

Centring Anangu voices on work: A contextualised response to red dirt thinking

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Nyangatjatjara College is an independent Aboriginal school distributed across three campuses in the southern region of the Northern Territory. The College serves the Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) communities of Imanpa, Muṯitjulu and Docker River. Since 2011, the College has conducted a series of student and community surveys aimed at obtaining feedback regarding students' educational experiences and their future aspirations. In 2016 Nyangatjatjara College funded a research project, Centring Anangu voices in Anangu education, to look more closely at Anangu educational aspirations in order to inform the development of a five-year strategic plan. Among other activities, interviewers conducted surveys by listening carefully to Anangu school students and community through sharing first-language narratives. This paper focuses on the most commonly discussed aspiration of students, their families and communities, namely, that school should enable young people to get a job. This finding parallels other research findings (Guenther et al., 2015) and the philosophical underpinnings of "red dirt thinking" on aspiration and success (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). Our examination of the data suggests that the theme of "work" is intertwined with aspects of the local community context. The paper concludes with an analysis of existing school-to-work transitions and opportunities, with suggestions for strengthening local participation in employment initiatives across the tri-state region at the intersection of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia.

Keywords: remote, Aboriginal, education, aspirations, employment

Background and introduction

Nyangatjatjara College is an independent Aboriginal school that provides secondary education for young people in the Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) communities of Imanpa, Muṯitjulu and Docker River.¹ Since 2015, primary schooling has also been offered at the Docker River campus. The three sites are located in the southern region of the Northern Territory, and there is a distance of some 500 kilometres between campuses. As a broad estimate of population, Imanpa is a community of 100 to 200 Aboriginal residents, with 200 to 250 in Muṯitjulu and 200 to 300 in Docker River. The main language of these communities is Pitjantjatjara, although there are strong language connections to Yankunytjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra, Ngaatjatjarra, Luritja, Western Aranda and Pertame (Southern Arrernte).

¹ The term "Aboriginal" is used in reference to Anangu peoples. The term "Indigenous" is used in international contexts and in discussions of federal or state policy.

The College is predominantly funded by the Federal Government, along with contributions from other public sector sources, such as the Northern Territory Government and grants – including project-based funding provided through the Association for Independent Schools of the Northern Territory (AISNT). The College has an administrative centre and campus located at Yulara, a resort town situated near Uluru. The College offers classes for the three home communities, with Mutitjulu students bussed in daily to the Yulara campus. Boarding facilities located at Yulara are utilised for semi-residential programs, such as short-term training intensives and special events. Previously, a more permanent boarding program was in operation.

The College is governed by the board of the Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation (NAC), which is comprised of two member directors from each of the three communities and two independent directors (education and finance). The board operates under the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). This current study, *Centring Anangu voices in Anangu education: Reshaping education practice for the future?*, was commissioned by the NAC board to inform strategic planning processes for the NAC board and College staff, and to contribute to the field of remote education research. This research project builds on the work of three previous reports conducted in 2011, 2012 and 2015 (Ninti One Ltd, 2012; 2013; 2016).

A brief community and College history

In the Northern Territory, the state government provides primary education within the desert communities, but not secondary schooling (Osborne, Benveniste, et al., 2018). Many students living in these communities are, therefore, forced to board away from home in distant regional centres in order to complete their secondary schooling, a situation that Mander et al. (2015, p. 28) describe as a “choiceless” choice. Nyangatjatjara College was founded in 1997 by the Mutitjulu, Imanpa, and Docker River communities and their supporters to enable students to continue their secondary schooling without having to leave their community. Over the years, the College has had mixed success in establishing a local/regional boarding model and has struggled to maintain staff and programs. The College was placed under administration in 2006 and came close to closing in 2010. Since then, student and staff numbers have grown steadily, and in 2015 Nyangatjatjara College took over management of the Docker River primary school from the Northern Territory Government. The College currently caters for about 100 students across the three communities. According to My School data (myschool.edu.au), average attendance rates across all campuses have been around 50 per cent over the last five years up until 2018.

