyday needs. These children enter school most probably in their first year of literacy development. (Cunnington, 1994: 39)

As this is the case for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, recognition of, exposure to and engagement in real-life literacy practices needs to occur at every available opportunity in the school environment. At the same time, given that oral language is "fundamental to learning" according to Malcolm, emphasis should be placed on a broader "two way" approach to education, recognising the oral skills that students already have, learning from them and expanding upon them.

Within the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners, Pre-levels have been included in both Reading and Writing to recognise that students may not have developed concepts of print literacy. The Major Teaching Emphases provide strategies which encourage early literacy development based on an understanding of the students' home culture. At the same time, the Pre-levels also recognise that students do have knowledge and skills which may not be recognised in the school context and that teachers need to be aware of what their students can do to build upon this knowledge as well as identifying what their students need and working on this.

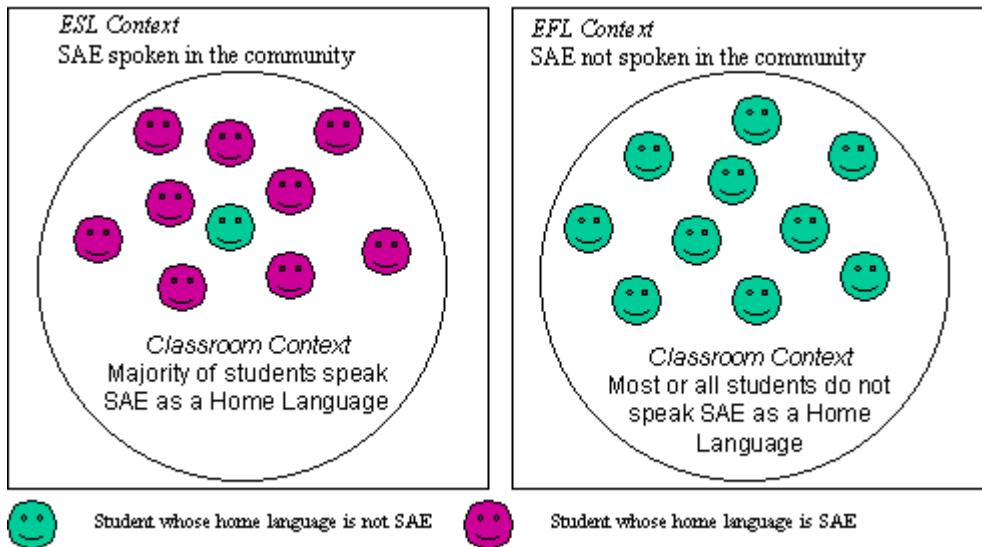
### Classroom context

In many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where a traditional indigenous language, a Creole or Aboriginal English is the common language spoken, active engagement in Standard Australian English may not occur or may occur infrequently outside the school environment. These students are

learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) rather than English as a Second Language (ESL). (See Table 1.) For many students in these areas, exposure to Standard Australian English occurs for the first time when the child enters Year One. Given this, teachers of students in these remote schools are in a unique language teaching situation in Queensland. Students are learning Standard Australian English in the similar way to that of mainstream students learning a Language Other Than English in an urban classroom.

ESL teaching pedagogy such as immersion models of language learning, as used with immigrant students entering an English-speaking majority in the classroom are inappropriate, because the language of the majority in community classrooms is not Standard Australian English. Whereas ESL students need to learn Standard Australian English to have their needs fulfilled in a classroom context, EFL students can communicate effectively with members of their class in their Home Language without the use of Standard Australian English (SAE).

**Table 1. Diagram of School and Social Context for Students whose Home Language is not English in Queensland Schools.**



The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners have recognised this differentiation and incorporated alternative EFL language learning and pedagogy, focusing on explicitly teaching Standard Australian English and developing oral language as vital factors in the development of literacy.

### 3. Cultural Backgrounds of Students

The classroom culture and its associated language use is alien to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Because "Standard English comes from the base of a literacy-oriented culture and is biased towards decontextualised expression..." (Malcolm, 1992:26), students who have oral language traditions may experience difficulties. To overcome this, the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners, within the Major Teaching Emphases, advises contextualising literacy experiences for students.

