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Research and Education in the Kimberley: A Local Perspective

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Abstract

The picture of researchers arriving in 'remote' communities to conduct research on a topic of interest to them (complete with consent forms and ethical clearance), is conjured up frequently by First Nations people, as a sign of White power and colonial control. 'Research' for many, has become a dirty word. But when First Nations researchers who live in those communities, take responsibility for research, a different dynamic comes into play. Research then becomes a legitimate way for community members to tell their stories, and for the voices of community members to be heard and relayed with integrity. This Rural Connections article tells two interwoven stories of Catherine Ridley, in her own words. The first story is about her experiences growing up and learning at school in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The second story is about her experiences as a researcher, investigating issues of school engagement, attendance, and retention.

Keywords: *First Nations research, engagement, retention, attendance, Kimberley schools*

Introduction

One of the many challenges that face schools in remote communities across Australia, is how to engage and retain young people in schooling. In this Rural Connections article, we hear from Catherine Ridley, who has worked with a team of researchers from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Curtin University and University of Notre Dame Australia, to explore these issues. This research team has talked with students, staff, and community members in many schools across Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Local researchers play a critical role in hearing and relaying the voices of people living in communities. Catherine's interwoven stories highlight some of the challenges and opportunities that arise from working as a local researcher in contexts like those in Kimberley communities. What follows is a conversation between Catherine and John Guenther (Editor).

Catherine's Learning Journey

John: Catherine can you tell me first a bit about yourself and your learning journey?

Catherine: I was born in Kalgoorlie and raised in the Kimberley. There's a community there called Wankatjunga on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. That's where I live now. On my mother's side, she is a Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara woman and my dad's side he is a Martu Wangkajunga man. That's my background. My skin is Karimarra / Nangala and my clan group is Murkurtu. I'm a mother, five kids grown up, I have been currently working for Notre Dame on this research project on educational engagement and retention. I studied in early 2010, graduated in 2014 with a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Community Management and Development from Curtin University. I worked in the public sector for various government departments for a long time:

housing, child protection, disability services commission, and did a stint with the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia for a while, so I did some training in the legal unit with Aboriginal Legal Service Western Australia in Perth. I was more interested in community development and how things worked for people in community, managing projects and all that sort of stuff.

John: Where did you go to school?

Catherine: Most of my early childhood schooling was done at Wankatjunga on the outskirts of Christmas Creek Station. The school was right there beside the old camp where we used to live. I had a lot of my early childhood there and Gogo School then Fitzroy Valley High School at the old school, not the new one. It was kind of very transient. So, Kalgoorlie was also a place where I attended schooling, when we were there, we would go to school, but of course there were a lot of racial issues around that, but I loved school.

John: What made you like it?

Catherine: It was a happy space, it was a place, an environment where I wanted to do things. It made me happy I loved school, whether it was because I wanted to be away from the chaos at home (I was too young to understand). I know when I walked into that school yard, it was a happy place. Of course, there was the bullying and stuff, but that was nothing compared to that good feeling I had about being in that space. Schooling for me was in Fitzroy crossing, a little place out at Gogo Station, about 15km out of Fitzroy crossing when I lived with my mother's sister and her partner at Bayulu community for a while. So, I sort of went between my dad's sisters at Christmas Creek Station and my mum's sister based in Bayulu community, I bounced off those families. I never really had a stable education.

John: Obviously it worked for you because you then went on to do your degree.

Catherine: Yeah, I didn't finish school, I finished at Year 9. I pulled out very early.

John: What made you want to go to uni then?

Catherine: Because I wanted to further my studies, I always had that in the back of my mind that it would help me. I think it was my family issues, the push behind my desire to go to uni and finish it. Initially I thought of it, but I thought I wasn't good enough. So, I never even tried. I guess when you have a lot of problems, it's like if we have issues—are we going to dwell on it and sink in it and stay down or whether we are going to get up and do something about it? So, what would make my family better? I thought that education is the key to open many doors of opportunity for me. And it did! It really did, and someone once said to me just in casual conversation, they said 'you know that knowledge is very powerful' I really couldn't understand that it didn't make sense. How? When I did go to study, I could feel that power. It was there. And it is very powerful because you can go back to your community and help your people. You know right from wrong, and you can guide your family in the right direction. There's a lot of backlashes too when you speak the truth, and some people don't like the truth. It can cause a lot of problem in your community, it can cause division, you know, all that sort of stuff. I think it stems from lack of knowledge and understanding. But I stand firmly on the fact that you have always got to do the right thing. And understanding that mistreatment and doing things that aren't right creates disadvantage more for our people. And that we can't work like that.

