UNSETTLING WHITE NOISE
YARNING ABOUT ABORIGINAL EDUCATION
IN WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PRISONS

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B.Ed, BSW (Hons)

This dissertation is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy with Murdoch University

Year of submission: 2014
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution. This research has been conducted with approval of the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2010/184).

...............................................................

(Roslyn Carnes)
Abstract

Though representing less than 4% of the Western Australian population, almost 40% of incarcerated adults and more than 70% of juveniles in detention in Western Australia are Aboriginal. Despite these figures prisoner education is rarely investigated in Australian academic research especially from an Aboriginal perspective. In response, this research focuses on what Aboriginal people themselves have to say about their experiences of education in Western Australian prisons. The intent is to identify what they believe helps and hinders education for Aboriginal prisoners.

Consistent with critical theory this research questions society, structures and systems in context. Specifically it is grounded in critical race and whiteness theory which argues that racialised categories are socially constructed by dominant Settler systems with whiteness unmarked as a racial grouping. Attempting to counter this often unrecognised privilege, Aboriginal and other Indigenous academic voices are prioritised in this thesis. From the standpoint of a critical ally, the culturally appropriate methodology of yarning is adopted to learn from the experiences of Aboriginal ex-prisoners who volunteered to participate in this research.

What is revealed relates to and goes beyond prisons and education, reflecting the interrelatedness of Indigenous life, worldviews and problem solving. Therefore experiences in prisons cannot be divorced from the broader structural and cultural influences shaping participant’s experiences of life. Based on experiences of the participants two major areas of hindrance to prisoner education can be identified. First is the impact of intergenerational trauma. Second are a range of
challenges inside and outside prisons. Inside prisons there exists a lack of physical and human resources. Outside prisons Aboriginal inequality such as housing, employment, education and health are raised. Such hindrances are exemplars of white noise created by historical legacies, unquestioned white privilege and denial of Aboriginal sovereignty. What participants identify as helpful is programs, practices and relationships that value Aboriginal agency and reciprocity where non-Indigenous people and systems become informed of Aboriginal processes and perspectives of history.

Having recognized that white noise requires systemic transformation, the thesis attempts to move beyond deficit and victim-blaming approaches to Indigenous prisoner education with a view to closing ‘educational gaps’. Building strong relationships is the major goal in constructing this transformative educational framework based on the four cornerstones of Honouring Aboriginal Sovereignty and Healing of Historical Trauma and actions of transformative education that recognise the need for starting with Aboriginal Agency and Becoming Informed as Whitefellas.

Ultimately, it is not appropriate for Indigenous people alone to be expected to make shifts in thinking in order to match expectations of dominant Settler cultures. Changes are also required of non-Indigenous, mainstream systems, habits of mind and cultural self-awareness. Without such mutual transformation the din of white noise continues and reciprocal dignity and respect remains elusive whether inside or outside a prison.
Acknowledgements

I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the First Peoples of the Noongar Nation on whose country I live, work, have conducted this research, written, read and learned and where the dissertation will be stored at Murdoch University. I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

By far the biggest debt of thanks is owed to each and every Aboriginal friend, colleague, companion, client, researcher and author who has helped me be more aware of white noise in my own life and work. I cannot put in words the change this has wrought in my life. Special thanks to those teacher/participants who agreed to yarn with me and spend time teaching me about their experiences and what they see as important and valued. Given the history of oppression and appropriation of knowledge of Aboriginal people I do not take lightly the gift you have given here. This dissertation may have my name on it because that is what the academy demands but it belongs to you as much as it does to me. Thank you!

Finally, huge thanks go to my two supervisors who have been my companions on the journey. Professor Barry Down’s experience and unending patience in supervision pointed me in the right direction and his unassuming, quiet way of asking just the right question or making just the right comment helped find exactly what I needed to from readings and teachings. Dr Greg Thompson’s commitment to detailed feedback on my writing and challenges to my thinking also deserves my thanks. To both of you, your differing theoretical stances always provided me with food for thought and made me think for myself. Thank you both for your words and silences of wisdom!
Publications and Presentations

The following outcomes have been achieved from this research at the time of submission.

Award

Recipient of 2011 Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)
Postgraduate Research Award for outstanding conference paper
Education for incarcerated Aboriginal Western Australians: “Education revolution” or just plain revolting?

Refereed publications


Conference presentations and published abstracts


Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (Adelaide, December 11-13, 2012; Racism and Desire) Historical trauma and yet to be acknowledged First Nations sovereignty

Chair of a concurrent session on History

Murdoch University Postgraduate Student Association (MUPSA), Murdoch University (September 27, 2012) In Western Australia what gaps need to be closed in prisoner education?

Racisms in the New World Order (Cairns, August 30-31, 2012) Education is colonial it ain’t ours… I’ll tell ya who needs educatin’ … whitefellas

Western Australian Institute of Educational Research, (Notre Dame University, Fremantle WA, August 11, 2012) Decentring colonial discourse

Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (Gold Coast, December 7-9, 2011; Directions and Intersections) Where do I belong and what map do I use to get there? The dilemma of a critical, activist ally.

International AARE (Australian Association for Educational Research) (Hobart, November 27-December 11, 2011; Research Crossing Boundaries)

Education for incarcerated Aboriginal Western Australians: “Education Revolution” or just plain revolting?

