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READING AND WRITING THE LANDSCAPE

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We just chop and leave a mark. We just chop it and look. If nothing we just leave the chop there so we see that's a mark, and if you go again and you see that log two weeks later you see the log it will be alright. There'll be something.

Arnie is one of the children who participated in an extensive study that generated detailed case study information about the transition experiences of seven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as they moved from Year 7 in their community school to Year 8 in their new urban high school ( 2004). In particular the study documented the literacy and numeracy practices valued in the home community, community school and urban high school and highlighted the continuities and discontinuities between them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Discontinuities were found in the ways in which children engaged in the various activities. Further, the data highlighted a lack of understanding, valuing and acknowledgement of the various community literate and numerate practices by schools. The results of the study suggested that student identities embodied different forms of knowledge and skills and these qualitatively different identities played key roles in the students' effectiveness as 'westernised' learners. In the opening vignette Arnie explained how to find mangrove worm, one of the local delicacies. All of the children who participated in this study actively read and wrote their landscape. They read their environment, the water and their bodies and they represented this through story, art and dance. As they moved to urban high schools these different literate practices were not valued.

The paper will explore an example from the data where another child, Darcy, shares his highly developed knowledge of place, self and significant others at the local art centre as he takes the researcher from the story of his favourite Grandmother's painting to his late father's pottery. Finally, it will highlight the need to redefine literacy, so we might acknowledge value and use different ways of reading and writing in productive ways.

***Reading and writing differently***

In this study literacy was approached from a socio cultural perspective which means it was not simply understood as a discrete set of skills but rather as variable forms of social practice, see for example, "New Literacy studies" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), "social literacies" (J. Gee, 1996; Street, 1993), or "situated literacies" (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanich, 2000). Literacy enables us to 'do' things, to learn about ourselves and others and to communicate our knowledge, thoughts, understandings and feelings. Most importantly the process of becoming literate and the kinds of literacy practices engaged in demonstrates aspects of the individual, place and cultural, social and community identities (Falk & Balatti, 2004; Ferdman, 1991; Guofang, 2000).

Literacy occurs through a range of different modalities including the visual, oral, kinaesthetic, digital and written. The multiliteracies framework described by Cope and Kalantzis is helpful for thinking about literacy in this way (2000). They argue that we need to think about literacy differently because of the advent of new technologies and the increasing awareness of cultural diversity in a globalised world (Somerville, 2007). Since the

introduction of mass schooling the literacies of reading and writing print based texts has been privileged. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000) literacy teaching and learning has been carefully restricted to “monolingual, monocultural and rule-governed forms of language” They believe that:

...the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class based dialects; variations in register that occur according to social context; hybrid cross-cultural discourses; the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects or registers; different visual and iconic meanings; and variations in the gestural relationships among people, language and material objects. Indeed, [they say] this is the only hope for averting the catastrophic conflicts about identities and spaces that now seem ever ready to flare up (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Somerville (2007) also highlights a need to redefine literacy. She discusses body and spatial literacies which evolve from a highly developed learned understanding of our own identities in relation to the places and spaces in which we work and live. According to Somerville (2007) literacy is something which occurs in the translation between these embodied knowledges and different textual forms. In the context of this study a broad definition of text was adopted to include kinaesthetic, oral, visual, print and digital text forms. The child at the centre of the discussion in this paper was not considered literate in the school space. Darcy had some difficulty reading and writing print based texts and was placed in an Intensive English class when he moved into high school. Despite this Darcy had highly developed knowledge about his place which he conveyed through different modalities.

### ***Background to the study***

The study in this paper was funded through the Department of Education, Science and Technology as part of a broader initiative to fund small projects that investigated students considered at risk in the school environment.

A feature of many rural and remote communities in Northern Australia is the requirement for Indigenous students to leave their home communities in order to access secondary education.