John: Obviously you have navigated that space reasonably well over that time.

Catherine: Yes, it was hard, but you still manage to navigate all that, and graduation for me was the greatest thing that ever happened I couldn't believe I was on that podium getting my degree—one of the best moments of my life. It changed me. Although I worry sometimes that as an Aboriginal person with skills and knowledge, I am very scared of being put up on a pedestal. I always try hard to keep my feet firmly on the ground. No position of authority will ever make me forget who I really am and where I come from.

Research in Kimberley Communities

John: So, you have been working as a researcher on a project that is designed to understand attendance, engagement, and retention dynamics in rural and remote Aboriginal schools. How has that experience been? What has that been like?

Catherine: For me it has been a very great journey. It has been not only good that Notre Dame thought I might have some good skills to give to the team, I not only gave, I actually gained a lot of knowledge from being on that team. I learned a lot about research in-depth, and the thing I have learned is that there are processes in place with government and schools and education and all that. I don't come from an education background, but it was good to have an insight into education which I didn't have. Everyone else on the team I think comes from an education background, whereas I don't but it was good. Even though there is that community development side of things, people in the community and how that school is attached to that community and how important that it is to see—that if you want positive outcomes in terms of education and children—then that school and community must be hand in hand. The community needs to own the school. That's just my views on how I see it coming from the outside.

John: What are some of the communities that you have visited or are going to visit?

Catherine: I have been all along the East Kimberley, right up to Frog Hollow, all around Yiyili—I had a lot to do with Yiyili community because that's one of the case studies on this project. I even went as far as Arnhem Land with the team that looks after that area, it is good to see how other communities are working, you share your knowledge and take it back to share with other schools and say, 'this is how this mob do it and it is working for them'. Sharing of information is good too. And working together makes it even more successful. I have been covering Yakanarra school, and all other independent schools, I am booked to go to Yiramalay Studio school in 2 weeks' time. I have covered a lot of area!

Engagement, Attendance and Retention in Remote Kimberley Schools

John: Thinking about talking to community members and school staff, what are your impressions about what they think about that topic of attendance, engagement, and retention?

Catherine: Funny thing is a lot of them, some of them don't even know that attendance and engagement are two different things. I picked that up in conversations with community members and I have always had to affirm them that attendance is like ticking the box, yes that kid is at school, 'yes I am here!' He is there but engagement is different, they are there but are they focused, are they happy to be at school? You must make them understand that there is a difference.

John: Did they get that?

Catherine: Yes, I said 'that kid could be at school, but could have been forced to come'. 'Come on you got to go to school', parents /caregiver shout at kid, and kid goes to school not wanting to be there, so because kid doesn't want to be there, kid is not engaged. That's engagement. You can be attending, but if you are there and you're not engaged, it's useless, we would all prefer that when they send their kids to school, they are there, they are focused and happy they are learning. Whereas if they are just attending and not engaged, there is no use being there. I discuss in depth of how attendance and engagement work.

John: I think that's an interesting role for the researcher to unpack the question so they can understand it, so they know what you mean and give them fresh insight in a way to reflect and think on their own. What did some of the people say about what made it difficult for remote kids to go to school?

Catherine: One of the things that stands out from my research work is that the people complain about the social media. How much it has interfered with their relationships. Not only the kids going to school but their relationships you know 'come on you gotta go to school' and that kid he knows he can't be on YouTube, he can't be on TikTok they can't be on Instagram, they can't be on Facebook, you know. They get all that at home.

John: What could turn that around, so it was no longer an issue?