Previous research on student and community aspirations

The surveys conducted by Nyangatjatjara College among the students and communities over several years provide some insights into the changing aspirations of and for young Anangu people, or at least how these aspirations are expressed. In earlier surveys, particularly data collected in 2011–2012, the available options for paid work in the community were limited in scope. Employment options were centred around working in the school as a local Anangu educator, on country (such as ranger work), in the community store, or on “work for the dole” programs.² An air of resignation was palpable, suggesting that it was not expected that these jobs were realistically attainable. However, in this most recent series

² These include CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects), CDP (Community Development Program) and RJCP (Remote Jobs and Communities Program).

of interviews conducted by the Centring Anangu voices in Anangu education research team (Osborne, Guenther, et al., 2018), participants clearly outlined a suite of employment opportunities and spoke with a sense of expectancy, often going further to explain what is needed to strengthen transitions to, and retention in, these positions. Suggested types of employment (in order of frequency) included working in land management (such as in Indigenous Protected Areas programs managed through the Central Land Council), the Yulara airport, as a ranger (a local employment program run in the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park by Parks Australia), aged care, child care, dance (performing for tourists) at Yulara Resort, local health clinics, grading roads, computing and office administration, tour guiding, tree planting, or across various roles at the Yulara Resort, with a further nine jobs listed. Comments included:

There are no Anangu working at the airport. This would be a good job for our young people.

Some people are complaining the roads are in disrepair but grading the roads is great work for Anangu.

The College [should be] supporting young people to be work ready when they finish school to get work like ranger, airport or resort. Both sides learning at the same time.

It is possible that there has been a significant shift in community perspectives on employment possibilities. However, it is also possible that a change in survey methodology has enabled more elaborated responses. Earlier surveys primarily involved an interviewer making a series of statements in the home language which the respondent rated according to a Likert scale. However, over the last eight years, this methodology has developed significantly towards inviting narrative responses in the home language to relatively few open-ended questions. This methodological shift towards first-language narratives makes room for imagining that is limited by a closed question Likert scale survey.

Literature review

Trends in remote education policy and practice

Remote Aboriginal communities and education tend to be characterised in political and media narratives as lagging behind (ABC, 2013; Wilson, 2014), or failed (The Scots College, 2015; Throwden, 2013), and in need of intervention (Martin, 2014). Current federal government education policy (Morrison, 2019) focuses on “Closing the Gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students on the measures of school attendance, literacy and numeracy benchmark test results (NAPLAN), year 12 completion rates, and transition to employment.

Since the Wilson Review of Indigenous education (2014), the Northern Territory Government has developed a new strategic framework and plan—*Education NT Strategy 2018–22* (Northern Territory Government, 2017)—which broadens the language and focus of Indigenous education policy and practice in recognition of frustrations with the limited scope of previous approaches. The federal and state governments have also committed to “refreshing” Closing the Gap targets and policies (Council of Australian Governments, 2018). Of relevance to this paper, an “economic development” target encompasses aspects of student retention and engagement, as well as employment, stating, “65 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) are in employment, education or training by 2028” (Council of Australian Governments, 2018, p. 5). While the narrow frame of Closing the Gap is being reviewed, these additional targets do not go as far as incorporating home languages and cultures,

local workforce development targets and local community engagement in schools which recent research suggests remote Aboriginal communities value highly (Guenther et al., 2016). There has recently been a scholarly focus on issues of equity and access to higher education and post-school training opportunities for remote Aboriginal community members, although, at this point in time, the locus of this work tends to centre on Darwin and communities situated more closely to the top end of the Northern Territory (Frawley et al., 2016). Enabling pathways programs and other transition supports are still limited in their effectiveness in attracting participation and establishing delivery models in the southern region of the Northern Territory (Osborne et al., 2019).

The Northern Territory historically developed and resourced policies and programs for first-language instruction and local educator teacher training programs (Devlin, 2011; Nicholls, 2005; Shore et al., 2014), but a gradual moving away from a localised focus towards more homogenised approaches to policy, practice and measurement of outcomes has proven to be problematic (Guenther & Osborne, 2020).

