

Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education

Fully Revised Edition

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PREFACE

Since the first edition of *Reform and Resistance* was published in 2003, significant developments have impacted on the field of Indigenous education. The Howard government's introduction of Shared Responsibility Agreements and the Northern Territory Intervention embodied a focus on education as did the Rudd/Gillard Government's Closing the Gap commitment and the measures to enhance accountability for school performance. In fact, there is now a greater degree of bipartisanship in Indigenous affairs policy than has existed for the past few decades. However, this consensus has overseen a shift away from a so-called 'rights' agenda in Aboriginal affairs to one of focusing on socio-economic outcomes. Not all agree that such a shift will produce the desired outcomes.

Nevertheless, the shift has served to heighten the focus of state and federal governments on the state of education for Indigenous students. This renewed focus has highlighted that progress towards educational equality for Indigenous students continues to be painfully slow, although the new impetus in policy and funding may be a spur to faster progress.

This fully revised edition of *Reform and Resistance* brings together a range of experts from across Australia who draw on their research to examine and reflect on the progress and the challenges in Indigenous education. In setting out the issues, a balance has been struck between research/theory-based perspectives and practitioner-based ones. The combination of the two approaches will best serve the diverse audiences for whom this book is aimed: pre-service teachers, educational administrators and policy makers.

The structure of the book is mainly thematic. Each chapter highlights a critical issue and, as with the last edition, we have taken a broad scope of the historical, cultural, political and pedagogical influences on the education of Indigenous young people. While we have tried to avoid unnecessary duplication of issues, we have encouraged authors to provide whatever context is necessary on a particular topic. The result is a diversity of perspectives on some of the key issues.

We have been conscious, too, of placing as much emphasis as possible on the diversity of Indigenous voices on this important topic. Several of the authors (and one of the editors) are Indigenous and we value their input. But a large body of material exists that embodies Aboriginal perspectives on education and we have tried to give emphasis to this material.

Aboriginal educational disadvantage ranks as one of Australia's most pressing social issues, and it is our hope that this book will encourage debate and contribute to the development of best practice in the field.

Quentin Beresford

Gary Partington

Graeme Gower

BEGINNINGS...LIVING AND LEARNING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS

Helen McCarthy

Disclaimer: I wish to advise Aboriginal readers that while pseudonyms have been used, there are stories relating to deceased people in the following section.

I grew up on the wild southern coast of Western Australia where I had the freedom to surf the beaches and roam the open empty spaces, so having to move to Perth to attend university was truly a rude awakening. Clearly it was going to take something special to capture both my spirit and attention to hold me in the city. I studied primary teaching, majoring in Aboriginal Education which enabled me to complete my pre-service teaching practices in remote Aboriginal schools in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions in Western Australia. In addition, every year one of our enclave lecturers would organise awesome field trips to places of Aboriginal significance. Off we would go in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program bus, all fifteen of us, out east beyond the city to the desert and the ancient ochre caves or down south to the kitchen midden mounds and rock art sites. As a graduate I believed my lecturers had inculcated me well and that my time spent in this rich context allowed me to grow even more deeply respectful of the multifarious Aboriginal

ways of being and their attendant knowledge systems. I had steadily developed and gained what I thought was a pragmatic compilation of cultural competencies, but nothing prepared me for what I was bestowed.

William Pinar wrote that our lives and lived experiences are, 'not mere smudges on the mirror' (Pinar 1981, p. 184) but are, in fact, illuminating and the prerequisite for cultivating our capacity to know, explain and facilitate our capability towards transformation. Likewise, William Earle observed that when we write autobiographically, we write to ask, 'what it is for me to exist...Ontological autobiography...is a question of a form of consciousness' (cited in Pinar, 1981, p. 184). To authenticate my knowledge rather than write as an academic, I write this chapter autobiographically in an attempt to allow my consciousness a form to express what I have lived and learned. Doing it in this way has generated a reflexive awareness of better understanding my role as I participated firstly as a neophyte teacher, then as a student of life and then eventually as an educator. The first time I began to reconstruct my teaching experiences, I trawled around in my past, initially feeling shy to write about myself unabridged but was comforted to read, 'understanding of self is not narcissism; it is a precondition and a concomitant condition to the understanding of others. The process of education is not situated – and cannot be understood in the observer, but in we who undergo it' (Pinar 1981, p. 186). And undergo it I did. I got involved. I became what Giroux (1992) calls a 'border crosser'. I became transfixed and transformed: a single white face in a black world what seemed like galaxies away from my home. This is my journey...

My journey to the Other world

My first teaching placement in the 1980s was on an island deep in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, renowned for its fierce war-like clans and speakers of Anindilyakwa, considered by linguists one of the most complex languages spoken on earth. Flying onto the island I could see an extensive mine site with a gaping hole in the ground interspersed with a series of tailing dams. A multinational corporation had established the lucrative mine and a township characterised by lavish, spacious elevated homes, luxuriant tropical gardens and superb sporting and social facilities for their 2000 or so staff. Where I lived was diametrically opposed.

Nothing in my town seemed equivalent; not the dusty roads, the dilapidated houses with broken or missing louvers, the smells, the noises, the Aboriginal women brightly clad in their zipper front 'mission' style dresses, the naked children, the campfire lights, the unrelenting humidity of the steamy days and nights. Everything about the daily rhythm of life in my town reeked third world; it was as if I had actually left Australia. And in the midst of this extraordinary vibrant community, I was alone, completely reliant on my ability to learn to live amongst it and make a life of it.

