

**AARE Conference 27th November to 1st December 2016
Melbourne, Victoria.**

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Title of paper:

“Capacity building of Aboriginal researchers to get the inside standpoint – asking Aboriginal students what they think.”

Keywords

Capacity building, Indigenous standpoint theory, Narrative theory, Indigenous voice,

Abstract

“The term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself “research” is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary.” (Smith, 1999, p. 1) For many Aboriginal communities educational research can be seen with suspicion. In Aboriginal education much of the research is completed by non-Aboriginal researchers whose interpretations maybe culturally biased against Aboriginal peoples and their research may not always go back to support the Aboriginal audience.

This paper will highlight the importance of capacity building of Aboriginal researchers to investigate issues within Aboriginal education. Engaging culturally similar researchers to the research participants can base the research process on an equal foundation in the research practice. With the analysis founded through similar cultural filters of the participatory audience (such as Aboriginal students and/ or community). Through building Aboriginal culturally sound researchers to walk the bi-cultural pathways of research between Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal institutions a more informed examination of the research material can be presented. This position that there is a greater need for Aboriginal educational researchers to be developed to investigate researcher questions in partnership with

Aboriginal communities has grown through the development of my PhD research study on 'What Form(s) of Pedagogy are Necessary for Increasing the Engagement of Aboriginal School Students?' (Donovan, 2016)

This paper will highlight my PhD research project where 50 Aboriginal high school students were interviewed asking them what they believed was best practice when it came to supporting Aboriginal students at school. These students were invited to a Yarning Circle, that is a known Aboriginal culturally secure structure for open discussion (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Where all participants including the researcher were Aboriginal so we maintained a very culturally safe discussion environment. The significance of Aboriginal engagement across all levels of the research process will be highlighted to inform the reader about the importance of Aboriginal involvement at all levels of the research. From designing through practice, analysis and reporting.

Within this paper Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as Aboriginal students not Indigenous students, as supported by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) Aboriginal education review of 2004 (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group & NSW Department of Education & Training, 2004, p. 11). When using the term Indigenous it will be relating to other International studies of Indigenous Peoples globally. These terms will be used as a singular term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations as a whole even though there is great diversity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

The development of the research task

When it comes to research in Aboriginal communities there are issues that have been regularly identified that Aboriginal communities feel effect their ability to participate in research. Some of these issues include;

1. Is the research being done from the request of the Aboriginal community or just for the benefit of the researcher

2. Will the research that is being done benefit that Aboriginal community or other Aboriginal communities participating in the research.
3. Can the research be designed to support the Aboriginal community to build capacity in that community such as developing skills for members of the community to increase their employability?
4. Are the researchers culturally informed or is the research framed from a deficit framework?
5. Has the Aboriginal community or any other Aboriginal People been involved in the design, development or analysis of this research task?

(Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Blair, 2008; Donovan, 2007; Dunbar, 2008; Heitmeyer, 2004; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 1999)

Australian Aboriginal communities are the most disadvantaged populations in Australian society, across any social indicator Aboriginal peoples will be significantly represented across the negative end of any scale (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Due to these massive divides between the Australian population, the Australian Government in 2008 developed policy directions to 'Close The Gap' (CTG) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations under a series of strategic directions. These directions include closing the gap in life expectancy, halving the gap in infant mortality ensuring access to early childhood education to Aboriginal children, halving the gap in literacy, numeracy, final year educational attainment and employment (Council of Australian Governments, 2014).

But as usual these policy directions were developed without almost no consultation from Aboriginal communities to guide towards what the community believed was most significant to their needs. Aboriginal communities are not suggesting that these policy directions are not beneficial to issues within Aboriginal society but without any consultation or suggestions of self-determination these policy suggestions may fail. This failure may be due to Aboriginal communities not fully owning and engaging with the policy responsibilities for change.

This research study was founded on elements of self-determination and some level of capacity building. The study was developed by an Aboriginal researcher, who followed appropriate Aboriginal protocol and presented his questions and study design to members of the NSW Aboriginal education community for their acknowledgment, consideration and support. The investigation was completed by an Aboriginal educational researcher with the analysis of the data developed by the Aboriginal researcher but with aspects shared with other Aboriginal peoples to maintain an appropriate cultural positioning in his understandings. An Aboriginal standpoint was developed throughout the whole process to maintain Aboriginal empowerment within the process.