Prevalent in this decontextualised environment of the school is a style of teaching which is foreign to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Within a classroom setting, there are assumed rules about behaviour, including conversational interactions. For example, in a western style classroom, students are expected to follow teacher directions immediately and take turns in speaking to the teacher. Confusion can arise if students are not aware of these assumed behaviours.

Direct questioning is an example of western teaching style which creates much confusion for teachers interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Students may not respond to direct questions given by the teacher or may not know that responses need to be given immediately following a question. The factor of shame may discourage students from responding in front of the whole class in case they respond with an inappropriate answer. Students may need to be gradually introduced to the process of questioning through adults modelling. At the same time, teachers need to be aware of cultural factors such as "shame" and students' individual preferences to provide opportunities for students to develop "Western" culture when confident.

#### Reading

Cultural factors influence reading behaviours also. Assumptions cannot be made about the learners' concepts towards reading. This is evidenced in a report from Sister Theresa Ward who became involved with Aboriginal teachers in a bilingual program. She noted that these Aboriginal teachers...

had a quite different perception of reading from her own:  
Many of the Aboriginal teachers thought reading was calling out words as they appear on paper. To many of them, the idea that words were meant to make a story was completely new...After talking to them about their school experience of reading, it became clear that many thought reading was learning the pages of the Bush Books or other readers off by heart... Looking back, they realised that the main purpose of their reading lessons was to please the teacher...(in Malcolm, I.G., 1992:27)

This ritual reading, where the students read to please the teacher has also been observed by teachers of Torres Strait Islander students.

The need to please the teacher demonstrates the importance that relationship building has on learning for indigenous students. This is evidenced in student behaviours such as a group of children "calling out" inappropriate answers to questions and ritual reading. In both cases, the students have learnt that, to please the teacher, they must complete some ritual.

It is vital that teachers plan literacy experiences based on real purposes for real-life audiences. Students need to observe adults reading for pleasure as well as for other purposes. Reading activities within the classroom must be carefully



monitored with children being introduced to new language and cultural concepts that are contained within the texts. The children need to perceive reading activities as relevant to their lives.

## Writing

Early childhood students will tend to write the way they speak. The cultural knowledge and discourse conventions that the child has in their Home Language will influence the course of the written task. For students who have mastered control over the writing process, transference of Home Language features to the written format may occur. This cultural transference may be observed especially in written narratives.

Due to the oral-based culture, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' early attempts at narratives may include repetition or multiple repetition, as Malcolm, et al. (1999:54) state "for stylistic effect". Repetition of words or phrases may be used orally to develop suspense or anticipation in storytelling. When a child transfers this oral language feature to the written form, a teacher may misinterpret the student's purpose in using this feature. For example, a teacher may assume that the child is repeating the phrase to lengthen the text or that the child may only be confident writing this one phrase and has therefore written it a number of times so as to be seen as a writer. Being aware of the student's level of writing development and observing the child before and during the writing process will assist the teacher in identifying appropriate strategies to support the child's writing.

Another feature of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' Home Languages which may influence writing is *parsimony*, that is, where "one should use as few words as possible to get one's message across. (Malcolm, I.G., 1994:298). Malcolm, et.al. (1999:32) elaborates further:

In Aboriginal English a speaker is under no obligation to provide all the information required for understanding. Aboriginal English values economy of words so a short phrase can be used to express a lot of meaning. The responsibility for understanding lies with the listener. The listener should already be familiar with the context and be able to work out what is said. By contrast, in Standard Australian English, and especially in more public settings, the responsibility lies with the speaker to ensure that he or she is understood. The speaker will therefore use a lot of words to fill in the details in case the listener is unaware of them. To a speaker of Aboriginal English, non-Aboriginal speech appears repetitive and unnecessarily detailed and an Aboriginal person can get very frustrated with a non-Aboriginal person who seems to require lengthy explanations to understand a simple statement.

