

# Stories from high school and prisons rattle institutional cages.

Janean Robinson, *Murdoch University*

Roslyn (Rose) Carnes, *University of Notre Dame*

## Abstract

This paper is based on two research projects. One considered ‘unsettling’ Aboriginal prisoner education and the other ‘troubling’ education in high school. Juxtaposed are two critical research methodologies; critical ethnography and a relational critical allied methodology. Whilst these may at first appear very similar, on closer scrutiny it becomes clearer that independently, the place of the researcher becomes situated in a somewhat different relationship with participants. In working through these layers of difference, what emerges are the entwined voices of participants who are clearly telling us what ‘bars hold them in their cages’ and what spaces between could be transformational.

**Key Words:** context, world view, respect, relatedness, power

## Introduction

Two research projects have been combined for the purpose of this conference. Carne’s (2014) research ‘unsettled’ Aboriginal prisoner education and Robinson’s (2011) ‘troubled’ education in high school. Both researchers applied a critical theory perspective and initially identified similarities in their respective research projects and the common themes raised by the two groups of participants. In the process of writing this paper, however, points of difference in methodology and method emerged. By working through this process, this paper rattles a number of institutional cages; the cages of high school education and education in prisons, as

well as, potentially, the cage of academic research. As asserted by Four Arrows (2008: 2), authentic research will ‘be critical of cultural and educational hegemony, challenge the accepted values of academic work and offer alternative ideas that stem from different, sometimes opposing values’.

In creating this authentic research, we have reached an understanding that not only is the marginalisation of young people who do not conform exacerbated by a colonial construction of what is the norm, but also, a neoliberal turn to conservative policies and institutional practices leads to a focus on the individual rather than the communal. Our intention is to challenge these policies and practices because we argue that they discourage responsibility and inclusivity and punish difference and diversity. In addition, the sovereignty of Indigenous people remains invisible between the cages’ bars.

Critical theory has a common focus on society, structures and systems in context rather than a search for positivist truth (Gibson 1986:16) and even though ‘stories’ appear to have common elements they need to be contextualised in order to be useful in application. Whilst both researchers are situated in a critical theory paradigm, there are layers of difference in the projects that lend nuances to the understanding of research, the relationship between researcher and participants and the analysis of information provided. This paper illustrates this by simultaneously providing snapshots into the nature of two types of institutional cages experienced by young people.

## **Researchers and participants: the nature of the relationship.**

We begin by outlining the nature of the methodology and method utilised in the two research projects thereby highlighting the nature of relationship between researcher and participants.

Robinson's (2011) research used critical ethnography to 'trouble' the 'behaviour management industry' dominating government secondary schools in western nations like Australia. Like McMurtry (1999), she tackles this behaviour policy dominance in society as a 'cancer of capitalism' because of 'the restructuring of global market operations' developing 'immune, surveillance, and recognition and response systems' (88). She argues that young people are stripped of their social identities and become further alienated because of an unhealthy infatuation emanating from the policy with scrutiny and an obsessive fixation on security and punitive discipline measures.

Her research methods included reflexive journaling, critical discourse analysis of policy documents and most importantly having conversations with 27 sixteen year old student participants to hear their interpretations and understandings of behaviour management. Interview transcripts were shared with participants for checking and narrative portraits were created to 'give voice and to make meaning...not just focusing on the transcripts...but (to) read/listen/hear the data' (Mazzei 2008:51). Involving students as narrators provided a different kind of data to be used in discussions of pedagogy, praxis and policy (Pasco 2000: 33).

Carne's (2014) research 'unsettled white noise'. Built on critical race and whiteness theory it utilised a relational critical allied methodology based on research as learning *from* rather than *about*. Her place in the research was partly as a 'fellow participant'. Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2010:4-5) state that non-Indigenous research is based upon strict guidelines, usually with an object, issue or problem as the focus while Indigenous research is based on observation of the world and learning experientially from it. As Chilisa (2012:8) argues, 'Euro-Western research paradigms ...ignore the role of imperialism, colonisation and globalisation in the construction of knowledge' and how that knowledge is represented. A relational-critical and allied methodology, however, leads to

methods of research that take issues such as Indigenous sovereignty into account in both method and analysis.

Yarning is a culturally appropriate alternative to interviewing. It is defined by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010:38) as 'an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study'. Yarns can appear to go in circles rather than maintain a linear progression and yarning as a methodology is as much about listening as it is about speaking, relating and maintaining relationships.

