

Trisha Maroney Memorial Essay

During my final year at Flinders University, I lived in Katherine for 7 weeks for a speech pathology placement that strengthened my cultural awareness and understanding of respectful practice towards Aboriginal people. In preparation for my placement I extended my knowledge of local languages, history and culture. Placement began with an empowering cultural orientation to the Katherine region that prepared me to be sensitive to the school's cultural context and challenges that exist for families living in rural and remote areas. Weekends provided time to attend local events and explore the Katherine region.

Prior to placement, I spent time researching cultural and linguistic factors pertinent to the Katherine region. Katherine West alone is home to more than eight local languages, each with distinct phonemes and gestures. Many children also speak Kriol, which shares sounds with English. As I researched the history and geography of the local area, I gained an appreciation of the significant role of languages in the transmission of culture. Consideration of how the traditional owners of Nitmiluk, the Jarwoyn people, have passed down customs and culture through story telling, led me to consider the 8 ways of knowing and how to integrate story telling into speech and language sessions.

The cultural orientation to the Katherine region was delivered by the Flinders Katherine director, the lecturer in Aboriginal health and the Work Force Development Manager for Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA). The last two are local, Aboriginal women who spoke freely and passionately about their families, culture and community life. The director shared her diverse experiences of remote area nursing, her research and Katherine life. The lecturer in Aboriginal health began by speaking Kriol, bringing research articles to life by enthusiastically describing nuances of phonology, gesture and sign. It was reassuring to realise that she was there as a mentor and could point us in the right direction when it came to understanding local languages. Mapping my family tree, provided insight into kinship which has supported me to further understand and be respectful of the roles of extended family members in caring for Aboriginal children. The lecturer also provided support to connect us with local, community events. Attending Sorry Day was a powerful experience, which spoke to the ongoing presence of trans-generational trauma from the Stolen Generation experienced by local people. Sharing a meal afterwards, I was uplifted by a sense of family and community support. This resonated throughout my time in Katherine, providing perspective during challenges on placement. These experiences showed me the significant, positive impact of finding a local mentor and embracing opportunities to be involved in community life.

The scarcity of allied health services in Katherine was a daily reminder of the remote location, which challenged me to think outside the square. In order to advocate for services through appropriate referrals, I learned to consider each child's hearing, vision, sleep, nutrition, general health and overall wellbeing as

well as school and home environments. The clinical educator, an experienced speech pathologist, gave me the freedom to make decisions and the opportunity to learn. Standardised assessments were not always appropriate or meaningful for Aboriginal students. With each assessment I became more familiar with alternate but equally acceptable ways of teaching and assessing. Working with a reluctant talker who identifies as Aboriginal, I collected a language sample by playing I-spy outside. For lively storytellers, I would integrate this into sessions. I also collaborated with teachers and parents to provide support in the classroom and at home. Early on placement, I received some teacher feedback that previous speech pathology reports could be difficult to interpret and impractical to implement. After acknowledging the necessity of reports being readable and practical, I felt motivated to change this perspective for the better. Upon finishing placement, it was affirming to receive an email from this same teacher complimenting me on the clarity and helpfulness of my reports. She also commented that *“it is fantastic that the different agencies can work together to improve the outcomes for everyone involved.”* These experiences enabled me to draw on my adaptability, creativity and ability to work holistically and collaboratively within multidisciplinary teams to maximise our positive impact on all students.

Experiences in Katherine were not limited to the classroom and I was often outside exploring with my colleague on placement. On weekends we would be found swimming, walking and getting lost in local wonders like Nimiluk National Park. This became a talking point at school, as we shared our weekend adventures with students, who would respond with vivid accounts of fishing trips and wildlife encounters. This enriched our speech therapy sessions and helped us to find common ground with students. During our final weekend in Katherine, my colleague and I camped at the Barunga Festival. We were privileged to work alongside the Banatjarl women at the cultural park. Initially, we were unsure of our role but we waited for direction. Through putting our questions aside, listening and staying involved we soon settled into selling damper and making pots of tea. In between the weaving and bush medicine workshops run by the Banatjarl women, there was friendly banter over highly sought after cups of tea and time to relax and enjoy the festival. On the final night we sat on the slope of the riverbank, listening to didgeridoos, violins and voices resonate through a natural amphitheatre lined with gumtrees. Walking back to our tent, we reflected on how openly the Katherine community had welcomed us into their fun, vibrant and evolving culture.

This placement has improved my ability to be culturally sensitive, both as a human being and as a future health practitioner. Collaborating with the clinical educator, school staff and the team at O’Keeffe House, provided the supervision and support I needed to thrive and enjoy placement. Listening to and engaging with the community has expanded my understanding of different ways of knowing. Overall, I have developed my ability to be inclusive and respectful when working with Aboriginal people as well as skills and strategies to continue learning in this space.