According to the Department of Employment Education and Training (2002), there were 85 schools that serviced rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory. Sixty-two of these schools were relatively small primary schools with one to five teachers. Three were Area Schools that provided formal education to Year 10 and a small number were trialing the delivery of secondary education to Year 12. Generally these schools in remote locations did not provide any formal secondary education and most students were required to leave their home communities to attend urban boarding schools in order to access secondary education (DEET, 2002). The majority of children in these schools were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and the retention rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in high school according to Collins (1999) and Ramsey (2004) were reportedly significantly lower than that of non-Indigenous children. Problems associated with providing 'good' education to children living in remote areas of Australia are not unique to the Northern Territory. According to Barcan (1965) this has been an ongoing problem since settlement (Reid, Edwards, & Power, 2004)..

Whilst there has been a serious commitment toward improving the delivery of

secondary education in remote communities in the Northern Territory, it will be some time before all Indigenous students living in rural and remote areas have access to secondary education in their home communities.

According to Ramsey (2004), in 2001, the Northern Territory had the largest proportion of students attending schools in remote areas in the country. Forty-four percent of all students attended remote schools compared to the national average of less than 5%. However, in the same year only 21% of these remote students attained the Year 5 reading benchmark. Similarly, students enrolled in regional Northern Territory schools fared worse than their urban counterparts.

This study was interested in better understanding some of the transition issues for these students as they moved from their community schools to their urban high school, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. This was important for the community which generally had high expectations for their children in relation to education and future employment opportunities.

### *The research sites*

The two communities in this study are situated on an island that is approximately one hundred kilometres north of Darwin. Each community has a population of approximately 400 people and is serviced by a local store, bank, primary school, recreation hall, sporting facilities, social club, police, women's and men's centre, library, post-office, art and health centre. Both communities are very traditional with the children and their families participating in hunting and ceremonial activities regularly.

Each of the two community primary schools investigated had a student population of approximately eighty students. The seven children that participated in this study were chosen because they were relocating to the same urban high school in Darwin. There were other Year seven students in the school but their parents chose to send their children to different high schools located in other states in Australia.

The urban high school in this study had a population of about 800 students, the majority of which were day students. The school provided boarding places for Indigenous children from over forty different remote locations in the Northern Territory. At the time of this study Year 8 was streamed into three different programmes, which included mainstream, supported secondary and intensive English classes. Students placed in mainstream worked with the mainstream curriculum, those placed in supported secondary were being assisted so they could later be moved into mainstream classes and those in intensive English classes had a strong focus on the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. Initially, one student was placed in a mainstream class; three were placed in supported secondary and the remainder in intensive English classes.

The data found that caregivers of the children in this study had high expectations of the school system and of their children in relation to learning, community and school involvement and future career opportunities. The community clearly valued learning and what the education system represented. Learning was an integral part of community life. Parent and community members expected their children would learn during the various community activities such as hunting, ceremony and sport and most importantly the children knew that they too would be required later in life to pass this knowledge on to younger family members. Similarly

the school also had high expectations in relation to learning, however these students were positioned as being unsuccessful learners before their school journey began and teachers said it was the exception not the rule that these children would leave the school system with their high school certificate.

The research found that many of the discontinuities for these children lay in the fact that much of whom the children were and what the children knew, preferred to do and could do was often not valued and acknowledged in the school setting. The irony of the latter point was clear in the data: Continuities in knowledge and identity can be seen to provide the bridges and connections (based on what the children can do and who they are) that build learning and new knowledge and identities. Discontinuities in knowledge and identity prohibit effective and engaged learning.

This research was specifically designed to try and identify some of the continuities and discontinuities for these children so that schools might better help these children to become successful learners in a western school system.