### **The Research Participants**

The lens through which we view the specific projects will now become more apparent as we share the narratives of a secondary school student, ***Shane*** and ***HALO***, a group of Aboriginal young men under the age of 22, who together with relatives (aunties), were present at the yarn. We have distinguished various participant voices by using different fonts for each research project. Our voices as researchers will remain in body text. In using specific fonts within the same narrative we create a merging of the dialogical and reciprocal processes of knowledge building (Kincheloe 1997: 75; Freire 1997: 75), allowing one to 'not only *see* but also *hear* the different voices' (Martin 2008).

### **Introducing *Shane*: a high school student**

*Shane* is sixteen and in his third year at *Anchorage High* (a large government secondary senior high school) located in the outer suburbs of the capital city of Perth in Western Australia. This district has a high rate of youth unemployment and a lower than average life expectancy. *Shane's* interpretations of school are important in understanding the struggles surrounding conformity to the practices and changes that continue to filter into classrooms through a *Behaviour Management in Schools* Policy; formally implemented into all government schools during 2001(DET). Whilst the policy claims to be fair in developing a learning

environment that would be ‘welcoming, supportive and safe’ (4), *Shane*, like many of the students interviewed, explain that it had replaced meaningful relationships in learning.

### **Introducing *HALO*: a group yarn**

*HALO* (Hopes, Aspirations and Leadership Opportunities) works with young Aboriginal men aged between 18 and 22 in the southern suburbs of Perth who have been incarcerated in either a juvenile or adult prison. Also present during discussions were adult Aboriginal women (aunties) that these young men wanted to have present in hearing their stories and provide a family perspective on education in prisons. This group compilation reflects an Indigenous communal world view in which the individual exists in terms of relationships with people and place.

### **Rattling cages: looking at the bars and finding rods of power.**

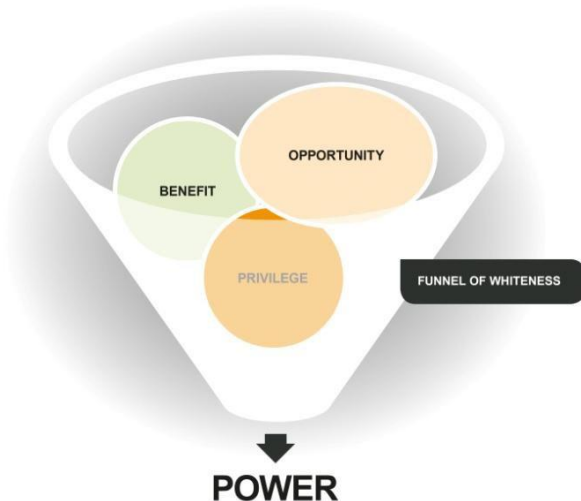
While the themes identified by both research projects are similar and often almost echo one another, there are nuances between the two. This can, in part, be traced back to slightly different perceptions of power.

Robinson (2011) examines power in relation to technical and scientific neoliberal processes of reform in schooling. She argues that these processes contribute to student disengagement and have limited capacity in resolution because they do not reach to the root of cultural and political problems (Oakes et al. 2006: 15).

Furthermore, what this leads to in classrooms for many students is boredom, limited participation in relevant and meaningful activities, a lack of freedom of expression and [a sense of powerlessness] (Polk, 1984). In turn, many students either ‘act out’ (Shor 1992: 24) or are misled to thinking that the fault lies solely with themselves (Power 1986: 249).

McLaren and Farahmandpur (2002:42-6) argue that economic globalization has contributed to this deepening of social disparities, reinforcing class inequality and a capitalist logic of values, attitudes, dress, mannerisms and style as corporate culture dominates unabated without the addition and emphasis of any critical knowledge.

Carnes (2014) sees power as the manifestation of assumed privilege; benefit and opportunity being funneled together through the context of whiteness (see *Figure 1*). This results in a race-based power which is at the core of what needs rattling in the prisoner education cage. While individual Indigenous people may have varying degrees of western opportunity, benefit and privilege, the degree of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron: 1977) available in a non-Indigenous cultural context will be limited due to the colonially constructed context of race.



**Figure 1: A context of whiteness has power with a racist base (Carnes, 2014, p. 158)**

In the remainder of this section, Shane and HALO ‘speak out’ about bars that confine access to education in their respective institutional contexts. These are bars of boredom, loss of dignity and respect, relationships with authority, loss of a sense of self, lack of opportunity and a focus on the individual rather than systemic

problems. In addition, yarning with HALO identifies the importance of culture and Aboriginal sovereignty in addressing the bars that confine them.

