

*Yarning with a purpose:
First Nations narrative practice*

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Celebrating children's culture and connections through story-sharing

MICHELLE BATES

I offer a collection of whispers, stories, memories and words of integrity and wisdom from a range of experts in the field of children's culture – namely children. This chapter describes work with young people, parents, caregivers and a Council of Caretakers who collaborated to find ways to coresearch and honour children's knowledge and to celebrate children as authors and influencers of culture. This involved using and sometimes adapting narrative practices to suit the context in which we live and work: in the 'middle of everywhere' in Central Australia.

As is expected of me by the people with whom I work, sharing this story starts with place and connection. I will offer some contextual information about beautiful

Warumungu Country to set our scene before I introduce the team of co-researchers.

Tennant Creek, where I work, is a small, very remote community of 3300 people. It is the hub of the Barkly Region, which contains many outlying communities and cattle stations. There are about two people to every 1000 kilometres: it's sparse and remote. The furthestmost Barkly community is an eight-hour dry-season drive from Tennant Creek. There are 16 First Nations language groups across the Barkly, and many people speak several languages, English being the second, third or fourth spoken.

This grassed and rocky Country shines golden at sunrise. It rolls and undulates between ranges to the south and

east. It's Country that holds precious, culturally rich memories and stories, as well as Dreaming and identity for many families and language groups. It has produced other riches too: gold and cattle.

The impacts of colonisation's harmful legacies can also be seen in Tennant Creek and surrounding Country: insufficient and inadequate housing, poor health, low employment, few businesses, over-availability of alcohol and other substances, and geographical remoteness from helpful, proactive supports that encourage culturally meaningful and safe engagement with health and wellbeing. Too many children and young people are at risk of or are engaged with the justice system. More than half the children in detention are also in the care of the state – not living with their parents or families. Many old people have passed on, some too early, and suicide has lured young ones. Some people express a hopelessness that comes from having endured the impact of others' great ideas and political agendas, enacted without meaningful regard for the expertise of the Warumungu people: the people who carry the richness and the pain of histories, experiences and stories of this place.

Stories are about belonging. They are the title deeds to a culture – clans have particular stories, and a story connects you to that place, or to those people. The right to tell stories and to link into that history, to that land, and that connection is an Indigenous cultural right. It is one that is

fiercely guarded in post colonial societies...

All we have left is our stories. (Janke, 2010, p. 1)

The children, young people and community have trusted me with their stories, insights, fears and knowledges, and with close and trusting reciprocal relationships. Storytelling has been a culturally resonant and meaningful way to develop understanding of our hearts, purposes, identities and connections. The storylines we developed together have contributed to building more full and layered pictures and understandings of the resilience, warmth, beauty and gifts held by children and their families in Tennant Creek. The exploration of these storylines has felt like a mighty journey of excavation, discovery and adventure.

My approach to working with the stories of this community has been influenced by Central Australian artist and writer Kathleen Kemarre Wallace (2009). She urges us to focus on *listening deeply*:

To all the people I would say: 'Come, listen to us, we will tell you our culture. Learn from us. That way we will all survive. We share this country. We need to work together and learn from each other ...' I hope you listen deeply and let these stories in. They ... are for all time, for the old days, to help remember the old people, but also for the future and for young people now. (Wallace, 2009 p. 170)

Her courage and leadership, under my skin now, has made me strong and ready to accept the privilege of

exploring storylines, life's intimate and precious details, with others.

Researching children's stories

After hearing children's responses to sad events in the community, I became curious about the lives of children of Warumungu and other language groups, and about how narrative approaches might be used to elicit their knowledge and help them respond to events in the community. Children's culture – talk, play, games, stories, learning – was strongly influenced by the problem stories operating in their environments. Children would retell the stories they were hearing, including details and language that they admitted they didn't understand. These words and stories seemed misplaced in the realm of childhood; however, the romantic notion of a perfect unencumbered by (adult) problems exists in story only. The negative and enduring impacts of colonisation are evident, and the lives of community members in remote and very remote Australia can be profoundly complex and intense as a result (Wingard & Lester, 2001).