Catherine: Maybe the school and community meet, it really needs to be discussed on where that issue is with that community. And that community members and schools can plan where these kids can come and be happy and how that social media and that can work together. It's a hard one. Maybe if they gave them time during recess or something, allow it in that time, but then you got the issue of what they are googling up? That's another thing. There's a bit of a problem no matter what way you try and look at it. You don't know what these kids are looking at on their sites.

John: What have you heard or seen that does engage kids at school?

Catherine: I have noticed that the relationship that they have has to be a good relationship, I have noticed in some of their schools, the kids and teaching staff get on very well and the kid is able to have breakfast, so they got meals at the school for them, so nearly all their needs and wants are being met at the school. The school will cater for that. They might say 'I got no clean clothes'. Well, we got clean clothes at the school, like uniform and shorts and we can help you wash the clothes you got on. That sort of stuff. 'I never sleep, I am tired'. Well, it might have been because they've been drinking or whatever, 'well come to the school, we have a sleep room there'. Frog Hollow was one where this one little room was designated especially for those ones that are tired, and they let 'em have a sleep and they tell 'em when they are ready they can come in, even if they sleep the whole day there which does happen, at least they know that kid has had a good sleep so they can be refreshed in the morning, and that kid turns up in the morning, because they have caught up on their sleep. And it's a happy place. The teachers and the Aboriginal staff play a very critical role there. I don't think any of these remote schools can survive without those Indigenous staff.

John: What difference do they make?

Catherine: They have got all the community knowledge, they are very skilled, minus what the teachers that do come from other places that do have a degree in teaching. So but then, they [the teachers] come from university and go out to these Aboriginal communities not having an idea of anything about the community, so I find that they struggle. It is really hard, they gotta depend on the Indigenous staff because the Indigenous staff are full of knowledge, it is their community and they have a lot of skills within the education sector too, they might not have a degree, but they have worked there long enough to be able to gain a lot of skills. It's just not written on paper like the other teachers. These Indigenous staff can just be—with training they could be the principal running the school—and that would have been the ideal case.

John: Do you think that's possible?

Catherine: Yeah. I think there is a way. Where there is a will there is a way. I think something needs to be implemented now where they go away, and they study at school. They have to go away for a certain block release, that's fine, support them in that because at the end of the day they are going to be there forever, and their kids they will—if someone is playing up, their voice is more stronger than non-indigenous teachers. It's like, 'who are you? I am not listening to you'. And I picked that up. As soon as an Indigenous worker walks in 'Hey! Sit down!' They sit down. And when you see those signs, it's telling you something. What are we doing? Why are we stuffing around with all these teachers coming in on a good salary, more than the Indigenous staff but when you weigh up the amount of work those Aboriginal staff do, they are over-

worked. And that really stood out for me, the biggest thing, they don't get acknowledged for all the work they do. A non-Indigenous teacher can go away and put it on their resume that they have worked at this Aboriginal remote community, they did this and that, but they don't acknowledge who gave them all that cultural knowledge who gave them all that other knowledge, that is never mentioned.

A Hopeful Future for Kimberley Education

John: We have a long way to go with remote education, for kids in those communities, but it sounds like you have some hope, and you see a lot of positives.

Catherine: Oh yeah. I support 100% for those Indigenous teachers, local Aboriginal teachers working at the school. They need to be trained up to become qualified teachers, become qualified principals because our kids in those schools, that's who they listen to, that's who they look up to. I have noticed that the kids don't even go into that mischievous behaviour. They know who they can play with, it's the non-Indigenous teachers who is not from there who has no connection there. And we say that education starts from the home. These people are from the home. So why aren't the government looking at investing in our Aboriginal staff? If they want to fix education, it's all there. The answer is there. Indigenous People are employed already but they need to give them more support, leading them, putting them into that role, not just being the second-hand thing, because you know, you can't go anywhere without education, kids can't learn when they are constantly being told to straighten up, sit down, whatever. When there is an Aboriginal staff there, they listen straight up.

John: Thank you Catherine for sharing with me, and for taking the time to reflect on your own learning journey but also those experiences of doing research. It's been great talking with you.

Catherine: That's good thank you.