After a sleepless sweltering night I walked to school grateful for the early morning coolness. The school was quaint: an older, double storey structure built from local timbers, with walls of louvres on all sides allowing for greater cross-ventilation to take advantage of the occasional breeze. I could see people chatting and preparing for the day and hear their conversations from inside the rooms as they wafted down to me. I really liked this

notion that the community could also hear and observe what was going on in their children's classrooms.

My first day and the following month, however, were an unmitigated disaster. To my distress, during this time none of the students looked at me, much less talked to me. I knew I was white but this was weird, I felt as though I was actually invisible. The students' familiarity with having white teachers arrive and leave within a very short time was based on convincing longitudinal testimony: They simply made no effort to engage with me because as far as they were concerned, I would soon be gone.

...

I lived twelve years in Arnhem Land.

How life became a kaleidoscope: new ways of seeing my world

Living and learning with Aboriginal people carefully crafted my pedagogical practices leading me to want to know more. This desire afforded me an opportunity to merge praxis with theory, undertaking qualitative research in a doctoral study. I have written a critical auto/ethnographic investigation that explored the struggle for culturally-sensitive educational pathways for Aboriginal students incorporating the impact of this transformative journey on me, documenting the 'outsider' who eventually, after learning the language and ways of living, becomes the 'insider', and I still did not get to tell half of it. So in this chapter I whittle that twelve year experience into a splinter of what I learnt, was taught, was allowed to know and was so generously bestowed during the time of my socio-cultural immersion in Arnhem Land. Following this, I returned home and spent

another fifteen years in Wongutha country in the south east of Western Australia working and learning with Aboriginal peoples.

I present this commentary as my personal observations and acknowledge that they may not be the same experiences of what others in a similar setting may have encountered. My intent is to write with a profound hope that these few observations can be of some benefit, so that the same excruciating and costly mistakes I made perhaps will not be made by others. This list is by no means complete.

A few personal observations

Looking back, I wonder at the perpetually diverse events and episodes I was privileged to experience and I marvel how these have impacted on my conscious as well as unconscious behaviours.

Another space

The island seems like a technicolour dream I have awoken from, not sure whether to believe it or not.

Funny how it is the small things that give it away, like always using my hand in a questioning up turned motion or picking things up from the floor with my toes.

My dad laughed when I dropped a shirt which I was about to hang on the clothes line to the ground and immediately effortlessly flicked it back up with my foot. He asked 'Did those island girls teach you that?'

I know within me are learned sacred codes, ways of knowing that have been deeply etched in my psyche, as there are some

things that linger in a space that I never totally understood, but only got to guess at its sanctity (December, 1984).

While my reflections are taken from a different time in a different space, the experiences contained in this chapter are still relevant. I suggest that they may possibly provide you with some familiar backgrounds that customarily seldom change in this amazing environment you are about to launch yourself into. I hope these few personal observations are pragmatic and usable and serve some purpose in your preparation for teaching and learning in remote and rural communities.

Normally I would write that ‘reconnaissance is seldom wasted’, but in this case simply nothing will prepare you for what you are about to undergo, so my greatest advise is just go with it. There are many reasons for this:

- Your previous ‘trusty’ knowledge and understanding of where you sat within your world and how things worked is now unreliable and suddenly seemingly useless. Your new daily practices move to a rhythm more akin to tides and seasons.
- The spoken language of your new community comes with an entire unique set of reverences, the tongue is intimately connected with the teeth and lips, phonemes pressed out retroflexed or interdental. Get these right or you are sure to offend.
- Silence and sign languages are explicitly imperative and meaningful, learn to know when and how to use them.
- Getting a response to a question cannot be taken for granted and often an extended length of silence transpires. Be

mindful not to interject and repeat the question as, more than likely, you will never get a reply.

- Try not to make yourself acceptable by dropping the names of all your Aboriginal acquaintances to members of your new community. Let the Aboriginal person ask you questions about your possible Aboriginal contacts.
- For cultural propriety, back to back often replaces face to face. Due to avoidance protocols, certain relatives cannot communicate directly with each other; for example, a husband cannot speak to his mother-in-law and she must move quickly away to avoid eye contact .
- Understand and identify these relational connections because students in your class are obligated to sanction these avoidance protocols.
- Time seems luxuriously blurred and life happens at an exquisitely gracious pace until there is a fight, or the arrival of the mail plane.
- Relational obligations determine all events and hence all actions, carried out in a fitting manner, seldom for reasons relating to time, deadlines or money.
- Family/kinship/country connections are allied and concomitant. Therefore if there is a dispute and *you* need support, many Aboriginal people refrain from confrontation and have a 'mild record' of backing non-Aboriginal people. You may need to seek advocacy in other quarters.
- Social interaction transpires as functionally egalitarian, but if an elder says something that everyone knows is incorrect, all remain silent.
- The living present is preferred; it is the here and now that matters. Thinking about the long-term or being

future-orientated implies ambition which can be viewed as 'incongruous'.

- The fundamental belief system is that every member of the community is beholden to their country and their clan.
- Going bush for many Aboriginal people is a way to gain privacy compared to living in town where they are forced to share public spaces.
- In Aboriginal culture, sorcery is real and ever present. You will see and hear things outside of your realm of comprehension. (Black) magic happens.
- Be authentic and be yourself. Aboriginal people have an uncanny skill in detecting when a person is being 'gammon' (false).

Certain school and community protocols are non-negotiable and must be observed regardless.