Murdoch University Postgraduate Student Association (MUPSA), Murdoch University (September 28, 2011) “Education revolution”…or just plain revolting? Aboriginal prisoner education in Western Australia

Western Australian Institute of Educational Research, (Notre dame University, Fremantle WA, August 2011) Incarcerated Aboriginal Western Australians: missing out on an “education revolution”

Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, UC Davis, Sacramento, California (May 2011) “Does race come into it?” what the most recent Custodial Inspector Reports and the words of Indigenous ex-prisoners reveal about Western Australian prisons
Inaugural National Indigenous Policy and Dialogue, University of New South Wales, Sydney (November 2010)  “They would not listen, they did not know how”: Some thoughts from a white student learning from Indigenous research methods

Murdoch University Postgraduate Student Association (MUPSA), Murdoch University (September 30, 2010)  Shades of grey: experiences of a first year PhD student in exploring Indigenous research methodologies

OTHER UNREFEREED PRESENTATIONS

State Community Legal Centre Association of WA National Conference (Perth, October 2012) Preparing firm foundations for cultural awareness. Facilitator of two 2-hour workshops for Community Legal Centre staff.

National Association of Community Legal Centres National Conference (Adelaide, August, 2012) Whether we like it or not (Un-refered paper on aspects of cultural self-awareness presented to staff from Community Legal Centres)
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Glossary of terms and abbreviations

Aboriginal/Indigenous
These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and in discourse (Purdie, Milgate and Bell, 2011: xxi). The convention I use is as follows:

- specific clan names are used where known,
- where this is not known by me or I am speaking more broadly about a number of nations from the state of Western Australia I use the term Aboriginal.
- Where I am unsure of the individual’s country or when they are from outside Australia I use the First Nation name if known and, if not, either Indigenous, First Nations or First Peoples.
- When quoting or referring to an author I use the terminology they use.

ACARA
Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority

AIATSIS
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

ANTA
Australian National Training Authority

ATSI
Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander

ATSIC
Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission

CDEP
Community Development Employment Program

COAG
Coalition of Australian Governments
Office of Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS)
A statutory body located in Western Australia. The OICS website\(^1\) states that, “The role of the Office is to bring independent external scrutiny to the standards and operational practices relating to custodial services within the state. The Office, which falls within the general portfolio responsibility of the Minister for Corrective Services, is answerable directly to the Parliament”.

DICWC
Deaths in Custody Watch Committee

Educational Gap
Defined by the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG, 2012: 3) in terms of literacy and numeracy and the number of students going on to year 11 and 12, the COAG goal is to halve the gap for

1. Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade;
2. Indigenous 20–24 year olds in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020—we report proxy indicators: apparent retention to Year 10 and Year 12, and school attendance.

Inverted comas around the term “gap” represent my questioning of use of the term as it is usually based on Settler criteria and indicators.

First People(s)/First Nation(s)
“Those people who have been present in a place as long as oral history remembers”. (Mehl-Madrona, 2010: 301)

HREOC
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Learning
Revising understanding or meaning of experience as a guide to future action, “learning may be intentional, the result of deliberate inquiry; incidental, a by-

\(^1\) http://www.custodialinspector.wa.gov.au/
product of another activity involving intentional learning; or mindlessly assimilative” (Mezirow, 2000a: 5).

**Nyoongar, Noongar, Nyungar**
Noongar people include the various peoples of the south west of Western Australia. “This word has various spellings which reflect the various dialects and pronunciations...[there was for example] a difference between “Nyoongar” the people and ‘nyoongar’ the man... mistakes can occur when translating an oral language into the written English word” (Van Den Berg, 2002: 7) and the nuances of meaning and pronunciation lost. I spell this word Noongar, and where possible refer to more specific names where known; for example, Wadjuk people of the Noongar nation.

**Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC)**
This Royal Commission was held from 1987 to 1991. It studied and reported expected high rates of deaths of Aboriginal people in custody across Australia. It found that, though the rate of death was not higher than that of non-Indigenous people, the rates of incarceration were unacceptably higher. Hard copies of all volumes of this report can be difficult to find. They are available online from www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadcr

**RIP**
“Rest in Peace”. This is added where quotes contain the name of an Aboriginal person known to be deceased. This is done as a sign of respect and recognition that it is taboo for many Aboriginal people to mention the name of a deceased person.

**Settler/Settlers**
This term refers to mainstream dominant culture which has evolved post ‘settlement’/colonisation. It also refers to those groups of Europeans who colonised various parts of the Australian continent.
Three strikes public housing policy
Under this Western Australian state legislation, once a public housing tenant has three proven incidents of disturbances at their property they are automatically evicted. The tenant has no right of appeal. Incidents can include times when the tenant has called police as they fear for their own safety. If children are involved, the Department of Child Protection is informed; this raises the spectre of stolen children in the minds of many Aboriginal people.

Two way learning
Purdie et.al. (2011: xx) say, “‘Two ways’ has the same meaning as ‘both ways’ – it infers a partner relationship between First Peoples and Settler cultures in Australia. By extension that means that both cultures have much to learn from each other, and that teaching and learning should occupy a neutral, negotiated place in which neither presumes superiority or authoritarian dominance. It is sometimes called the ‘third space’ ...It is a difficult space to negotiate because it is dynamic and fluid...”

VET
Vocational Education and Training

Whitefella
This does not directly refer to the colour of someone’s skin. Rather it describes a non-Aboriginal, non-Indigenous person, usually of European descent. I use it here, interchangeably with Settler and colonisers to describe people not descended from a First Nations people.

Yarning
Yarning is defined by Yindjabarndi academic, Bessarab (2012: 5) as “an informal conversation that is culturally friendly and recognised by Aboriginal people as meaning to talk about something, someone or provide and receive information.” Bessarab (2012: 7) identifies yarning as a way of engaging Aboriginal people as well as an important aspect of Indigenous pedagogy.