In the children's stories I also saw wisdom and the potent impact of nurturing, cultural ways and connection to place, Country, language and extended family networks. I wanted to learn more about the children's connections, acts of resistance, and the many skills they had developed in this often very complex living environment. In thinking about researching the children's 'strong stories' (Wingard & Lester, 2001) some questions emerged:

- What might be an antidote to the influence of problem stories for these children?
- In what ways might narrative practices offer children opportunities to express their expertise, skills and knowledges?
- Might children be interested in creating a forcefield, some safe distance from the troubles that affect them, but that are beyond their ability to resolve?

With my insider knowledge of history's influences on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, my drive to honour children's knowledges and expertise was strong. I became aware that it was strong too among community members. A team of co-researchers was assembled from children I had existing connections with. This team included 11 children aged between seven and 12 years, and a parent, carer or family member nominated by each child.

I met individually with these children every second week over the course of four months. We met in various venues including, a quiet room at a community hub, the footy oval, the town pool, while walking on Country, or sitting together at the basketball courts. We sat together or cooked food, made puzzles, drew pictures, drove out bush in the car, collected firewood, played Uno, camped out under stars, rode bikes to secret places and climbed to the peaks of high ridges. Each child and I explored what they held precious, what was important to them and ways of making space in their lives for more of what

felt good, important, fun, soft and adventurous. In the course of our research, children led us to invite others in. They sought to share our discoveries with loved ones or proposed different constellations of children joining together in our sessions. This was embraced by their co-researcher! We met with parents, family members and carers two to four times each. Some of the conversations had to occur remotely, using phone and video calls.

Our work was supported by a Caretaker's Council – a group of three Warumungu older people interested in supporting children to grow strong in their cultural identity and their understanding of themselves. They were also interested in learning about working with narrative practices. The caretakers brought integrity to the project, and made sure that it was embedded in the community. They watched, engaged and offered guidance and perspectives that challenged and supported me and others. The Caretaker's Council became more valuable than I could have imagined at the outset. It became a place for guidance and cultural meaning-making – a haven. In the face of relentless problem stories bringing exhaustion and shame, the Caretakers' Council took on a role of care for the children, parents and caregivers, encouraging and holding them. Without the contribution of the caretakers, and the establishment of trusting relationships with them, many participants would not have accepted the invitation to join in these conversations.

Reimagining narrative practice for the local context

The Caretakers' Council urged me to align my use of narrative practices with the local culture and context, and with local ways of helping people. In collaboration with co-researchers, we set about 'reimagining' practices that had been helpful in other contexts, making sure they fit with the ways Warumungu people and others raise their children. In some cases, this involved adapting our language:

- 'Double-story development' became 'we all have storylines', 'not one story but many' and 'that problem is not the boss, you are'.
- 'Externalising problems' developed into 'let's make sure that problem finds a place outside of your body and your spirit – you will feel different then'.
- Unique outcomes were recast as 'those times when you say "hey", when you feel right, ready to be helpful to yourself'.
- Locally resonant terms were used: 'helping work', 'making some meaning', 'stronger stories', 'stories to help us' and 'stories to keep us strong'.

Our work needed to be adapted not just to the local context, but to the age group we were working with. Michael White's work with children enthralled me (see White, 2000; White & Morgan, 2006). I became gripped by his exquisite skill in making meaning as he playfully and earnestly joined with children in the work

of loosening problems' grips and assisting children to view themselves as separate to the problems invading their space. I questioned my ability to move into a more open, relaxed space with children in a practice context, while maintaining a demeanour that was decentred, influential and playful all at once! I also needed to find balance between the weighty responsibility of witnessing events and hearing stories of injustices that had already shaped lives and a readiness and energy to see opportunities to make new meaning from the counter plots and ideas that surface in connected work.

One of the best challenges that the project presented me with was to work at the skill of the carefully crafted question, adapted to the context and respectfully accessible to my conversation partner. With the Caretakers Council, I developed forms of questioning that would catch the children's attention and make sense to them. As a way of exploring the values the children upheld, members of the Caretakers' Council suggested questions the children might be asked:

- What kind of good things in life do you see?
- What are some things you have learnt when you have been exploring?
- Who were you with when that happened?
- How did you learn to do that?