Why focus on asking students about education?

As a simple question why is there a need to ask students, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, about their educational experiences. I believe the simple answer is to get their views from their standpoint to give a clear voice from an insider's perspective in our current education situation. As Paley informs us "the first order of reality in the classroom is the student's point of view" (Paley, 1986, p. 49). Various educational specialists and educational systems have suggested that they can present what is best for a student's education. Much of this is drawn from the educators' observations, their own educational experiences and pedagogical developments. Some of the most meaningful voices in this argument must come from the students, as they are the participants in our current 21st century educational system.

This study is based on using the voice of the 'other' or a marginalised group within Australian society. The Aboriginal student voice is used as the expert voice in relation to presenting cultural difference, from an Aboriginal standpoint. Through using an Aboriginal voice highlights a cross-cultural study where aspects of difference can be drawn upon and compared to the wider Australian communities.

For this research task to be considered as following appropriate cultural protocol it needed to be guided by the Aboriginal community so that the Aboriginal communities needs can be achieved. So the initial contact began by presenting a research query to the NSW AECG to consider if these ideas are important to NSW Aboriginal education communities. The NSW AECG was contacted, as they are the primary advisory body on Aboriginal education in NSW. In partnership discussions with the NSW AECG these ideas were interpreted into a research task design to ask Stage 5 Aboriginal students (aged approximately 15-16 years of age) what they believed from their standpoint was best practice to support and engage them in their education. With the questions focusing on school structures, the teachers, teaching practice and what curriculum was presented to them. The inquiry structure was to be completed in the collaborative framework of a 'Yarning Circle', a cultural known discussion space that is present within many Aboriginal communities across NSW.

From these negotiated partnerships I was then able to translate the research task into the University environment to fulfil appropriate ethical protocols for research under the University requirements. Once the University ethically approved the research I refined the material to effectively present it to Local and Regional AECGs, schools and Aboriginal parents to allow for informed consent to be achieved at the designated sites.

The importance of an Aboriginal standpoint in Aboriginal research

An important aspect of this paper argues that when completing research with Aboriginal students there is a need for Aboriginal researchers to be participating in the research at all levels of development from the design through to the analysis of the data. I argue that this is due to Aboriginal researchers explicit understandings of Aboriginal culture, cultural mannerism and nuances. This standpoint is supported by Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) who identify non-involvement of Aboriginal researchers on Aboriginal

research as “Terra Nullius research” (p. 203). Through these understandings the Aboriginal researchers should be able to successfully interpret the participants responses both verbal and non-verbal giving a more complete analysis to the research from an Aboriginal standpoint (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Rigney, 2009). These broad generalisations of Aboriginal researchers cultural capital may not be true of all Aboriginal researchers due to the destruction of Aboriginal networks through the invasion by European society to this country (Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 2009). But many Aboriginal early career researchers carry their bi-cultural understandings with them as they work cross culturally between western and Aboriginal societies. Including Yunkaporta (2009), Brown (2010), Donovan (2015), Kickett-Turner (2011), McKnight (2015) and Lowe (2014).

Harding highlighted in her chapter in *Feminist Epistemologies* (Alcoff & Potter, 1993), knowledge is socially situated, so a distinct epistemological view of a specific socially marginalised group (race, gender, culture, socio-economic standing) gains greater insight from members of that group. Harding (2009) also suggests that these members are not the only ones who can research or speak on that group’s position but if members of that group are not involved then interpretations are likely to carry a very different understanding:

In hierarchically organized societies, the daily activities and experiences of oppressed groups enable insights about how the society functions that are not available—or at least not easily available—from the perspective of dominant group activity. (p. 194)

Standpoint theory was not theorised in relation to feminist theories only; rather, it is a “*logic of inquiry*” tool that is at once multi- and trans-disciplinary regulatory ideal (Harding, 2009, p. 193). It can be used to place the distinct interpretations of marginalised communities into the methodological arguments of social inquiry in which their positions are located centrally and objectively in the academic canon. Harding argues that standpoint theory is an incredibly effective methodology in the production of sound knowledge

about marginalised groups. As a methodology, researchers focus their attention on the standpoints of the underprivileged, presenting the world from the marginalised group's vantage point and, in that process, the lives, values, and understandings of that group (Harding, 2009).