Generic structures, such as narratives, which rely on expanding descriptions may be difficult for students whose approach to language is to economise on words. Again, students need to be exposed to the differences between Home Language structures (which will be oral) and written Standard Australian English genres. Frequent modelling and explicit teaching with appropriate scaffolding can assist students in developing their written language in Standard Australian English.

## Valuing the Home Language and Culture

Throughout the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners, emphasis is placed on acknowledging and valuing the home language of students in the classroom. Whilst this may occur for speakers of traditional indigenous languages, as Malcolm , et. al. (1999:4) states:

For education to meet the needs of Aboriginal students it has to meet the twin goals of inclusion and empowerment. As long as Aboriginal English and all that it stands for is unrecognised or excluded by the school, the goal of inclusion cannot be met for most students. School will be seen as a threat to the most meaningful part of their lives, an alien, unfriendly place. The second goal depends on the provision of effective literacy skills in standard English. However, this is unlikely to be achieved without the first.

Throughout school, we encourage students to develop independence, decision-making skills and the ability to work in groups. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these are skills which the students already have prior to school. Given this, teachers should be able to maximise this.

Unfortunately, teachers of Aboriginal students who come from a Western style of teaching may see these behaviours as a direct threat to their authority.

The teacher comes into the Aboriginal classroom authorised by society to control the learning behaviours which take place there. His/(her) Diploma of Teaching legitimises him/ (her) as a teacher. What he does not realise is that this credential carries no weight with the Aboriginal children, and he cannot stand on his authority to make them communicate with him. The teacher will gain credentials with his Aboriginal pupils by the way he treats them. Communication will be enabled and facilitated to the extent that teacher and pupil accept one another as interactants according to mutually acceptable sociolinguistic conventions. (Malcolm, I.G., 1980:41)

As well as teaching Standard Australian English and its associated culture, the teacher needs to learn about the languages and cultures of students in their class. In this way, teachers can utilise skills which the students have whilst informing students of the Western classroom culture and make explicit expectations for students. At the same time, teachers may need to adapt their behaviours to accommodate the students' culture to assist the learning process.

## 4. Hearing impairment

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will be affected by hearing impairment, especially through Otitis Media (or Middle Ear disease). This condition often results in a mild to moderate conductive hearing loss. "Prevalence figures for Queensland indicate thirty to eighty percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school children suffer from Otitis Media...This compares to fifteen percent in the non Aboriginal and Torres Strait [Islander] school child population." (Dept. of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, 1994:71) The impact of Otitis Media on language learning is significant, as listening ability is essential for effective language development. Students who have or have had Otitis Media may have delays in the development of their first language. These delays in first language development will impinge upon second language development.

In the development of reading and writing, students are expected to be able to utilise a wide range of auditory skills, eg. isolating individual sounds in words, combining sounds, identifying and producing rhyming words. Hearing loss can

significantly interfere with the development of these auditory skills which are essential for literacy development.

For this reason, strategies within the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners include referring to Hearing Impairment advisors and Speech Language Pathologists. These advisors have specialised knowledge to assist teachers in incorporating teaching strategies, listening programs and intervention practices into classroom and whole school literacy programs to maximise learning outcomes for students.

### **Correlations between Bandscales and the Continua**

Whilst both the First Steps Continua and the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners are designed to track development of Reading and Writing of students, the contexts on which they have been written are different. Correlations in literacy development between first and second language learner groups can be made (see Appendices 1 and 2), but it needs to be acknowledged that oral language development will play a major role in literacy development of the latter.

### **Conclusion**

The Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners have been devised using current language and literacy research. Advice in their writing has been given by a wide range of teachers, education advisors and academics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The reading and writing teaching strategies which have been included were given by teachers who have worked effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and are designed as a guide. Most importantly, teachers need to be aware of their students' literacy needs to identify those strategies which will be most appropriate for their particular group of students.

At present, the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners have been designed to suit the language and literacy needs of a specific group of students. As new research and societal changes may affect the information contained within the documents in the future, the Bandscales have been published on a Website to cater for future amendments if necessary.