Moving away from deficit assumptions

Indigenous scholars reject colonial representations of themselves and their communities, including policy interventions that assume Indigenous deficit according to criteria imposed by the dominant culture, determined by their governments and institutions (Bishop, 2011; Nakata, 2007a; Sarra, 2011; Smith, 1999). This work towards decoloniality resonates strongly with the work of critical race theorists who argue that race, power, class and institutional norms set the conditions for unequal outcomes in Western education institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2008). A “funds of knowledge” (FoK) theoretical approach seeks to reject a deficit mindset towards minority students, their families and communities, and instead identifies the assets of family, culture, language and community as central to strengthening education in diverse communities (Moll et al., 1992; Zipin, 2013). FoK grew out of theoretical and pedagogical developments aimed at improving the experiences of Mexican and other minority communities in American schools by working from the knowledges and skills students develop through roles in their home community and culture. Building on this theoretical foundation, more recent research argues that culturally responsive pedagogies are needed to reposition local communities, knowledges, languages and cultures as central in framing education towards more just outcomes for “other” students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Delpit, 1993; Morrison et al., 2019; Smith, 1999). These theories offer alternatives to current policies that take a delocalisation and neoliberal stance (Hursh, 2016) built on assumptions which may apply in urban or international contexts, but which have failed to yield positive results in remote contexts (Guenther et al., 2019).

In remote Aboriginal communities, the work of Yunupingu (Wearne & Yunupingu, 2011; Yunupingu, 1999) elevated Aboriginal knowledges, languages and communities in education, but the voices and narratives of remote Aboriginal educators and scholars have been largely silenced in the current framing of remote Aboriginal education policy. In terms of Anangu communities and education, policy is largely informed by non-Anangu voices (delocalised). There is an emerging archive of literatures featuring Anangu educators (Ellis & Dousset, 2016; Kral & Ellis, 2008; Minutjukur et al., 2014; Osborne et al., 2014; Tur et al., 2010), but, to date, these have not been dominant voices in shaping Anangu education from a systemic or policy perspective. In South Australia, the Department for Education released a 10-year Aboriginal education strategy (2018) with a commitment “toward a bilingual education model that ensures proficiency for Anangu children in Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjatjara and Standard Australian English as an additional language” (p. 19), and key statements that value the Aboriginal child’s “cultural repertoire” and “cultural identity”, and commits to teacher developments in becoming more “culturally responsive” (p. 19). These statements signal a shift in intent towards (re)localisation and centring Anangu

voices, knowledges and language in the classroom, an approach that stands in contrast to the delocalised positioning of continuing Closing the Gap policies and data collections.

This study examines community aspirations for young people in three Northern Territory Anangu communities and how Nyangatjatjara College might better position an education approach to strengthen these aspirations. Nakata (2007a) argues that “imagined futures” are critical in forming what Zipin and colleagues (2015) term “emergent aspirations” (p. 239), an idea supported and developed by Rueben Burton in reflecting on his work as an Anangu educator at Amata Anangu School in South Australia (Burton & Osborne, 2014).

Drawing on a funds of knowledge theoretical approach, Zipin and colleagues (2015) examine the impacts of significant structural changes to global economies on regional and marginal communities in Victoria. They argue:

Discursive incitements to overcome obstacles through “raising aspirations” actually increase rather than attenuate obstacles by operating ideologically to simplify the complexities and mute the severities of historic conditions in which young people in underclass and working-middle-class positions struggle to imagine and pursue futures. (p. 228)

This requires a two-fold response where educators and policy makers must first work towards “a complex understanding of how aspirations are constituted by multiple social-cultural resources, including policy and populist ideologics but also family and community histories and the lived-cultural agency of people in the present” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 228).

And secondly, drawing on the work of Appadurai (2004), we are urged to consider the “resourcing and capacitating required for emergent aspirations to be brought into effective expression and agentic mobilization towards alternative futures” (p. 239).

A funds of knowledge orientation underpins the approach for this study, whereby we work to investigate community-based “funds of aspiration” (Zipin et al., 2015) and then consider the implications for “resourcing and capacitating” alternative future possibilities across social, cultural, economic and educational spaces (p. 236).