### ***Research design***

The study referred to in this paper generated detailed case study information about the transition experiences of seven Indigenous students from their home community and school to their new urban high school in relation to the literacy and numeracy practices of these different contexts (Dyson, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study used ethnographic techniques of observation, document analysis and interviews during the data collection phases. Qualitative techniques were used to analyse the data. In the initial phase of the analysis, data collected from the home, community school and urban high school was analysed separately. After the various interviews and observations were transcribed, coding of the data sets occurred (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The second phase of the analysis involved an ethnographically grounded approach to discourse analysis. Gee and Green (1997, p. 139) identified four dimensions of social activity - World building, Activity building, Identity building and Connection building. World building referred to how participants assembled "situated meanings about "reality," present and absent, concrete and abstract". Activity building described the construction of situated meanings connected to the activity itself. Identity building concerned the identities that were relevant to the situation and included ways of knowing, believing, acting and interacting. Finally, Connection building related to how interactions connected to past and future interactions (J. P. Gee & Green, 1997, p. 139). Gee and Green (1997) suggested a number of questions relating to each of these dimensions. The research team selected a number of questions that could be answered through the data. The questions provided a framework to analyse the various data and provided a rich description of the activities investigated.

The third phase of the analysis involved constant comparative analysis between the data sets to assist in identifying discontinuities between the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This assisted in identifying the extent to which school literacy and numeracy practices reflected those valued by the community.

In this paper two examples from the data are discussed. In the first example the child is in his place, the local art centre. There he reveals a highly developed knowledge about himself, others and his place by carefully moving between western

and Indigenous literacies to convey his story. In the second example the same child is in a different space, his Year 8 English classroom. In this space he attempts to tell a similar story. However, in this space these ways of knowing and doing literacy are not privileged and so the child's story remained untold.

### ***"You going to be pot man"***

Darcy walked me down the local art centre where we met his grandmother. She was busily working on one of her paintings at the table out the front. He told me how he comes here every afternoon after school and how he often drops in at lunch time to see his grandmother. Darcy explained that the painting she was working on was about gathering long bums and mussels and that the colours used in the painting were traditional colours. They included grey, black, yellow, brown and white. He then pointed to the shapes that represented the long bums and the shapes which represented the mussels. The local women and children on the community often gather 'long bums' and 'mussels' during their hunting activities.



### ***Pointing out the mussels***

He explained that the white colour represented body paint and that the white circle in the middle was to put an outline on it to make it "look outstanding". My understanding of traditional Aboriginal art was very limited and very 'white' and so I asked whether Darcy knew how to make the paint. He explained it was acrylic and came in containers. Although he did say that sometimes they used ochre and that he did know how to make this. He told me you get some rocks and that you scrape them. He called this 'woody woody'. Then some powder falls off. You then mix that with a very 'small amount' of something else that helps turn it into a 'good' paint. He also explained that some products were 'better' than others for making 'good' paint.

Darcy then began talking about some of his grandmother's other paintings. He proceeded to take me to the art centre's show room so he could point them out to me. When we got inside he began looking through a pile of canvases that were stacked on the floor. He spotted the one he wanted to show me and asked the sales assistant to help him pull it out. He explained that it was his favourite painting and that it represented two snakes, a 'girl and boy snake'. He then explained it was his grandmother's dreaming, her totem. He reminded me that his totem was 'Jungle Fowl' like his father and highlighted the fact that the colours were slightly different to the first painting we had looked at in that there was no grey, only white, yellow and brown.

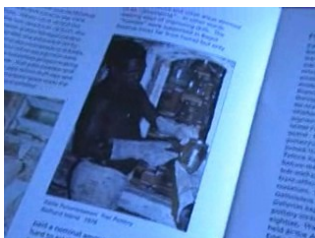
This was obviously a hugely significant point. He finished by telling me this was his favourite because it was one of the longest ones she had painted.