### **Boredom and repetition**

*Marlon: At Hakea they have two sides to the prison and over one side they have all the education and if you're on the other side you just don't get anything<sup>ii</sup>. And you just sit around all day ... doing nothing, just go for a walk and like it gets to you, it does your head in quite a lot... all day every day and the same thing every day. Just play cards, go outside, wait for lunch then eat lunch, have a shower, wake up and do the same things over and over.*

*Shane: When you have to use a book, you need to take time to understand. When you are speed reading you just skim and get a few key words for that question. Like in class, she will put a projector on, and then we have to just copy it down quickly before she changes to the next sheet. We are just writing and copying words, we are not taking anything in and she is not explaining it to us.*

### **Loss of Respect**

*Shane: Teachers never listen to your side of the story and then they shout at you, you feel really belittled, when you are sitting down and they hover over top of you, shouting.*

*Lewis: There are some screws in there that are like dogs, you know... I was paintin one day and I was smiling and then he sees me and he says to me 'oh what the fuck are you smiling at?' I'm like what the fuck! ... You know, why say somethin if someone's happy ... why change their mood you know... instead of just lettin em stay in their happy mood.*

### **Focus on deficit**

*Lewis: They go for about a week these short courses. Like the blood borne*

*virus course. And there was drug and alcohol and there was another one....cog skills... There were some things in there that were alright like...but I don't think we really take it in much. We wouldn't end up back in there if we did. When we get out we do the same thing and go back (pause) yeah, so much for cog skills.*

Cognitive skills training places the individual as the sole agent of making change in prisoners life and, similarly, the source of blame if things do not work out well. This 'deficit approach' (Freire 1972; Yunkaporta 2009: 55) combined with a focus on cognitive skills programmes, can lead to pathologising of individuals and leave systemic issues unaddressed.

***Shane: To get 'good standing' back we have to carry behaviour cards and serve detention.***

*[Anchorage High Good Standing Policy 2007]...Students who lose their 'Good Standing' are required to complete a report card. This card requires a signature from every teacher each day for a week as well as having a parent signature each evening. Should [Shane] fail to complete this within the week, additional time will be added to [Shane's] loss of 'Good Standing' (5).*

***Shane: It just makes you angry having to fill out this attendance blue sheet every day. It means you don't want to come to school so you just stay at home.***

Programs like 'cog skills' and 'Good Standing' fail to take into account systemic issues because they 'are typically based on the premise that offending is largely attributable to the failure of offenders to think through their actions, and to their unawareness of the impact of their offending behaviour on others' (Gorman, 2001: 4).

**Relationships with authority:**

***Shane: If you haven't explained with a note why you are out of uniform then you get detention. I tried to explain to Mr R. when he came up to me and said***



*'look I don't know where my shirt is, I think my sister might have stolen it off me because I don't live with her anymore...so my school top is obviously lost somewhere around there'.*

*Marlon: Or the guards, you might have been a bit smart with them, and they want to get you back and they'll say 'we'll get you visitor non-contact' and that non-contact's awful...you know... they're just there and you want to touch em and that and you can't.*

### **Loss of dignity**

Loss of dignity occurs not only to those being 'educated' or 'reformed'; it happens to family by association, as these words from *Marlon* reveal:

*Visitors have to get tapped down and then they can get the dog sit on 'em. When I walked in for my visit a couple of times, my mum (pause), my mum was cryin and it was makin me upset seein my mum crying. She doesn't touch drugs but the dog sat on her coz people at home mess around with that stuff or she mighta been sitting on the steps outa front of the visitors centre...and the dog smelt the drugs ...*

*Shane: I was going to buy a new one (uniform T-shirt) but I had already spent the money that day on lunch. I did try to explain to Mr R, but he said I would have to do detention anyway. I am trying really hard to get my 'Good Standing' back so that I can go to the end of year function.*

To attend any school function, Shane must break through the bar of compliance because 'if a matter cannot be resolved with non-compliance of the dress code at the school, the Principal may apply sanctions prescribed in the *School Education Regulations Act 2000*': 7).