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**Appendix 1. Correlation between reading monitoring devices.**

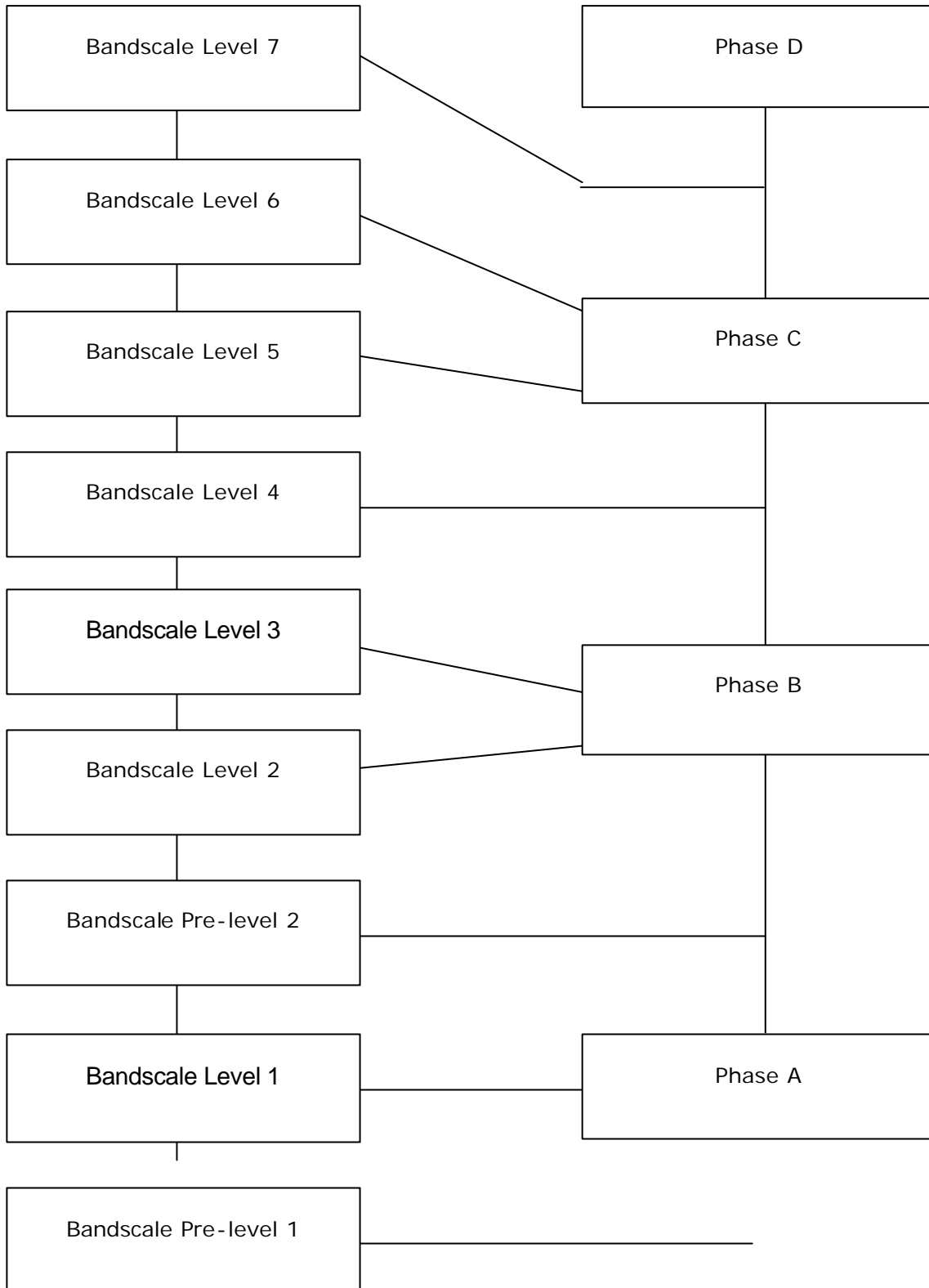


Table 1. Correlation between the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners and the Reading Developmental Continuum. (Rees, D. 1994)