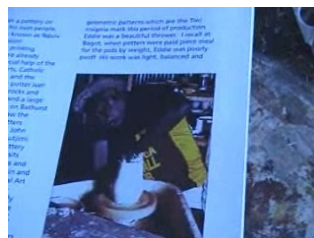
***“No grey!”***

***“It’s my favourite because it is longest one out of all of hers”***

After we had looked at his Grandmothers painting he moved me towards the pottery displayed on the shelves. He told me that pottery he had made had sold and he mentioned that his father who had passed away also made pots. He then proceeded to take a show me a book about the pottery made on the island. He took me on a picture flick of the book pointing out all the people he knew and pieces of work his father had created. He pointed to the first picture and explained that it was Maria and his father when he was young. He then turned to another picture and said that this was his father making pottery when he was old. He showed me the kiln he was talking about on the previous day and told me he would show it to me after.

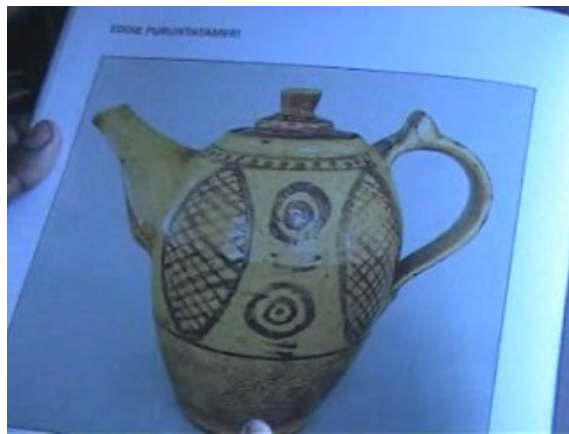


***My father when he was young.***



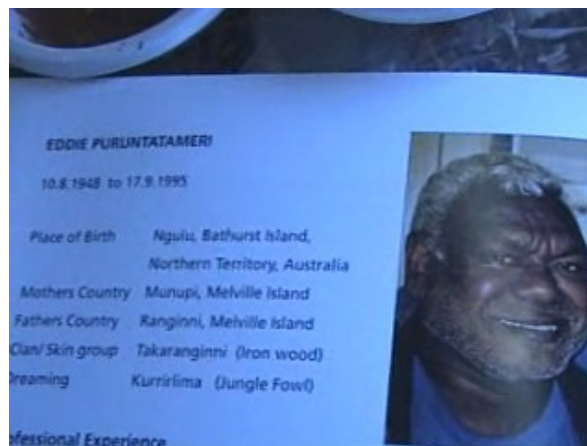
***My father when he was old.***

Following this he showed me pictures of several artefacts that his father made.



*That's another one he made*

He then turned to a picture which he explained was a group of 'famous people' at his father's opening exhibition. He said that he missed his father and showed me a picture which gave details about his country, skin group and dreaming. He also showed me where his name appeared in the book.



*That's him there*

He then turned to a page which talked about his father's 'Pukamani' which is a period of mourning that occurs after a person has passed away. During this time the deceased member is given a different name and family and other community members are forbidden to refer to the person using their birth name.

Finally he showed me a picture of several people and told me how they were related to him. He then turned to a picture of a plate which his sister had made and he explained that he had painted the plate. He was very proud of this piece of pottery.

Following this Darcy went on to the computer to show me the Art centre's website. He explained that people from all over the world bought the paintings and that the artists made a commission on their work.

Darcy then proceeded to take me outside to where the pottery is made. He told me that this was the place he was talking about on the previous day. He showed me the potters' wheel, showed me where to put the clay and how to turn the wheel. He said that he often makes pottery when he is feeling bored. He pointed out some unfinished pots and walked

over to the kiln and explained how the pots were fired. He showed me where the clay was kept. He then said he had been making pots since he was four years old and that he kept doing this until he was seven, the year when his father passed away. He said that his father used to tell the kids to go to school and to come down and help with the pots after school was over. He said he still makes some pots with his big sister. He took me outside and was very excited to show me the old brick kiln. He showed me where they stacked the pots. He explained that there used to be an iron sliding door where the heat came up. Finally he showed me where they put the wood to fire up the kiln. His closing comment was that his Uncle had told his that he was going to take 'all this over' and that he, Darcy, would be the next 'pot man'.