Some community protocols I have observed include:

- Never assume the right to take a person's photograph. Always ask permission and don't be offended if rebuked.
- Never show images or paintings of deceased people. Always forewarn that there may be images of people who have died and then once informed people can choose to view or look away.
- Never assume that people are known by one name. They may be referred to by their nickname or their ritual name, subsection name, moiety name, totemic name, position in their kinship name or called a name based on the individual's relationship to someone else.
- Never wander through a camp to look for someone without

an invitation. If no one approaches you, then it is clear no one wants to see you.

- Never walk straight up to the front door when you are permitted to do a house call. While there may not be a fence, there is an unseen boundary. It is wise to wait for the dogs to bark to draw attention to yourself.
- Never go to any ceremonial grounds without the appropriate people to accompany you.
- Never hit a camp dog; learn the vernacular for 'get away'. These canine assets traditionally play several vital roles including keeping people warm at night and scaring malignant spirits off through their barking.
- Never sell/offer/bring alcohol into a dry or alcohol-free community. Don't fall victim of people who will bribe you because they will not be there to defend you when the police escort you to court and then off the community.
- Never compromise yourself by being alone with an Aboriginal community member of the opposite gender. Always have a chaperone to serve as an alibi, preventing innuendo and gossip as this can have a maliciously detrimental effect on your position.
- Never underestimate the power of humour to defuse a faux pas or neutralise conflict. Aboriginal people see wittiness in all sorts of situations.

Some school protocols I have observed include:

- Never assume you can apply your ontological world view on to those you teach. Aboriginal child rearing strategies are different. Children are co-constructors of their own being and, as a consequence, enjoy significant independence

and experiential freedoms. They are raised with an expectation they will develop the capacity for self-regulation, self-motivation and self-efficacy.

- Never abruptly wake a sleeping student as they may not want to be suddenly taken out of their dreaming.
- Never use direct questioning as a pedagogical device to elicit what knowledge a student may possess. Rather put the question in the form of a proposition then you will get a clear yes or a no response.
- Never use complex explanations that describe more than one thing or idea. Rather demonstrate what you want achieved. You may need to repeat what you want modelled several times as often Aboriginal students are shy to 'have a go'.
- Never push a student for an answer or for a judgment, rather give them time to come to a decision and use terms like maybe, later, or after.
- Never focus singularly on an individual student – communal group paradigms work best.
- Never use corporal punishment or berate a student publicly.
- Never force a student to sit next to their 'poison cousin' – respect avoidance relationships.
- Never tease an uninitiated male adolescent about not having gone through the 'Law'.
- Never resort to sarcasm when you feel you are about to lose your temper. Try to divert your frustration towards self mockery to make light of the situation. If you don't, things will escalate which you will regret.
- Never expose the nether regions, dress suitably professionally, even if you are bare foot.

- Never invite a non-Aboriginal guest to the community school without first gaining permission or a permit from the Community Council.

Elaboration of key personal observations

While some things need to be experienced firsthand, there are some tricky situations that commonly occur. To help with your transition into your new community, I alert you to a few of them.

Housing

Pending the location of your placement, if you are recruited up north, the wet season will be in full blast and cyclones are synonymous with the start of the school calendar. The days are hot and humid and there are regular torrential downpours. Your skin is constantly clammy with sweat, your clothes are damp and your shoes are soggy. Anything you own made of leather will begin to spawn mould, a bit like the walls in your house which will become downy grey panels. This build up of mould is often exacerbated due to the poor quality of accommodation which may range from a donga or small transportable building to an older style environmentally inappropriate Anglo-centric house. You can expect the air-conditioning in your house to resolve this problem, and normally it would, if you are lucky enough to have a regular power source.

Another onerous housing issue, due to limited accommodation, is sharing with other single teachers. When I first arrived I had to share with a male teacher who went to the club most nights to play darts and socialise with the men. At first sharing a

small house with someone who drank and smoked exasperated me, but I slowly warmed to him because he appeared to have a good relationship with his students, who seemed to like his casual manner. However, his lifestyle choices eventually emerged as unsustainable for the professional requirements demanded of a teacher. In my experience the school is usually the central heart beat of a community and when the siren goes for end of the school day, the reality is, that is when the next shift begins. For the majority of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, this involves running after school sporting programs, after school homework centres, making sandwiches for the next day's canteen, attending bilingual classes and working on inter-agency community projects. Teachers like my house mate who are not prepared to do ten or more hour days soon transfer out.

A further inevitable housing matter is that of 'visiting'. Students will come to your door and ask to 'visit'. Most teachers are worn down by the end of the school day and to have students visiting can be problematic. Essentially the children's objective is to innocently satisfy their curiosity as to what 'White Fella's' own and they will want to explore your house, experiment with your possessions and get something to eat or drink. When hoards of kids arrive they tend to swarm enthusiastically all over the place. Providing your voracious noisy visitors with a platter of fruit or a loaf of bread and a jug of juice may not seem much when you live in the city or a major town, but in remote communities perishable foodstuffs are not always easy to come by. As well, often these foods are very expensive. Consequently it is important to establish guidelines such as making sure the kids don't go to your refrigerator and help themselves. Other regulations may include not permitting them to go exploring

in personal spaces like your bedroom, or only visiting certain days of the week for a certain period of time. These parameters send a message and the kids who do end up coming on a regular basis are the ones who like to sit down and share a yarn, fortuitously leading to the development of precious friendships. In the meantime the other kids, who don't like your rules, won't bother visiting and will save themselves for the next new white teacher, who predictably arrives very soon.