By engaging with marginalised voices in any sociological inquiry's will present the research questions from the ground up allowing the disempowered bodies to give weight to the questions through presenting a lived experience that may differ from the societal status quo. Harding highlights this when stating,

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. (Harding, 1993, p. 54)

Harding points out that to gain a more complete view of the world and the diversity of positions within any population then diverse populations need to have an equal say in their responses and carry equal weight (status) in the asking and analysis of these questions.

Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander educational researcher draws on feminist standpoint theory when he argues about the importance of members of the examined population to be involved in all aspects of a research task. Not just as the object being researched (Nakata, 2007). Nakata goes on to argue that through allowing Aboriginal peoples to be involved across all aspects of the research task will bring greater depth to the research than through Aboriginal people only participating in a minor aspect. Nakata states that, "Standpoint theory in my mind is a method of enquiry, a process for making more intelligible the corpus of objectified knowledge about us as it emerges and organises our lived realities" (Nakata, 2007, p. 12).

Nakata is not the only Aboriginal researcher to argue the significance of an Aboriginal standpoint. Rigney (1999), Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) all argue

the importance for Aboriginal researchers to participate within the research process at all levels. Rigney (1999) highlights the need for “Indigenist research as culturally safe and culturally respectful research...(that) privileges Indigenous voices in Indigenist research” (p. 10). Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) further this position by stating Aboriginal researchers “actively use the strength of their Aboriginal heritage...viewing anything western as ‘other’, alongside and among western worldviews and realities” (p. 205). These standpoints highlight the reality of recognition of difference and using this difference in the interpretation of the reality of the Aboriginal participants.

The use of standpoint theory integrates itself smoothly with Aboriginal research. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia are a culturally different group compared to other populations within Australian society. They consistently identify this cultural difference as an important feature to their unique identity. As part of this unique identity Aboriginal communities see themselves in a collective group identity, which is very different to the individualisation of the rest of Australian society and Australian law (Brennan et al., 1992). This sense of collective identity connects with aspects of the principles of standpoint theory particularly to the sense of group identity and examining socially situated social inquiry (Harding, 1993; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).

There is a great need for the development of Aboriginal researchers working within educational research, as their employment and graduation numbers are well below the population parity within higher education institutions (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2014). To gain some equity within this educational gap there is a need of some greater equitable support to be developed by higher education institutions and research funding bodies to allow for the increased participation of culturally sound Aboriginal researchers. So there is a need for the Aboriginal researchers to have a clear understanding of their identity and cultural position within Aboriginal society (Rigney, 2009). For this to be accomplished universities should identify high achieving Aboriginal education students and support them in their development of educational research skills. With the inclusion of some

partnerships' with Aboriginal academics to mentor the Aboriginal student in both their academic development and journey across the bi-cultural pathways that are needed when supporting Aboriginal communities and the academy.

When developing research involving some 'in' crowd researchers like Aboriginal academics investigating Aboriginal education there are arguments of limited objectivity through this process. One of the main reasons why insiders should be involved is that it is morally correct to allow marginalised populations to address or investigate the needs of their communities. This will allow these communities to have the opportunity to view and express their opinions on issues within their communities from their standpoint under their established directions and conditions. Also with the inclusion of an insider of the target group being involved they will carry into the research their own socio-cultural knowledge systems in the socially situated practises of the research. Griffith highlights this point of social affinity having greater value when engaging in research because 'an insider' can identify, "the social relations of the researchers biography that shapes the topic of research, the methodology used and the knowledge gained" (Griffith, 1998, p. 367).

The objectivity of research performed by members of a socio-cultural group is sometimes challenged as being less valid by some western mainstream research academics (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Moreton-Robinson contests these understandings in her comments that,

Feminists and Indigenous scholars argue that their way of knowing is connected to their positioning as subjects/ knowers of inquiry who are socially situated and related to others in the actualities of their own living. They acknowledge that not all knowledge is chosen or actively acquired.
(Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. 76)

The view that western academic norm's, or white middle-class male knowledge, is the benchmark for knowledge to be produced in western societies. With other different systems of knowledge or understandings being exotic compared to the acceptable standard of academic understandings

(Moreton-Robinson, 2000). For Aboriginal communities this can be argued as another form of colonisation where Aboriginal knowledge systems and standpoint are oppressed and the invaders standpoint is established as the civilised standard (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).