***The new kiln***



***The old kiln***

During my time at the art centre Darcy took me on a journey through time from the story of the painting his Grandmother was doing when we arrived to the days when he was four watching his father fire the pots in the old kiln. I learned snippets about his family, his dreaming, how to make ochre, stories of paintings, the economic workings of the art centre, the old and the new. This place was part of Darcy's life. The paintings and the pottery helped to form his identity both past, present and future. After all he was told he would be the next 'pot man'. To tell his story Darcy moved between Indigenous and western culture. He told me about traditional colours, totems, dreaming and family relationships. He also told me about making 'good paint' about how the website took their artwork to the rest of the world and that his favourite painting was the 'longest one'. Further he gave me insight into the character of members of his family. He told me how his father told the children to go to school, how he was famous and he told me how he made pots with his sister. In the telling of his intricate tale, Darcy utilised a range of literate practices. He told his story orally, he showed me the things he was referring to and he revealed how his grandmother's identity was represented in her paintings. He showed me where aspects of his family's life had been recorded in a printed text and he showed me where the art centre went out to the world digitally. He moved from oral story telling, to giving explanations about how things worked to using procedural discourse to tell me how to make things to navigating websites. Darcy presented as being highly literate in this place. A few months later I sat with Darcy in a different place, his Year 8 English classroom.

### ***wRiting Remotely Different***

I walked into the classroom and sat with two of the Tiwi children. Other students were busily taking out their English books and writing implements. The teacher supplied Darcy and Arnie with pen and paper and asked them to ensure they were better prepared for their next lesson. After the normal routine of re-establishing the classroom rules and procedures the teacher wrote "The Purposes of Writing" on the whiteboard. The students were orientated to the lesson and asked to write a list of all the different kinds of writing. Darcy and Arnie began their list which included shopping list, email, timetable, newspaper, books and magazines. Darcy began to write the word 'painting' and looked to me for approval. I told him it was a good thing to include. After all he had told me some of the stories in his Grandmother's paintings. Then Arnie said, "What about dance?" I told him it also was a very good example to include. I had seen their dances and they had told me how they represented their various totems. Both children became excited and started adding other less conventional forms of writing to their list including tracks, songs and the seasons. The teacher



asked each group to call out their lists. She began to compile a list of all the students' ideas. Darcy and Arnie were pleased that their ideas were recorded. Following this the teacher chose four of the examples the class had offered and erased the remainder of the students' responses. The final list included novels, dictionary, map legend and email. She continued with the lesson and the groups were asked to think about purpose and audience in relation to the remaining four genres. In a prior interview with the teacher she explained that this lesson was an introductory session for her writing program this term. She expressed concern about these students' preparedness for secondary school and said that it was important to 'get back to basics'. She aimed to have these children comfortable using a range of written genres by the end of term and to have them plan and draft their writing appropriately.

In the observed lesson, writing, learning about writing and 'doing' writing were constructed from a western, school-based view of literacy. Arnie and Darcy suggested different ways to write. In their other space they were comfortable telling story through painting, dance and song. Similar to print literacy these provided a means for self-expression, to record significant events and to show their connections to place and others. In their other space Darcy was also comfortable using a range of different literacies to tell his story. He moved from oral literacy to print literacy through to digital literacies to tell me about his connections to the local Art Centre.

This lesson constituted a missed opportunity. It was an opportunity for Darcy and Arnie to tell their stories. It was an opportunity for other children to learn. It was an opportunity to redefine literacy. It was an opportunity for the children who were considered to be struggling with literacy to be positioned as experts. It was an opportunity for the teacher to better understand these students literate competence. The teacher missed it because her definition of literacy was driven by the curriculum which is constructed from a westernised view of learning and literacy.

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