Modda car

An essential item to take to your new placement is a four wheel drive vehicle. A diesel vehicle would be advisable if petrol sniffing is a problem and you do not have access to Opal fuel, the low aromatic petrol with reduced intoxication producing solvents. Often having transportation becomes the catalyst for the formation of deep friendships with members of the community. In a strictly segregated manner, if you are a male teacher you will find yourself seeking companionship amongst the men and if you are female you will spend more and more time with the women. This grouping in most cases leads to being invited to go out bush for hunting and gathering expeditions and marks the start of your acculturation where you will learn astonishing things. You will gain knowledge about the land and how the topographic profile forged by metaphysical phenomena shapes the fundamental belief system of the community's socio-cultural existence, and their perceptual notion of the eternal role of their ancestors. Berndt and Berndt (1977) described a world view in which the 'primordial land was *given* (was *there*). The mythic beings shaped it and, so to speak, humanized it;...they were mythically substantiated and ritually validated' and 'They

are associated with territories and mythical tracks and...were themselves transformed into sites where their spirits remain' (Berndt & Berndt 1977, p. 137). You will learn how.

Before birth, a person's foetus is animated by a spirit which breathes life into it and, so to speak, makes it human: that spirit is derived directly from a mythic being who continues to exist, spiritually, at a particular site. The very fact of this spiritual animation means that the child who is born is not only himself (herself) a manifestation of a sacred mythic character, but also has a very direct and significant linkage with the site (*and* country) associated with that mythic being (Berndt & Berndt, 1977, p. 138).

If you are female, you will discover this vital life affirming link, the connection of birth with country and learn a sacred attribute of women's business. After experiencing a dream or receiving a sign, the women will journey out to fertility water holes within their country to specifically swim in the water so the spirits can come into them and procreate new life. If you venture along, the women will be very stern, they will be constantly shooing you away from the water hole, prohibiting you from swimming in case a spirit accidentally comes into you. White anthropologist Diane Bell experienced similar chastising when she began to document her acculturation living and learning with the women in the Great Western Desert as she wrote about her friend, the late Topsy Napurrula Nelson:

Topsy led me by the hand (sometimes physically) through the maze of knowledge required of me as an adult woman in a desert community. It was she who either nodded approvingly at my response or moved

to protect me from dangers of which I was unaware when we found ourselves in unfamiliar situations. On reflection I now can see turning points when, having demonstrated competence at one level, I was permitted to proceed to another (Bell, 1985, p. 4).

The rate of this progression is determined by how well you behave and if you demonstrate a shared authentic affinity with the kids and the country. If you are found to be genuine, you will be allowed to experience simply unimaginable opportunities.

After your arrival

In my enthusiasm to share this life-affirming journey with you, I find myself jumping ahead a little. In reality often months will pass before you are really invited to participate in this intense collective community life. Firstly your initial experience may be quite exhausting as this vignette from my teaching journal implies:

I'm so tired of working long hours; researching, gathering and stratifying ideas to create motivating lessons so the kids can learn through their world by means of experiential real life performance and discovery not contrived authoritarian White Fella way.

I am missing the love and security of my family so much that it physically hurts. I await their mail frantically. I feel as though I am losing grip without them. I am lonely and isolated and their mail is my lifeline.

Nothing in my life seems predictable or comprehensible. The other day for no apparent reason, on no observable signal,

the entire class got up and ran out of the classroom.

Puzzled I ran out after them calling them back. I stood there totally mystified, had there been a fire evacuation planned and I had not been informed? They ran on across the oval and stood among many others watching some event that was going on at a particular house.

Later some of them wandered back in, sat down, picked up their work from where they had left off and appeared totally nonchalant about the whole foray.

It took me days to find out what happened. No one had bothered to explain what occurred, because to them running to a fight is just what you do, it's the way it is, as natural as the air you breathe. Likewise, when you first arrive, no-one will tell you but it will be assumed that you will endure: loneliness, head lice, frustration, infected sand fly bites, significant communication misunderstandings, conjunctivitis, school lock down due to community fighting, large spider infestation, depression, scabies, witness unprecedented domestic violence, isolation, Giardia, power outages, tropical sores, lack of food due to store closure as a result of a cursing, unreliable internet service provision, student truancy, airport closure due to cyclonic weather, large visiting snakes and, at times, disgruntled parents from those students with behaviour problems whom you needed to discipline. The following vignette again taken from my teaching journal tells of my first disgruntled parent meeting.

I love big burly arms

Fighting persists in the camp. Two women have been evacuated from the island to Darwin Hospital with intensive head

and body injuries. The kids who do come to school have been restless, fighting and teasing. Everyday fights end with kids throwing desks and chairs. God, no one listens, it is just bedlam.

A student was teased and became out-of-control throwing chairs around the room and to prevent injury to the other students I took hold of him, got him outside, calmed him down and told him to go home for a while. After some time the kids settled back into their work and all was fine until the busy hum of the classroom was silenced and the reason soon became evident.

Women began assembling outside my classroom door and it crossed my mind on seeing the Nulla-Nulla (women's fighting stick) that this wasn't a good sign. One of the women asked me to step outside and I could hear the kids whispering 'Awiyemba, Awiyemba' (fight, fight).

Once I was outside on the veranda one of the ladies asked me what had happened. I explained in English and she translated my version of the event to her sister in Anindilyakwa.