With these questions, the Council of Caretakers was cleverly inviting curiosity into the conversation and mapping a way for other storylines to emerge to make

way for new identity possibilities. These questions were an invitation for children to reach out for new territory on which to stand (White, 2007).

I dispatched with long-winded wordings. Short and direct worked better. Instead of the practices I would typically rely on to scaffold conversations –recapping, rescuing words to repeat back – I would use my memory as a ploy to help the child to rehear, to think again, keeping them centred as expert: 'Oh wait, I'm not keeping up! Take a step back – did I just hear you say your grandfather said you would become big and a great hunter like him?'

Curiosity became a vital tool in working with the children. This included my expression of curiosity about the children's lives and stories, and my responsiveness to the children's curiosity. A calm, steady curiosity led to ample expeditions into richly described alternative stories of children's lives. Much work was needed to uphold curiosity, which was sometimes diminished by long days, tiredness, community happenings and other distractions.

Rich metaphors from the local context wove through our conversations: 'I'm going mining for gems', 'giving Running Amok other things to do', 'planting seeds of kindness', 'caring for my garden', 'swimming and jumping into the deep', 'my forcefield', 'long walks, waiting, hunting for goanna', 'going out bush – packing my bag', 'thanking that problem for coming and closing the gate'.

Externalising practices were also introduced. Our co-researchers, the cohort of children with whom I worked, included a number of children for whom ‘problem’ had become part of the way their character was perceived by others. ‘Problem’ was a word used to describe the child, across learning and social contexts, ‘they are too big a problem for me’ and ‘the problem kid can’t come along’ and ‘if he doesn’t sort his problems out, he will continue to be suspended and won’t be playing sport’. A series of adventurous conversations with four boys, aged between seven and nine years, identified that the children were trying hard to do their best at school, trying hard to listen and to learn, yet something was keeping them from staying in class, sitting still and participating with other children. We decided to invite the problem in.

Michelle: Boys, I have an idea. I need to know what you say about it. What if we said to that problem Running Amok, ‘Running Amok! You are causing me troubles. I can’t learn and I get in trouble and then I can’t play footy when I don’t stay at school to learn. And so, Running Amok, we need to help you get busy somewhere else!’

Zane: We need to give Running Amok something else to do!

Michelle: What do you think Running Amok could be really good at?

Michael: Running messages to the office.

Billy: Picking up rubbish to make him tired.

Terry: Maybe he wants to lay under a blanket and just listen. Maybe no-one asked him if he wanted to learn before.

Michelle: You’ve given me an idea. We can keep Running Amok busy, and then what if we make a little space for Running Amok to take a break at the back of the classroom?

Patrick: Oh no, no! You have to keep him busy, or he’ll, he’ll – run amok!

Billy: He’ll be tired; he will need a rest, jugga [little boy]!

Terry: Let’s see, he maybe is different now.

Externalising the problem as Running Amok made space for each child to consider his care of himself, and in so doing creatively and imaginatively opened space to take on a role caring for Running Amok, making sure Running Amok was busy but had a chance to rest. Importantly, they acknowledged Running Amok as an entity with capacity for change.

The following practice excerpts demonstrate ways that narrative practices were reimagined and adapted to this place and community.

Walking with Zane

Tingkarli, five kilometres north of Tennant Creek, offers a place of retreat and solace in nature. It is an important place culturally and spiritually. It is also a place for fun and recreation, community events and family time. The chosen venue for 'Australia Day' activities each year, it is a cultural and spiritual, social and political place.

Walking on the stony and spinifex-covered land – coarse, steadfast, rich with colours – my nine-year-old companion and I are deep in conversation. I began spending time with Zane following a series of school suspensions, late nights walking around and risky events leading to contact with the police. In many people's eyes, Zane was the definition of 'problem.' He heard this frequently. Ross Hernandez's (2014) work inspired me to walk while consulting with Zane. When children are not comfortable inside a room or confined space, the space and discomfort confine conversation. Moving, walking, driving, riding, swimming, sitting after a long walk across Country: these are talking and listening spaces.

I ask Zane about the problem that's been hanging around at school and causing a fuss – what would he call it? Zane offers 'Being Bored.' Externalising the problem (White, 2003) of Being Bored took some time. I learnt about the weight of others' perceptions and their bearing on Zane. I decided to ask Zane what his grandfather might think Being Bored was up to:

- What might Kangku say Being Bored is trying to do?

