

Nyangatjatjara College's communication strategy



MICHAEL WINKLER reports on an innovative strategy used by Nyangatjatjara College in order to gauge what remote community members want for their children's education.

CENTRAL Australians pride themselves on being resourceful. By combining knowledge of an ancient language with the 21st century technology of the iPad, Nyangatjatjara College has devised a method of gauging what remote community members want for their children and their school.

Most schools with a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled espouse the importance of 'working with community' – a buzz phrase that verges on the clichéd. A school that genuinely works with its local community is a school where the leadership knows what the community wants, and monitors community opinion as to whether or not expectations are being met. This can be an onerous process – sometimes awkward, often time-consuming – but it is the only way to be certain that the school is providing what the community requires, rather than delivering what the school leadership thinks the community needs.

What do you do, however, when language and culture creates a hurdle for clear communication between community and school? This was an issue facing Nyangatjatjara College, an independent school providing secondary education for students from the Central Australian communities of Docker River, Mutitjulu and Imanpa. While there are many commonalities between the school's three campuses – most importantly, that all students

are Anangu and speak Pitjantjatjara as their first language – there is a distance of approximately 500km by road between the easternmost community (Imanpa) and the westernmost (Docker River). In order to adequately serve the three disparate centres, each community elects two people to the Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation board of management that oversees the College and is also supported by independent directors with specific expertise in education, governance and financial management.

Community surveys

Recently, the College has gone one step further and conducted surveys in each of the communities. The process was complex, reflecting a belief that working in an appropriate and fully inclusive manner is more important than working fast. Nyangatjatjara College principal, Chris Harvey, engaged the services of former Ernabella School principal and Pitjantjatjara speaker, Sam Osborne, through a partnership with Ninti One Ltd. Ninti One manages the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation. It is a not-for profit organisation based in Alice Springs that builds opportunities for people living in remote Australia through research application and outreach. Anangu researchers were employed from each community, and they worked with Mr Osborne and Mr Harvey to devise questions in Pitjantjatjara that would elicit the sort of information the school needed to know. The researchers learned the essential elements of working as a researcher,

including the ethics of research, methods, data and the challenges of adaptive methods for cross cultural research. They then worked on their interviewing skills. The rationale for this method was that community respondents tend to, for a range of cultural reasons, give even trusted and experienced non-Indigenous researchers responses which are standard, unproblematised and intended to be helpful and build a relationship that avoids any form of conflict.

'So often, Anangu participants are thinking, 'What do they want me to say and how can I support what they are trying to achieve?', Mr Osborne says. *'There is an 'obvious questions; obvious answers' façade that often bears the title 'research.'* Sadly, this is problematic. It is a well-worn interface through which the validation of policies usurps the opportunity for research findings to influence adequate change in remote Indigenous communities.

'In the Anangu context, Anangu researchers implicitly understand the culture and can interpret the dialogue, including the unspoken far more effectively. They also provide the opportunity to de-colonise the power-laden interactions that so often take place in remote community research that is undertaken by 'outsider' researchers.'

Imanpa researcher Andrew Nugiyari says, *'It worked quite well. We talked to young people, old people, all sorts of people. They could understand. They found it good to talk to me'.*

Although all Australian schools are supposed to do staff/parent/ community surveys, this has never previously happened at Nyangatjatjara College. *'One reason we hadn't done it was because we hadn't found any surveys that were useful for our purposes'*, Mr Harvey says. *'This was a way to find out what people really want from their*

school. The researchers asked questions about what the school should do, what they think about our staff, whether or not our staff are helpful, how often they visit the school and how they feel about visiting the school, and so on. We also had survey questions relating to our work with MindMatters, a mental health and wellbeing education program.'

'I believe that this is a way to get authentic answers. You don't just get the answer they think the principal wants. As a leadership team, we can use this information to direct our strategic plan.'

An additional benefit of this process is that it enhanced the skills of the Anangu researchers. Mr Harvey says that there are many employment opportunities for people who are skilled in Pitjantjatjara and English and who have experience interviewing community members. The College has already committed to working with Ninti One's CRC REP (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation) Remote Education Systems research project over the next five years. This will provide a range of opportunities for engagement and employment for Anangu in action research, to better inform educators and the systems they work in.

The value of iPads

The value of the iPad was that it allowed researchers and respondents to tick on-screen boxes, as well as recording comments in audio and text based formats. Following the initial school attitudes and aspirations survey, the iPad-bilingual survey method will be used for a NT National Parks & Reserves survey on Anangu young people's attitudes to their environment and the Parks service.

The history of Nyangatjatjara College is full of good intentions. When Mr Harvey took over as principal in 2010, it looked like the school could be closed. He decided from the outset that he would be guided in all key decisions by the will of the three communities the college serves. The school's aim is simple – *'to have every secondary-school aged child across our communities attending school and learning every day'* – but no educator with any knowledge of the Central Australian context would think this is simple to achieve. Under his stewardship, the school has reconnected with community leaders, and attendances and enrolments are healthier.

The major question of what happens to young people whose families experience generational unemployment; living in a part of Australia where job opportunities are limited, once they leave secondary school is a separate issue – but something that exercises the minds of Nyangatjatjara College leaders and staff members every day. For a few of them, perhaps, the future might involve paid work in bilingual research, using iPads or (more likely) the next advance in the ever-evolving world of technology.

More information can be obtained by visiting the college's website at: www.nyangatjatjaracollege.org.au/ and www.nintione.com.au.

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