The auntie (mother) of the child turned to me and fiercely denounced my story raising her fist towards my face and calling me 'rubbish one' and a liar. She circled me slowly, angrily wetting me with profanities and derogatory remarks. I could feel my legs shaking and was so scared that she was going to flog me with her Nulla-Nulla that what happened next surprised me as much as everyone else.

Instead of withdrawing I stepped towards her and asked, 'What would you have done if it was your son who got his head split open by a chair?'

They conferred for a moment and then the posse of

supporters, as well as those just in it for idle curiosity, to my amazement just turned and left. I walked back into the classroom still shaking thinking, what just happened? Did I scare them? For the first time, I was really glad that I was a fairly tall basketball player with big strong arms.

Survival Skills 101

An invaluable skill that no one had mentioned that I would need working with children, was the art of self-defence. For reasons that were not clear to me there was one student, Cherry-Louise who had a penchant to inflict pain on me. She was the tallest of all the Year 5s, physically mature and very strong. Recently transferred into my group from the remedial class, she reacted violently to anyone who came within her personal space, lashing out at them as they moved past her. Whenever she spoke to any of her class mates, it was like she was barking at them and I often heard her growling to herself when she was not happy about something. One day without warning she attacked me with a large pair of scissors which, apart from taking me by complete surprise, really frightened me. I remember looking at her with an expression on my face of sheer terror as I asked her beseechingly, 'What have I done to upset you?'. After school I walked to her camp and spoke with her father and mother about what had happened. I found it difficult to believe that two calm parents could produce such a disgruntled daughter.

That year was my Cherry-Louise year. I consulted neurological journals, read psychology books, even pondered star signs in an effort to crack the Cherry-Louise code. I made a point to always tell her parents about her day and what was happening in her school life. I recorded this entry in my teaching journal:

How life can spin

Today Cherry-Louise said I could be a Wurra and I am ecstatic. Cherry-Louise who used to viciously defy me, menace me with scissors and throw desks at me has proclaimed that we are 'sisters'. On her instruction we are going for a ride to town and I am going to take her in my 'dirraka' (car) just the two of us.

A later journal entry documents what occurred as I drove to town with my former bête noire.

Cruising with Cherry-Louise

Went to Cherry-Louise's camp to speak to her mother to make sure it was 'Meningarba' (good) to take Cherry-Louise in to town today as we had previously arranged. Her parents were happy to see her so excited and I could see how proud she was as she sat up high in the car as we drove through the camp.

I remember thinking how refreshing it was that she wasn't embarrassed by me, not sliding down in the seat so no one could see her like the other kids did. This girl was impervious to shame and I loved her for that. At one stage she even waved!

We talked all the way to town and she had so much gossip to tell me. She is really maturing into a very special girl and is trying hard to manage her less-blattant angry behaviour.

Spending time hanging out with Cherry-Louise and the other kids swimming down the river and playing basketball after school has made a huge difference to my relationship with them and especially with her social skills.

After this excursion to town life with Cherry-Louise was very different. She adopted me as her sister and then self-appointed herself the role of assistant teacher. She was capable and gentle and I was grateful to have her in my class as she helped me interpret the way things were done. Teaching is all about first the building of trust and then establishing relationships.

Sometimes the outcomes are not forgettable

When you live in an Aboriginal community, you begin to move in motion with the cyclic pattern of its biorhythms. Some nights you achieve more sitting on the oval talking with the kids than you did in the daylight hours of your classroom. In the dark you see the reality of their lives and get what is really going on in their heads. Often you witness risk-taking behaviours such as excessive alcohol consumption, illegal drug usage, promiscuous sexual conduct, substance abuse (particularly petrol sniffing) and sometimes criminal activity. This risk-taking behaviour has a propensity to lead to fatal consequences. The following vignette tells of the fate of one of my students, Locky Mara.

No match

In between hearing the wonderful news that I was going to Milingimbi Bilingual Community School to teach, sad news arrived telling me Locky Mara has been killed.

He was trying to steal aviation gas to sniff, and one of the boys lit a match to see what they were doing, and the place exploded. The others panicked and took off leaving him.

Later someone returned and dragged him to the side of the road. He was flown to Darwin hospital with burns to

*70 per cent of his body but died before they could evacuate him
to the Special Burns Unit in Adelaide.*

Locky was thirteen.

In the first four years teaching on the island, I attended forty-eight funerals. I never meant to count them but one day I was trying to find a note I had made about a student and was leafing through my teaching journal. Skimming the pages, I noted that many of the entries I had written were about feeling a sense of hopeless because I was unable to comfort families in their grief and loss. Likewise, my school roll was peppered with large sections of absenteeisms from kids away attending funerals. Where there had been a death in the classroom, I had put a small cross next to the deceased student's name. One such cross I still bear.