- What would Kangku do if Being Bored visited him?
- And what might Kangku say to Being Bored? Do you think he would growl him Zane?

Considering these questions on Country worked very well for Zane as it freed him to be in the conversation. Distractions ensued, yet I welcomed their efforts, as I learnt from Zane that they supported our interactions immensely. I made a note to share this observation of Zane's skill with others in his life.

- Zane, what do you think made your grandfather such a great man?
- What might your grandfather say if he saw you now?

We continued to explore his ideas about his own values and those of his grandfather, and what his grandfather saw in him, helping to stare down the dominant negative description of him, and creating a thicker, richer description (Ncube, 2014). It was easy to centre Zane's insider knowledge and expertise.

I reflected on the negative perceptions of Zane. What might change if his 'wonderfulnesses' (Epston, 2010) could be exposed, understood and invited to stay awhile? I asked Zane about his wonderful kicking at footy, and how he had learnt to play so well. 'My grandfather', Zane offered. 'He's watching me now, Michelle. I make him so proud'. A beautiful sparkling moment!

I held on to Zane's words, keeping them safe for him so they would not be forgotten by either of us. We agreed to write them together. I sat scribing while Zane paced along the creek bed, dictating with pride. I became aware of much beneath the surface: the subjugated knowledges he had forged and held on to in the glaring light of the dominant discourse that labelled him 'problem child'. I wanted our time together to offer him opportunity to focus on developing the story of his strengths, humour and skill (Lee, 2017), an accessory to his already evident acts of resistance or 'survivance' (Vizenor, 2008). I asked Zane some questions to prompt his dictation:

- What's great about being out on Country, Zane?
- What do you feel inside?
- Who else knows about these lovely 'warm tummy' feelings?
- Who in your family can you remember being on Country with?
- What are the things you remember about your old grandfather as you stand on his Country?
- What might he say to you now?
- With so many memories of fishing, camping, hunting and driving, and all the things you have learnt, do you think it a good idea to talk to others to let them know about all that you have – your skills and knowledges?

Zane and I compiled a 'Wonderfulness List' drawing on the work of Epston (2010). The re-authoring process assisted Zane to connect clearly to his grandfather's

values, and to the cultural protocols and practices he had witnessed since he was a baby. For each item in the list, Zane chose an object to symbolise the skills, knowledges and values he held close. This helped us to avoid the tedious and difficult work of pen and paper. Some of the objects were collected during our walks on Country.

Zane's wonderfulness list

I have a very good and kind heart, helping other boys: a heart shaped rock found in the creek bed.

I love being out bush, I can start fires and keep them going: two firesticks collected out bush.

I know a lot of tracks and can find my way: a mud map of Mystery Dam and how to get there from town.

I love my family: a picture from a previous 'Tree of Life' exercise showing immediate and extended family members, school, footy and swimming hole.

I can fish and catch barramundi at Borroloola: pictures of fish drawn on sticky notes and pasted to a blue cardboard sea.

I love footy and I can goal umpire a whole game and play long time: a small footy signed by a visiting AFL [football] team – a prized possession.

I love food and I like to cook: a series of sticky notes with letters and drawings depicting ingredients and cooking utensils for making ham and cheese toasties.

Conversations with Zane required persistence which was richly rewarded with experiences of hard-won collaboration. It was kind of working together that demanded we were 'both are knowers and learners in the process' (Spradley, 1979, p. 47). Zane's strengths and knowledge were cast in a new light by linking them to his motivations and connections to cultural life, his history and family.

Simon's seasons

Continuing to follow Hernandez's (2014) lead about movement and talking, I decided to further explore the possibilities of different kinds of conversations occurring in different environments. Simon was 12 years old and in detention. We met at the skate park. We kayaked in the dam. We met at sunset, high above the town on a hill. We walked, sat and even watched the sunrise. Only later did I wonder about the role played by the freeing and vast spaces we ventured in, and their contrast with the small cell and sparse visitors' room he occupied in the 'detention time'.