Education and work in remote communities

There has been a steady stream of research that has aimed to identify components of education and training delivery which inhibit or facilitate successful employment outcomes for remote First Nations peoples (Biddle, 2010; Guenther & Boyle, 2013; Young & Guenther, 2008). Attention in the media has often been given to training that leads to “real jobs”, as emphasised by Tony Abbott (who then became Prime Minister) during the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign: “Indigenous Australians [need to] receive practical training with a guaranteed job at the end of it” (Abbott, 2013). The same sentiment was also reflected by then Indigenous Affairs Minister Scullion: “We need to ensure that we engage them with a job as well as training” (Colvin, 2013). The language of “real jobs” was picked up by *The Forrest Review* (Forrest, 2014) and is now translated into the language of programs such as the Real Jobs Program (Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, 2019). Exactly what a “real job” is, is never clearly defined in any of these references, but one could deduce that the intention of the “real job” is meaningful economic participation. It is also possible that this language is carefully selected to define a form of employment that is distinct from previous models that combine welfare payments with “top-up” wages.

While the importance of employment outcomes is evident, within this discourse there remains an underlying assumption regarding the importance of formal education and training qualifications. The idea is that young First Nations people must attend school (every day) until they complete high school and acquire post-school qualifications to secure economic engagement and employment. As expressed by Minister Scullion, “You need to have an education if you’re going to take advantage of ... this wonderful economic nirvana” (Scullion, 2013). The question of just how a student takes advantage of this nirvana or how schools facilitate this is unclear, and previous research suggests that, generally in remote education, the links between school and work or further education are at best unclear (Guenther et al., 2017; Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2014).

Employment opportunities in the southern part of the Northern Territory are to a large extent focused on the Ayers Rock Resort, with additional opportunities coming from work in schools, clinics and health services, land management programs, and some community and social service (ABS, 2019). The resort has created work and training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but these employees are generally not local and are not Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjatjara speakers.

Data from the 2016 Census shown in Table 1 highlights the labour force status of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people in the Petermann-Simpson region, which encompasses the three communities Imanpa, Muṯitjulu and Docker River. The employment profile for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak English looks very similar to that of non-Indigenous people, but the profile for Indigenous language speakers, most of who are Anangu, from the region differs significantly. More than three-quarters of local first-language speaking people are not engaged in the labour force or are unemployed. It is this group of local Anangu that the College serves.

Table 1. Labour force status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and language spoken at home, 2016, for Petermann-Simpson region³ (ABS, 2018)

Working-age population labour force status	Language spoken at home				
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander			Non-Indigenous	
	English*	Australian Indigenous	English	Other languages + not stated	
Employed full-time	78%	8%	0%	78%	29%
Employed part-time	8%	10%	0%	7%	1%
Employed, away from work	5%	5%	0%	5%	2%
Unemployed, looking for full-time work	0%	7%	0%	1%	0%
Unemployed, looking for part-time work	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%

³ The administrative region which encompasses the three communities Imanpa, Muṯitjulu and Docker River.

Not in the labour force	9%	66%	0%	8%	3%
Not stated	0%	5%	98%	1%	65%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Counts	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Total workforce	153	196	0	656	172
Total not in the workforce	14	379	0	54	17
Total not stated	0	24	102	6	331
Total working-age population	167	599	102	716	520

* This category in the ABS data includes “Northern European Languages”, but the most common non-Indigenous language spoken in this region is English.

Authors’ positionalities

The Centring Anangu voices in Anangu education research team includes three Anangu and three non-Aboriginal authors, positioning us as both insiders and outsiders in the Anangu education space. Those of us who are outsiders recognise that our relationship to the context of the research is dependent on our relationship to and with the insiders (Guenther et al., 2018). This relationship requires attention to important aspects of ethical research in Aboriginal communities (Martin, 2008; Smith, 1999), including privileging (local) Aboriginal voices, knowledges and aspirations, ensuring the community is in control and benefits from the research, and applying the principles of ngapartji ngapartji (Tur et al., 2010), which involves reciprocity and mutual respect. Anangu members of the research team bring expertise in language, community experience and perspectives, and a vast range of professional experiences, including expertise in education, research, community leadership and formal interpreting roles. This was a collaborative initiative incorporating local language and built around local expression of educational aspiration. We expand on this further in the Methodology below. In terms of positionality, it is noted that author Dr Sam Osborne is currently a member of the NAC (Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation) board, but this was not the case at the time of data collection.