Benny-Benny Lara

For years I lived behind the Marba sisters' camp. Four sisters lived in several houses close together; one of the sisters, Missy, was not married but helped her eldest sister Loi, who was married to Kael Lara. Kael was Benny-Benny's dad, famous for surviving a crocodile kidnap but left with horrendous crocodile claw scars down his back. Kael was now suffering Machado Joseph disease, a neuro degenerative condition that has no known cure. The other two sisters, Diva and Florence, were married to Axel Lara, Kael's middle brother, in the house next door. Dadiwonga, the widowed mother of the sisters lived at the camp and sometimes Kael's younger brother Jack-Boy lived there too. Every morning from my kitchen window, I would see Benny-Benny's mothers and Dadiwonga making damper,

washing down the kids, combing hairs and yelling instructions to ensure they got to school early. Loi and I worked as team teachers; at one stage we had two of her kids in our primary enrichment class. All her children were gifted and talented but, to me, Benny-Benny was extraordinary. He was always first to school. He constantly participated in all class activities and got the other students involved with his contagious cheerfulness and then helped them complete their work. Over the period he was in my class he performed as an exemplary scholar and athlete. I got the distinct impression that the aging elders were comforted to know that they had a future 'ceremony man' of such exceptional calibre. One rainy Friday night he removed the electrical cable from the external caravan power pole and suffered an electric shock. By the time the family got to him then raced to the health centre to get the ambulance...he was lifeless. While he lay on the ground unconscious no one knew how to do cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The sad irony of this inconsolable story is that Benny-Benny did. Losing a student leaves an unfillable, malingering sadness. It becomes apparent why many Aboriginal people suffer from a malaise of sorts, a melancholy brought on by great sadness due to the high number of deaths that continue to occur in their lives.

Forging friendships and connecting with community

The critical catalyst in terms of my acculturation was when one of the Aboriginal teachers at the school asked me to play basketball for the local community team in the white township. Playing basketball with the community girls made such a significant difference to my school life. Suddenly my students started to include me in their classroom activities. It felt awesome to finally

fit in. Unexpectedly I was included in everything, and my little blue Suzuki would be seen roaring around the community full of girls heading to training or to basketball games. While all the girls were noteworthy, two in particular were deeply consequential, Jara Amarda and Mily Wurra.

Jara Amarda

Jara and I met at school. From the outset Jara talked long and passionately about education and how she felt learning needed to be reformed in the school recognising Aboriginal kids had to be taught 'both ways', in the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal way. Coming from a family of innovative artists and community leaders she had grown up surrounded by motivated revolutionary thinkers. This was the ilk that Jara emanated from and her persistence to transform education in her community led her to continue with formal studies and take on complex senior leadership responsibilities.

Mily Wurra

I came to befriend Mily Wurra through basketball. She was an exceptional player and outmanoeuvred her opponents with her intelligence and speed. Mily and I spent a lot of time together. She was able to interpret and translate our two worlds and explain to me what was happening and why things in her culture were done the way they were. She always seemed to pull me out of tricky cross-cultural situations and protect me from possible harm, later elaborating on what could have happened and why I needed to be more alert. I remember the first time I ever saw Mily was at her younger sister's funeral. I had only just arrived on the island and it was the first funeral I had witnessed. She was

devastated, seething with rage, throwing herself on the ground, wailing and smashing a bottle relentlessly against her head to draw blood. In the Aboriginal way, the more blood that is let, and flows, the easier it is for the spirit of the deceased person to return to their mythical place of being. Anthropologists Berndt and Berndt (1977) explain how the body is recycled back to the site of the spirit. The name of the deceased is no longer used and from then on is only referred to in their family or clan terms of their relational association. Some Aboriginal peoples use a generic noun to identify the name of the recently deceased. I recall being terrified as Mily ran towards where I was sitting smashing the bottle to her head and wailing. At first I thought she was angry at me and was offended by my presence but later I learnt this behaviour was what is expected. It is the Aboriginal way.

Aunty Jemma Barron

When I wasn't hanging out with the Jarra, Mily and the girls, I was at Auntie Jemma's camp. I'm not sure if the Barron family even wanted to adopt a homeless white girl but I was certainly happy to adopt them. Over time Aunty Jemma would take me fishing and show me the 'right way' to throw a line or she would sit on the beach with me under the Casuarina trees and tell me stories about her children and her life growing up on the cattle station. She talked about being taken from her mother and father: 'I cried for my mum, I grabbed hold of her skirt you know, I cried. But they said we had to go. So they took us away to the mission and there were hundreds of children already there' (J. Barron, personal communication, 1993). Aunty said once she got to the mission she just tried to make it a good

place for herself and her siblings, 'we had clothes, one dress for walkabout, one dress for school and one dress for church' (J. Barron, personal communication, 1993).

Aunty Constance

Many Aboriginal children who were exposed to this regime suffered greatly from being forcibly separated from their parents. In Arnhem Land, Aboriginal children who had any white parentage were compulsorily taken from their families by Welfare Department personnel to a mission on the Roper River. As adults, many returned back home to the island. The following testimony from Aunty Constance tells of the long-term, emotional vulnerability that came from being taken from her mother as a child. Often without any provocation, the aunts would recount such stories of powerlessness. It seemed that in telling of their pasts they were trying to unburden themselves from their entrenched childhood sadness, since now as old ladies they had no strength left to lug their melancholy any further.

Aunty Constance

I had brought my newborn baby daughter Billage-Billage, named after the red tail black cockatoo, to visit Aunty Constance and was sitting breast feeding her, sipping from a pannikin of tea, when Aunty started telling me about how she felt when she had watched the ABC television series called Women of the Sun.

She said how she had watched as this white woman in the story comes up and takes this little Aboriginal girl by the hand and says, 'Come on, you are coming to live with me'.

Aunty said 'You know Helen, all my life I've been living with this hard lump in my chest and I didn't realise I'd had it ever since I was separated from my mother.

When I saw that woman take this little black girl by the hand, it was just as if an explosion went off in my chest. I can't explain it to you Helen, but truly, it was as if it was me being taken into that house.

True God, I cried and cried when I was taken away because oh I loved my mother. I always felt that I had a place in my heart that was wholly and solely for my mother; the holy of holies.'