Before meeting with Simon, I had been contemplating the imagery and metaphor of cycling seasons as a way to think about moving through change and about what remains constant (Abu-Rayyan, 2009) I wondered whether metaphors about changing seasons might resonate with Simon if they were offered as a way to think about the stages of his recent experience: home, community and town life prior to engagement

with the justice system; the court processes, remand and sentenced detention; and his eventual release, on conditions. Simon took up this invitation and used it to create meaning. Summer represented home, his starting point. Autumn was remand time (changing, unsettled, wind, waiting, preparing for cold). Winter was the time of defined incarceration (hoodie on, head down, cold mornings, cold concrete, darkness, reluctance to engage). Spring represented the time when he was confined but looking towards release (incentives, rewards for good behaviour, transition, newness). Summer, Simon's favourite time, would come again at his point of release some months in the future.

Epston's (1999) advocacy for the 'co-production of knowledge' grounded my meetings with Simon. I sought to help Simon to locate himself in his known context and environment, and to promote his connection to stories, skills and to movement of day, light and time.

I learnt that Simon had been forced by the context of detention to demonstrate toughness and defiance in order to get through very tough times. In conversation together, we found ways to draw attention to his skills. He loved stories and engaged freely in sharing his stories and knowledges of his young life before detention, his family connections, friends, school and community.

A striking, sparkling moment emerged in response to the question 'How did you manage, what helped you stay strong in detention?' Simon responded 'I had time to think. It was too quiet some days and then too noisy

other days. I upset my mum, and her face was in front of me one night, in my dream and I knew I would get through and not go back'. Simon described feeling held by his mother's love. Dreaming about his mum reminded him of the truth of their deep connection: something that remained constant. Before the dreams, Simon said all he could feel was the hurt, shame and disappointment. Simon's awareness of the bond he shared with his mother, and the bond's impact on his ability to keep going and to see his time in detention through, led to further understanding of his skills of persistence and self-knowledge.

I asked Simon if I might talk with his mother about the story of this dream. Together we wrote her a letter about the dream and what it meant to Simon. After reading the letter to Simon's mother, Vanessa, I asked if there were words for what she felt.

I knew it would be hard for him. He is so far away, and I have little ones to care for. I didn't know he cared about me and my feelings. It was a very stressful time – my son in detention and I was upset with him for making a poor choice.

The image that Simon's mother spoke of in response to her son's words, was of 'a big heart weeping'. She described it as 'the heart we share that keeps beat for each of us'. Vanessa asked for help to write her son a letter in response, and this became an opportunity for mother and son to unite in hardship, and to share in a preferred story of their future.

Dear Son,

I cried more tears when I read your letter to me. I cried because I felt your bravery lift off that page like your spirit.

We are together in our dream space, Simon. I see you.

My son. Mistakes are made and repair will come.

You are young, and you have your grandfather's strength. He will be watching over you.

The seasons you will enjoy when you return home, and the summer will be the best we have had: you will be back with us.

I think of you each day. Your brothers and I talk about you each day, every day.

Remember that love heals all hurt, my son.

Remember your culture: we are fighters, we will resist and live long.

Your loving mother,
Vanessa.

The story of Simon and his mother is a strong example of relationships formed and moving over time in response to life's circumstances. The gift of having spent time with Simon in open spaces gave us a solid foundation for the work undertaken together in the confines of detention. Twelve years young, and facing great difficulty with detention's routines, expectations, deprivation and power relationships, Simon was not

coping. As someone strongly connected to space, Country and his culture, the seasons metaphor, slightly adapted to Simon's cultural life and experiences, proved to be a helpful tool to support Simon in connecting with his life, his family and his future while in a difficult context.

Letters between Angela and Alira

Angela and her daughter Alira shared a close and loving relationship. Angela had been a very young mother at 16 years of age. Supported by her family, she made sure that Alira attended school, despite having challenges with her health and wellbeing. When she was six years old, Alira witnessed a violent incident that led to her entering the system that purports to offer children protection.

Although Alira lived with a dominant story of separation and pain, together we were also able to explore a counter story based on Alira's memory of times with her mother and grandmother. Through careful questioning, curious enquiry and playful meaning-making, Alira recalled shining moments and points of connection. She attributed her softness to her grandmother, who hugged her repeatedly and cradled her to sleep. She described her grandfather's skills: driving, hunting, music. Alira was learning guitar and played for her grandfather over the phone. Alira loved to hear people saying that she looked like her mother. We decorated photos and sent letters and drawings to family members.