Research Design

The development of the understanding for greater need for Aboriginal educational researchers was gained from this study that involved interviewing Aboriginal High School students on what they believe is best for them in improving their educational experiences. The study is consistent with the principles of self-determination, as the Aboriginal students will identify what they see as the best practices when engaging with Aboriginal students through their own stories. This examination was held at a variety of school locations to identify if place, socio-economic standing and culture have any significant effects on the students' perspectives.

The data collection revolved around a Yarning Circle design. This is a level space where all participants are equal in the value of their voice in the discussion. This structure has been used by Aboriginal cultures' for as long as human memory (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). The Yarning Circle is where all the participants sit in a circle facing each other, this allows for all participants to see each other comfortably in an open discussion space. In a traditional sense the Yarning Circle is lead by a facilitator, someone who is respected for their wisdom or ability to guide their community. In this research design it this was lead by an Aboriginal researcher as the Chief Investigator (CI). Within the Yarning Circle all voices are heard and all voices carry the same value into the discussion.

The Yarning Circle establishes a safe non-hierarchical place where everyone present around the circle has the opportunity to speak without interruptions. In a research context the CI will facilitate the process through introducing the discussion topics and support the open discussion. The CI can do this

through clarifying some comments, probing the comments further or inviting participants into the Yarning Circle to allow for comments from all parties. For many non-Aboriginal researchers this structure may appear to look like a focus group structure. But for many Aboriginal peoples this circular structure is the norm for community meetings especially at important community meetings where the community gains guidance from the leaders (Elders) who bring their wisdom to the issue in open discussion to inform the community or suggest direction when developing viewpoints. It is a known structure; a comfortable space and this forum can be seen as a culturally secure space for open collaborative discussion (Blair, 2008; Donovan, 2015).

The school sites were not randomly selected but had a targeted selection approach. This was due to the very limited evidence of regular Aboriginal student success across all schools in NSW. So schools with significant Aboriginal student populations that have had some recent success or engagement in positive change were identified and examined for this study. Schools were asked to identify approximately five high school students in Stage 5 (Year 9 and 10) to discuss what they believe are best practices in engaging Aboriginal students at schools. A total of eight high schools were visited with initially four schools in a targeted region identified that set the norm from the participants' responses and four other schools that were targeted that had identified features that are generally associated with Aboriginal student populations. That is a school in a low-socio-economic area, this was also an urban school, a remote school, a school that had a high presence of Aboriginal culture, this was a school that had a long standing Aboriginal languages program and an elite independent single-sex boarding school that had a strong long-term mentorship program. A total of fifty students participated in the Yarning Circles, there were thirty-three male and seventeen female students who participated.

Schools	Location	Student population	Aboriginal percentage	ICESA	Attendance rate, %
1	Metropolitan	553	15	895	81

2	Provincial	1221	8	959	90
3	Metropolitan	867	10	956	88
4	Metropolitan	529	13	927	88
5	Metropolitan	535	12	872	85
6	Metropolitan	1056	3	1145	100
7	Remote	101	65	771	85
8	Provincial	401	21	911	85

Table 1 School site information from My School website (Australian curriculum assessment and reporting authority, 2014)

The Yarning Circle evolved from informal introductions and establishment of cultural positioning or relationships of family and community between the CI and the participants. A personal introduction of who you are, your family and Aboriginal Nation is a significant feature and has identified by other Aboriginal researchers as important practices when working in collaboration with Aboriginal communities (Blair, 2008; Hanlen, 2002). The students were informed of the confidential nature of our collaborative discussions and that this open discussion space was for all voices and they are all equally valued because of the unique Aboriginal voice that only Aboriginal students could present. From there we proceeded to some more targeted discussions around the research questions. Within these discussions the students gave their views on the issues they saw about school, teachers and the curriculum.