She talked about her life with the missionaries and the way she had been treated. She said that her anger was the thing that had pushed her to keep on going. She believed she had to keep busy, to prevent the insidious memories from that time taking over, or even taking, her life. Aunty Constance was awarded a Member of the British Empire Award (MBE) for her community service for helping her people.

The critical nexus—building relationships

Being around the Aunties presented me with the opportunity to get to know the women elders in the community. Three women immediately come to mind: Gulid, Imogene and Wudari. They were amazing artisans who continued to carve, paint, sing, dance, and walk for hours hunting and gathering, often carrying their grandchildren on their backs. These women also took time to guide me. They would show me things then say this is 'Aboriginal way' and share with me their stories about the events that had carved the composition of their lives.

Imogene would demurely cover her mouth when she laughed, like the missionaries had taught her to do as a child while Gulid was always tossing her head back laughing, with a mouth full of missing teeth. Likewise, the Aunties would patiently answer my questions, describing for me in scenario-type yarns the cultural setting in which many of my dilemmas were embedded, especially when I told them of the problems I was having with the students in my class and the fighting that was continuously happening. They suggested things I could do that would alleviate certain situations and essentially everything recommended seemed to make a difference.

As the years passed, I found myself documenting and emulating more and more Aboriginal ways of teaching suggested to me by the Aboriginal teachers and members of the wider Aboriginal communities. It seemed I could differentiate between the classroom behaviour of students whose white teachers used these ways of learning and those who did not. Likewise I could differentiate the relationships between white teachers who spent time in the community with the local people and those who did not.

Every weekend would see us out bush camping along the south side of the island. It was never planned; just in the moment. Families would fling everything including kids and dogs in the back of the Toyotas and off we would go, as the following vignette reveals.

Erriberiba-wa – (Going bush)

We left Friday night to drive south firstly along the jungle track then along the sandy beach. The full moon rose in total brilliance while we set up camp and drank steaming billy tea.

When the tides were right, we went crabbing while the Barron clan screamed and laughed and ordered others, especially the younger ones, to run errands, playing on the pecking order like only large families can.

I fell asleep to the sound of the incoming tide as it lapped upon the shoreline. Sunrise was spectacular, as was the smoked black toast and billy tea. After breakfast we went back over to Salt Creek to go shell fishing amongst the densely populated mangrove swamp, famous for crocodiles. The Barron clan with all their adopted white kids, me and Bluey and Bree-Boy, bent over like the number seven for hours, plucking and swearing and ripping and tearing our bodies and clothes to reap a pillow case of cockles.

Later we sat around the fire with Aunty and Uncle listening as they yarned and Uncle carved animal shapes into the soft wood he was working. They talked about what it meant to them to be a survivor of the stolen generation, to witness transformation of people and culture, progress not necessarily beneficial to the original islanders and the build-up of commercial ventures on the island, bringing with it money, machismo and hedonism.

I was suddenly conscious that this world of theirs was so fragile and how other outsiders, 'blowins' from the southern cities, obsessed in their global gluttony to exploit, made precarious decisions that impacted, often diabolically, on many local inhabitants' lives. I felt ashamed to be white.

Tonight the rising moon looked like a huge over-ripe orange leisurely ascending. I sat atop of the Toyota with a torch, crocodile spotting, straining to see 'red eye' while the others dragged the net across the creek.

This was the very place where years before Kael Lara was snatched from out of his mother's arms by a crocodile. She brazenly fought it off and legend has it she poked it in the eye, grabbed her bleeding baby and ran.

I soon understood that what we did and when we did it was intricately connected to the tides and moon and seasons, and reading my new world seemed lusciously visceral and continual. I learnt how the Round Stingray or Yimaduwaya is ready to catch, when the Red Kurrajong or Miyarrawa flowers and the Wild Plum or Mangkarrkba turns green and how, when the Cocky Apple or Mukuwara flowers, it is time to catch turtle or Yimenda. The women showed me how to find the wild bee honey called Yilyakwa and how to treat the Zamia palm or Burrawang nuts to leach out the poison. I learnt to walk through the seasons reaping the lavish offerings by reading their signs.

Sensing the signs

Likewise reading body language became an equally important quest as an effective way to communicate over distances which accounts for much when it is too hot to walk or talk. Similarly reading the mood of the community was also an important skill to acquire as the following vignette suggests.

Awiyemba – (Fight)

Coming home from basketball training tonight I called into Jamba's house to check tomorrow's excursion with him and, just as I was getting out of the Suzuki, the most horrendous fight broke out. I ducked for cover into the Lara's camp as a

throng of people came running and shouting up the centre of the road welding nulla nullas, spears and woomeras.

To the unskilled eye it could have seemed like a free for all. What was happening and who was challenging translated immediately into an unambiguous kinship obligation being played out.

Next minute, several women of the Amarda clan were set upon and a few were thrashed and forced down onto the road. Jamba leapt up, grabbed his woomera and spear and threw two hunting spears into the crowd clear in his intention to miss and interrupt the fighting.

Instantly the rattling of spears resonated loudly and what appeared to sound like multiple dramatical monologues added to the hectic deluge with people running everywhere.

Jamba's eldest daughter, Dendi, threw her baby into my arms and quickly followed her father and mothers into the fighting. Jamba's wives and daughters strode powerfully into the maelstrom; strong, fierce and protective of their clan as I sat surrounded by little children and nursing mothers.