Alira and Angela shared a history of long phone talks, gossiping about family matters, sharing stories and news. However, this had recently changed. Alira continued to call and write to her mother, but Angela had been unable to respond. Alira longed to hear from her mother.

I know my mum is stuck. It is hard for adults, and I know children shouldn't see bad things. Everyone needs to feel safe all the time. I see my mum in my dreams, and I look for her in the stars. She's there, she's always there.

As I listened to Alira, I wondered if I might rescue some of her words and turn them into a letter to Angela. I hoped a letter might offer Angela an opportunity to refocus on the love and care she could offer her daughter. With Alira's permission, I sent this letter to Angela.

Dear Angela,

Earlier today, your daughter talked with me about her family. This, as you know, is a favourite topic for her!

Today Alira remembered a time when you, Alira, Mimi [grandfather] Joseph and Nana Louise were living together at Ti-Tree.

Alira remembered that sometimes she could smell porridge before she got up from bed, and she said this feeling made her tummy and her heart feel warm.

Alira says that you loved to cook her porridge, and that even though you would be sleepy, you would make sure

that her hair was brushed, her tummy was full and her face was clean before she went outside to wait for the school bus.

Each afternoon, Alira said you would wait at that school gate for her.

Today Alira asked if she could see you and I reminded her you were in Mount Isa, visiting your mum and helping with her hospital stay.

Alira asked if I knew when you were coming back to Ti-Tree. I reminded her that we had spoken about how you sometimes need to step out of town. 'She must miss me too' said your daughter.

Before I could respond, Alira offered that 'Mum is a bit stuck, and life for grown-ups sometimes can be too hard'.

Dear Angela, perhaps when you read this letter, your heart might feel an ache to hear your daughter speak in this way. The reason I write to share with you is that I can see in your daughter the love that she carries for you, and I can also see the love you have for her. She holds you so close, even when you are many miles away.

How about we talk by phone soon, and maybe you would like to send some words to Alira?

With love,
Michelle.

When I spoke with Angela, she expressed much shame and sadness about the impact of the court's decision to

keep her daughter in care until she was 18 years old. It had been such desperately confining, wretched news for someone working hard to strive for more in a state of loss and grief. She explained that this made talking with Alira very hard. She would cry and 'no words would come'. Together, we wrote this letter to Alira.

Dear Alira,

It is cold in Mt Isa, and that baby one, little Rosa, is growing up like a little fatty one – too heavy to carry now. Nana Louise is feeling better. Your Mumom [uncle] is having his court day and his daughters Leanna and Larissa are coming to live with him, and we are all happy for that.

I read your letter, and those are your words, Alira? Thank you, Alira. I have my love heart drawing you gave me on my window.

Alira, when I am there and when I am not there in town, you are always beside me and in my heart. I am trying hard, and I will be well for you and I will see you and we will talk by phone. Even in those moments when we are not talking, or together straight up, I am with you and you are with me. We are family.

Maria is helping us, she helps me to grow you up, and we all are family.

Love you my daughter,
Alira Acacia Ann.

In this story, the value of rescuing others' words is at work. The separation, loss, geographical distance, grief and the pain held by Angela in witnessing another raise her own child was keenly felt. The use of letter writing to honour roles and connection provided time for clarity and set a pace for calm, heartfelt words to emerge: meaningful honouring of heart connections committed to print.

Turning stories into books

With my young co-researchers and the Caretakers' Council, we developed a beautiful collaborative approach to sensitively exploring and celebrating children's culture. Our findings were documented in two publications: *A book of stories for people who are trying to understand us: Honouring children's skills, expertise and knowledge*, and *Stories inside my heart: Family sharing their wishes and dreams for their children in some problem-saturated times*. The first is a collection of drawings, letters, photographs, stories, dreams, memories and trees of life, compiled by the children in individual and small group work. The book was shared with each child's significant adult. It conveys the strong links the children had to values gifted by their family members, and is a beautiful acknowledgment of everyday family life including the gifts and skills of parents, aunts, grandparents and carers. The children's stories conveyed their love for and kindness towards the adults in their lives with clear and frank depictions of what in life held most meaning for them.