Methodology

Timeline and design

In 2015, the NAC board identified the need to engage community members, directors, students and staff in a process of documenting community aspirations for young people, education and the future, in order to inform strategic planning. Nyangatjatjara College and the NAC board commissioned the current study in late 2015, requesting the formation of a research team to interview community members, local and non-local staff, NAC directors and students who have returned from externally located boarding schools. The project agreement was with Ninti One Limited, a research organisation based out of Alice Springs

(www.nintione.com.au). Coordinating researchers Dr John Guenther (Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education) and Dr Sam Osborne (University of South Australia – UniSA) brought together a team of Anangu and other bilingual researchers to work on the project, including Lorraine King, Karina Lester, Sandra Ken and Rose Lester. A research ethics application was lodged with UniSA and approved in June 2016 (0000035092: Centring Anangu voices in Anangu education: Reshaping education practice for the future?).

The research team met together as part of the research design process and at other times for data collection, analysis and presentation of the data. In 2016, regular College board discussions were held, and an initial workshop was held in Docker River with Anangu education workers (AEWs). This workshop was designed to develop working Pitjantjatjara language and concepts about the notions of aspiration and success within Anangu knowledge and community contexts. In July 2016, a decision was made to suspend survey data collection due to instability within the NAC board. By June 2017 this situation was resolved and fieldwork recommenced. This process included a series of visits to all three communities with individual and small group interviews, and workshops with the NAC board, as well as a final workshop involving more than 20 NAC directors, community members, College staff, researchers and invited guests. This final workshop allowed participants to work in small groups and interact with emerging themes and data from the research. A final activity was to bring 15 artists from the three communities to workshop the research findings and document the foundations of a strategic plan through a collaborative art piece.

On completion of the research, a series of board and community presentations were held in November 2017 to report back on the findings and in October 2018, members of the research team presented their findings at the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) conference in Pretoria.

Research questions

The Centring Anangu voices research team (Osborne, Guenther, et al., 2018) worked carefully to frame just two questions and prioritise narratives and open discussion. Participants were encouraged to speak in their language of choice. This meant developing the questions in two languages and making space for uninterrupted narratives without channelling towards a predetermined line of questions wherever possible. All participants signed forms giving prior informed consent and interviews were audio recorded. Most interviews were conducted in Pitjantjatjara language and a summary translation in English was produced for each of these interviews. Where interviews were conducted in English, transcripts were also produced. Data was also collected during focus groups and workshops and is included throughout the paper.

The two questions were:

1. What does a successful young person look like in Anangu communities? Yangupala kunpu munu ninti nyaa nguwanpa ngaranyi?
2. How can the College strengthen these possibilities? Yaaltji-Yaaltjingku College-ingku alpamilara pakaltjingani yangupala kunpu munu ninti tjuṯa?

The process of working between Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara and English to frame the questions was painstaking and demonstrates the need for highly skilled researchers working in a dual language, dual epistemological context. For example, the notion of “success”, while complex and contested in English

language contexts, makes little sense in Pitjantjatjara language and communities. Many of the early researcher workshops devoted significant time to the process of reworking the language and assumptions when using the language of “success” and “a successful young person” in Western institutional spaces. In English, the Pitjantjatjara language version of the questions ask:

1. What is a strong and smart/clever/knowledgeable young person like?
2. How can the College help raise up strong and knowledgeable young people?

Assembling a research team with diverse skills and experiences in languages and research allowed for rich conversations to occur in positioning the work.

In focus group sessions, bilingual members of the research team acted as facilitators and scribes to allow participant conversations to generate momentum and ensure that conversations were documented in participants’ language of choice. This translanguaging method (Heugh, 2015) was effective as participants moved across local language(s) and English with minimal interruption.