I couldn't believe the intense antagonism, yet in a bizarre way, it seemed so healthy to spit it all out in the open and deal with it once and for all.

The fight was about a brother and a sister who were petrol sniffing and, since the community wanted to enforce a zero tolerance approach on sniffing, many members of the families wanted severe punishment for the sniffers and this was causing the dispute.

As people argued, Jamba sat by the fire listening to the dispute. Looking at his profile in the shadow cast by the fires I saw such a magnificent strength, a wise, competent

and compassionate man who was always trying to establish a cultured future for his children and his clan.

When everyone had finished having their say and the sniffers were publically shamed, people walked back to their camps, chatting and laughing.

These acts are actually carefully orchestrated, judiciously co-ordinated, channelled retribution with the intent to reach a compromise rather than to draw blood. The intent of these frightening displays of shouting, detailed monologues full of mythical allusions and cursing along with the rattling of spears in a full frontal attack is amply terrifying as they are effective at saving 'loss of face', a seriously significant component of Aboriginal culture.

The journey ramps up

As the years passed, I no longer experienced those gut wrenching mornings as I had during my first year. Then I would walk to school and dread what was waiting ahead of me, especially the constant fighting and the incessant teasing. Now after significant time had passed and I had been suitably guided and preened, my journey was finally ramping up. Like Bell (1985) who had needed to demonstrate competence on one level before she was permitted to graduate to the next level of knowledge, I had finally graduated to the privileged position of being invited to the ceremonies.

The Ceremonies – sacred and sacrosanct

Each year during the dry season special mortuary ceremonies take place to commemorate the first year anniversary of the

person who had died during the previous year. I always tried to write notes in my journal immediately after what had happened and the significance of the proceedings but my words failed dismally to accurately describe the rousing experience.

Amarda-langwa – (Ceremonies)

Each afternoon I have been going to the ceremonies. We sit and wait in the late afternoon sun as that wonderful, awe inspiring, indisputable sound of the didgeridoo and clapping stick music permeates its way through the jungle to our ears. The kids sit sucking on turtle egg while the women industriously pick and click nit eggs on each other's heads.

Then on a seemingly invisible command the women rise simultaneously and walk into the bush towards the clearing. We sit with our backs to the clearing until we hear the clapping sticks and the men moving nearer. We set off quickly to our moiety poles and stand huddled close together with our backs still to the men.

The moiety Morning Star pole is said to be like the dead person's body, so when we look at the post we remember the departed spirit. The men approach us, led by the ceremonial leaders of the appropriate clans and linguistic units.

Using the wooden clapping sticks to pulsate a guiding beat they direct the singing of the totem songs of the moieties, invoking the sacred names of the dead person's water hole and country with its mythical associations. Carefully we listen out for the signal before we step away from the poles and face the men and watch them dance in front of us.

There is this strangely powerful mix of tension and timelessness, that the celebration of death is, in fact, celebrating

new life, new possibilities. Painted up, the men's bodies seem so much more impressive, even commanding. It is as if their cultural authority has been restored.

Then in ritual reciprocity, us women dance. This is all practice for the Mortuary ceremony which will be performed over several nights. It is exciting and frightening, cerebral and spiritual all at once.

After the practice is over we pile into vehicles and head back through the bush along the corrugated track, blanketed by dust as the sun sets on another day. It is funny when a vehicle overtakes. In the back are about twenty heads with their faces all coated in the traditional white clay or red ochre with intricate animal totems meticulously painted on their upper bodies.

We could be right back in the dream time. Living close to this mob has taught me that 'transition' is not easy. I feel an inner sadness that I can't quite put my finger on. I am learning the Aboriginal way, socialising in their world, using the appropriate symbols of an insider, but still it is their world... not mine. It is not my language, my colour, my dreaming... yet I am absorbed in something that I am totally committed to and don't want to be separated from.

Decades later, my total commitment to progressing the lives of the Aboriginal students with whom I work continues.

Summary

Whilst cognisant of trying to achieve the impossible, to compact thirty years in as many pages of this chapter section, I conclude my personal observations and yarn with one statement. I have

been generously embraced and deeply enriched by sharing my life with Aboriginal peoples, learning to do things I never dreamed were even possible. One example of this is that after working and witnessing ongoing injustices directed against many Aboriginal students, parents and their communities, I was motivated to write a PhD dissertation, a demanding undertaking I would not normally have considered. What the people of Arnhem Land and Wongutha gave me was the reason to write, to craft their stories and tell of their struggle for culturally-sensitive educational pathways for their children. I continue to argue, it is akin to enmity to force another generation of young black people to endure an educational system that does little to venerate their epistemological traditions.

Some suggest that opposition to dominant Anglo-Australian hegemonic forces were reflected in 2008 with the first Welcome to Country ever staged at a parliamentary opening followed by 'the Apology' to Australia's Indigenous peoples. Some claim it was in 1998 with recognition of National Sorry Day while others suggest it was possibly due to the 1988 Barunga Statement and a few report it was the outcome of the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy. A number believe it was the 1966 Gurindji walk off, if not the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition. Several testify it was the 1946 Pilbara Strike outcomes, others propose it was way earlier in the 1890s with Jandamarra, if not even earlier in the 1830s with Yagan and his father Midgegoroo. It's been recommended it was Musquito in the 1820s and various reputable sources say it was earlier with Pemulwuy in the 1790s. The one thing not in dispute is that the Aboriginal resistance to these prevailing forces started a long time ago and now, in the spirit of reconciliation, it is time for reform. Failure to do this is not an option.