The second book, *Stories inside my heart*, is a collection of letters, stories and remembering by adults in caring roles. The contributions came about following the children's invitations to family members to join us in our work. Two children, siblings, asked if I could show their drawing and story to their mum. This idea sparked enthusiasm among all of the children to do the same. In diverse circumstances, including small gatherings, walks, phone calls, drives and sitting quietly together, children's perspectives were shared with their family member. An outsider-witness process was adapted to fit our context and responses were captured to form letters and stories, developed with each adult, some accompanied by symbols, artwork and drawings. These formed the basis of this book.

Damilia's Dreaming

To bring the chapter to a close, the following is a very significant story. Damilia had few genuine friends yet she was so loving and open and funny. 'Disability' and 'different' colluded to form barriers between her and peers, making it difficult to reach common ground. A degenerative disease meant that Damilia was almost blind. She wrote the following prize-winning story over several sessions with me. It was an attempt to make visible Damilia and her gifts of love and enthusiasm for life. For Damilia, her family was most important: her mother and siblings and family members who cared for her because she needed them. She stood strong and proud.

Kangaroo Dreaming

This is a story about Kangaroo Dreaming, my Dreaming. My friend is helping me to tell this story, slowly and with pictures on the white-lit screen of her computer. Amy, my carer, is also helping me remember about my Country.

I am Damilia. I am 11 years old. I have help to write this story as I have not always been to school and I am blind, with a tiny little peephole of vision in my left eye.

I am getting used to my vision disappearing, and I am not yet understanding very well what this means for me. I keep asking for the lights to be turned on because it's getting darker for me. This makes me shaky and unsteady, and I am sometimes frightened. I am learning to use a guiding stick.

I feel tired most days because it is hard for me to walk around. I can't see and I need to trust the people with me to watch over me.

Even so, I love my life. I love going to school. Last year was my first full year of school! I love to share my toys and my Lego, and I love visitors to my house. I love BBQ, swimming, songs. I love Jesus and he loves me. I love to make jokes, to laugh, to go out bush, to see my family and to talk of times when I was a little one like Tyson at Murray Downs.

My Red Kangaroo Dreaming is mine.

I am Damilia and this here is my story about my Kangaroo Dreaming. My one.

My mummy is Roxanne, and I lived with my mummy at Murray Downs.

There was Dameson, my daddy, and Dameron, my brother.

Now there is Damara, my little sister, and Tyson, my baby brother.

My Country is Tataninya in the Northern Territory.

On my Country I had nanny goat – biggest one nanny goat with one fella horn. Big horn.

I went to school in Murray Downs at Murray Downs School and there was Anna at school.

I played in the playground at Murray Downs school. Outside under trees and inside in the school building.

I love Kangaroo Dreaming. My mummy, Roxanne, talked to me about my Kangaroo Dreaming.

I feel Kangaroo Dreaming on my skin. My mummy showed me and she talked to me.

Now I live with Amy. I'm big!

Amy takes me out bush and buys me new one dress for me. Amy cooks yummy foods, and sometimes sausages, with love. I love sausages.

Amy helps me to spend time with my mummy and my family.

When we go driving, Amy say 'Look there, Damilia, a kangaroo there!' 'Where?' I say, 'Where the kangaroo?'. And Amy say, 'there on the left, Damilia. He's chewing the sweet grasses by the side of the road!' I love kangaroo.

When we go camping, we see kangaroo.

Damilia Holmes, 11 years old.

How beautiful is this story? And breathtakingly honest! Damilia is a delightful, knowledgeable, earnest and enthusiastic expert on children's culture! What a pleasure it has been to work with my co-researchers, all of the children, the adults who joined us and the Caretakers' Council.

Using narrative approaches to work with others in a very remote community has required a great deal of reimagining of practices to fit this context. At times, like during the development of Damilia's story, finding ways

to authentically engage people, listening deeply and earning the support of others in the process has been both humbling and life changing. The way forward was not always clear. Holding close the need for the local context to be centred in every conversation supported connection and brought forth resonances that echoed through the stories: themes such as culture, language, connection, the vastness of space and the presence of time. Local context woven through stories by their tellers.

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