### **The spaces in between**

When western astronomers look at the stars they see constellations based on the stars themselves. In some traditional Indigenous cultures, people base what they see on the spaces in between, with the unformed creating what is seen. To find the spaces between the cage bars requires a freedom of imagination to challenge those in power who wish to control the future (Medina 2012: 42). By flipping our gaze from problematic bars to spaces between them, we can begin to find solutions to the issues bars create. We need to listen carefully to do this. For example, *Marlon* provides a clue as to what would make education in prisons better for the young Aboriginal men from HALO, *'No walls around it, coz with those walls you can't see out'*. It is the bars that presently fill the spaces. This is a simple, yet profound statement: to be shut in, away from the earth, the sky, family and nature is a living death, where spirit, body, mind and heart all suffer. Identity is tied to country and family and sovereignty of self, family and country.

### **A place to be safe: Where am I gunna go?**

*Lewis: When I first got out ... after the three months, they're sposed to help you get your own house ... (pause)...and they just left some of the people I was staying with in the dark, and me in the dark as well. I stayed with these other men and after their 3 months they got letters saying like 'oh yeah yeah you gotta get out coz your three months is up' and then some of em didn't have nowhere to go ... they're like 'woahh shit', and they was telling me like, 'where am I gunna go?'*

Dudgeon et al. (2006) claim housing as one part of the web of pragmatic things that need attention, because 'we cannot address issues to do with Indigenous education without considering other inter-related factors such as health, housing, the justice system, government policy and importantly, culture and the history of colonisation and racism' (13).

### **Strength through culture**

Vicki (one of the aunties) says; *I think there needs to be more education around culture. The culture is a living thing, whether you believe it or not. It's living and in here* (Vicki gestures to her chest).

### **Spaces to be heard and to listen**

*Shane: Like Don Henry, he will let you have fun in class and he talks nice to you. Yeah and Mr Wiley he skated 'man'. Doug brought his skate board into school and then Wiley asked him if he could have a go. He was one of the coolest teachers but he still let you learn things.* Shane's words highlight that 'being heard is important in becoming a person' (Smyth 2005: 229). Listening and being heard is central to what is being asked of those with power and authority. The following is an excerpt from Carnes (2014):

*Daisy and I were ... 'yarning' softly about her people, her country. She was saying how important it was for me to come to 'The Lands' meet her families and see for myself how people lived. The families knew I wanted to go and meet them and were waiting. I felt powerless to find the resources I needed to make that journey or to do anything useful even if I did get there and asked 'Daisy, what can I do that might be helpful, that might help make any kind of difference?' She smiled and said, 'finish that PhD and go and tell people what you have learned' (355).*

## **Discussion**

If we really listen to what these participants tell, we hear what it is that have been the rods of power that constrain and restrict freedom but also where potential spaces of freedom between the bars can be found to exist. It may well be that young men like Shane and those at HALO could all benefit from an approach to education that ensures community, safety, recovery of stories of relatedness and a focus on strengths and agency.

This paper illustrates that issues in both prisons and schools appear to be similar in how institutions prepare docile bodies to take their place as productive, compliant individuals in mainstream society (Foucault 1977). A prison environment even

goes so far as to de-skill people in day-to-day decision making and living, for example; cooking, organising time, deciding what to wear, what to eat and who to spend time with. As a consequence, De Maeyer (2005:2) confirms that prison is the place where taking no initiative is considered 'good behaviour'.

Similarly, when school is not engaging young people like Shane, they need serious re-examination (Stevenson and Ellsworth 1993: 266). Instead of being places of learning, they become places of problems. Students can experience and learn *real* democracy from a 'position of possibility' (Giroux 2003:164), relationship, respect and trust. This is an intricate, informal, reciprocal, voluntary, public life trust.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, what the intertwined narratives of this paper call for are an education that is respectful, relational and creative and involves making choices and decisions in which consequences and reflections on those choices are considered. It is a place that respects both individual and communal ways of doing, knowing and being and does not assume a homogenous world view of neoliberal and colonially created and sustained systems of power that excludes (Corradi Fiumara 1990: 19). Instead, what matters is relatedness. Learning becomes two-way and when relationships are built based on trust, reciprocal friendship and respect; powerful educational interactions are more likely to be developed (Margonis 2004:47; Black et al. 2011:47). Rather than focus on institutional cage bars of conformity, this paper has brought together two studies that argue that relationships be placed at the centre of education because if *we really listen* to the clear messages of what the 'inmates' of institutional cages have shared, we can begin to find possible spaces of transformation.

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<sup>i</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the school and student participants. *HALO*'s participants were able to choose their name and all institutions are referred to by their real name.

<sup>ii</sup> Marlon could not go onto the side of the prison where there was education as it was not considered safe for him to be there.