## Appendix 2. Correlation between writing monitoring devices.

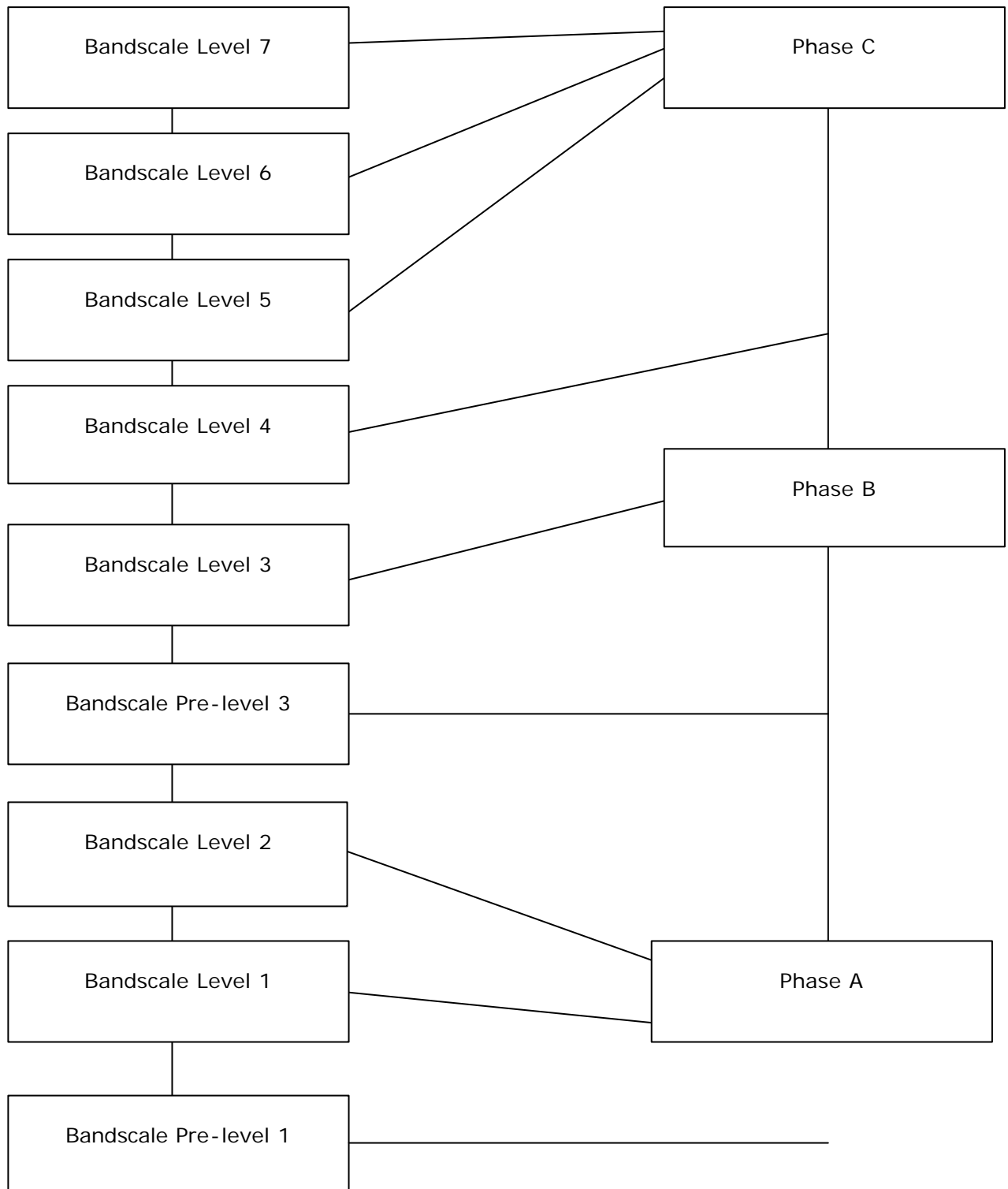


Table 2. Correlation between the Bandscales for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners and the Writing Developmental Continuum. (*Raison, G. and Rivalland, J. 1994*)