Practices embedded in thesis that allow for culturally responsive research

The most significant feature of this study was that the evidence came from Aboriginal students viewpoint with the analysis interpreted by an Aboriginal educational researcher. So all of these standpoints are embedded in Aboriginal cultural understandings. If these understandings are interpreted from a non-Aboriginal standpoint then some of these interpretations of data from the Aboriginal students position could have been misinterpreted if the study was analysed from a non-Aboriginal standpoint. Not those broad

similarities that could have been interpreted by any observant field researcher but the finer intangible aspects of culture or deeper understanding of Aboriginal cultural practices that may be missed by less enculturated educational researchers.

The cultural space that was established in the Yarning Circle allowed for an open, honest discussion from the Aboriginal students. This Aboriginal educational research task was developed in partnership with Aboriginal community through the Local AECG or through contacts made with the Aboriginal Education Team at the schools. Through the Aboriginal educational researcher being a known and a trusted member of the NSW DEC Aboriginal schools network has allowed for some easier transition into schools and developing contacts with AEOs. These AEOs supported him when introducing him to their Aboriginal students who participated in the Yarning Circles. This allowed the researcher to be supported into a trusting relationship with the Aboriginal students, as he was conveyed to the students under the status of the AEO who is a trusted person in the Aboriginal students world. Under these Aboriginal cultural protocols the Aboriginal students treated him as a respected member of their community through my association with the AEO, an important person in their lives. Of course if the researchers behaviour damaged this newly established relationship, the Aboriginal students would have treated the researcher differently in a more closed or less trusting manner.

An important feature of this research project being completed with Aboriginal understandings and a protocol at the centre of the study is that the interpretations of the materials were developed with Aboriginal interpretations as a founding approach. This meant that Aboriginal protocol was established from the onset including in the setting up of the Yarning Circles. So introduction and cultural protocol were addressed so all Aboriginal participants acknowledged this relationships between individuals and their Nations.

During the Yarning Circle discussions Aboriginal cultural behaviours and the

use of Aboriginal English (AE) was present from the CI and in the responses by the Aboriginal students. Through the CI having a clear understanding of AE allowed him to understand and acknowledge the comments by the Aboriginal students in their home language. Through this understanding the CI was able to re-direct certain comments back to the students to gain greater meaning to the research questions in a format that the students would understand. These student comments were further examined and analysed at depth by the CI when coding the discussion and giving a more accurate picture of the Aboriginal students statements.

This analysis was not just based on the use of the Aboriginal students language but the CI reviewed the Aboriginal students actions, both verbal and non-verbal, in the interpretation of their responses to questions in the Yarning Circles. These interpretations that are noted in the field notes were acknowledged in the classification of the themes that are presented in the analysis of the work. These themes were based on the cultural interpretations that were carried as part of the CIs Aboriginality into the analysis of the students' responses. The interpretations are not a mystical interpretation that only Aboriginal people can produce. But the analysis of the arguments needed to be founded in a rational and reasoned position. The CI was able to identify connections of the Aboriginal students words to other established academic arguments to form some validation of Aboriginal pedagogical theory. This interpretation is not uniquely Aboriginal but without consistent known understandings from Aboriginal researchers with a strong understanding of their culture and cultural interpretations, these arguments could be missed or miss-interpreted by non-Aboriginal researchers.

In finalising this research task and maintaining cultural protocol the CI will need to return back to the Aboriginal students and their communities. Presenting what was found from the analysis of the Aboriginal students voices. The giving back will include presenting any research outcomes drawn from the research including research papers and the PhD Thesis. Aspects of this will be shared with the Aboriginal community at local NSW AECG meetings, participant school meetings and presentations to the school

Executive of the schools involved.

Conclusions

This research supports the importance feature of standpoint theory that some communities responses to research can be inlaid with that communities cultural understandings and that members from that community are better equipped to interpret these embedded views. Researchers from that in-crowd will be better suited to interact with that marginalised community and have clearer interpretation of their data from a common standpoint. Through the following of correct protocol when engaging with marginalised groups will mean research identified by the marginalised community, designed, collected, interpreted and given back to these disempowered populations. This will allow a more complete understanding of various communities social needs.

Through engaging Aboriginal researchers when engaging in research of Aboriginal communities will have a better position from which to view and connect on aspects of societal structures and comment on these from their privileged position. This is a privileged position of having a greater understanding of the hidden elements of culture that can be portrayed through various non-verbal markers. I believe that the marginalised members should be engaged in the research development from establishing the questions; the research design, the analysis and what benefits could be gained from the research task.

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