Data was collected from 65 participants covering the roles shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant type and number

Participant type	Number
Teachers/non-local staff	14
Anangu education workers (AEWs)	12
Community members	21
Students returned from boarding interstate (8 males, 2 females)	10
Directors	8
Total	65

The teachers/non-local staff and AEWs participated in small focus group discussions. A separate focus group was held with the directors. Thirteen interviews were conducted with one or two participants in each interview. These involved 12 community members and 10 students. The students were in their middle primary to senior secondary years of schooling. Three students interviewed were from Docker River, three were from Imanpa and four were living in Mutitjulu. Emerging themes from these focus groups and interviews were collated and presented at a larger final workshop which involved 23 participants including 10 community members who were first-time participants in the research, and 13 participants including teachers, AEWs, directors and community members who had previously been in interviews or focus groups. A breakdown of community representation of all participants is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants' home community

Participants' home community	Number
Docker River	24
Imanpa	9
Muṯitjulu	15
Non-local	17
Total	65

Data included recorded interviews, workshop notes including group responses on butcher paper, posters and sticky notes. All of these responses were translated and analysed for themes and emerging issues through the use of NVivo software. This involved a group process of discussion, reflection and reorganisation of the data among the research team. Data analysis suggested five key themes that were included as nodes within a visual model to stimulate group discussion in follow-up sessions. These themes were training and work, family, teachers and teaching, community, and boarding. In this paper, the most commonly discussed theme of training and work is examined.

Findings

What does a successful young person look like?

Before considering the aspect of work, we felt it was important to understand how local people thought about "success". Our previous research suggested that this word was not as clear as it might appear to be in urban contexts (Guenther et al., 2015; Osborne & Guenther, 2013). Understanding success helps us understand aspiration (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2014).

Responses to the question "What does a successful young person look like in Anangu communities?" included themes such as having work, strong in English and Pitjantjatjara language, confidence, strong sense of identity/belonging, cultural knowledge, looking after family, happy and healthy, looking after country and community, life skills, ongoing commitment to learning, strong/good thinking, and respect. The most common focus was the importance of having a job. This was not expressed in terms of a typical neoliberal trajectory, whereby students complete school as a pathway to university and/or an upwardly mobile career, but more in terms of establishing a commitment to learning and growing and taking responsibility within the context of family and community, as these parent and community comments about their vision for successful young people suggest:

Having a good balance: Anangu and whitefella stuff and make sure they've got their culture learning.

We want them to be confident and learn resilience.

I tell them they are growing up and won't always be little and their time will come to look after themselves and family. I give them ideas about what they could do when older.

Living "good ways" (wirura nyinanyi), choosing good things.

An associated concept that was described by community members and parents was the notion of being strong in two worlds and the importance of socio-cultural mobility. This idea of the importance of "both ways capital" (Osborne, Benveniste, et al., 2018) was commonly co-located within narratives about the importance of having a job in terms of being necessary skills for success in the workplace. This was framed in language such as being "strong in both ways", "connecting to the wider world and to family and culture", and describing young people as being "in the middle" of social, cultural and epistemological spaces. The importance of local role modelling in encouraging young people to achieve these aspirations was also a focus of responses.

In summary, community narratives suggest a successful young person in Anangu communities is confident in their sense of identity and belonging, is engaged in cultural responsibilities such as looking after country and others, keeps learning, has a job and is strong in two worlds. They choose strong/good thinking (kulintja kunpu/kulintja wiru) and are respectful.

How education can contribute to success: Training and work

Turning to the second question "How can education strengthen these possibilities?", the data reflected a strong focus on training and work as a critical marker for success.

A need to map employment opportunities and pathways, and making connections between school-based training and work experiences, post-school training, and, ultimately, employment was articulated:

We need to map where the jobs are and what young people want to do - and then help them get the job. (workshop participant)

Like an audit - how many jobs and what are they? Nurse/health, IPA (Indigenous Protected Area) /ranger, mechanic, community store, aged care: washing, food, care. (community member)

It is important to note that community ideas about what is important and meaningful in "education" do not always line up neatly with traditional or mainstream definitions of school business or activities. A strong theme throughout interviews was the importance of cultural knowledge, connection to the land and language, and the primacy of intergenerational engagement in Anangu communities. Cultural knowledge and connection to country was seen as a resource that the College could use to encourage learning, enterprise, employment and economic development for Anangu youth, while simultaneously benefiting the broader community:

The College could make their own tour here. Bring tourists to the College and show the maku (witchetty grubs), tjala (honey ants), mingkulpa (native tobacco), plants and bush medicines, etc. The College could generate funds through a tourism program and the kids are working and learning. It could be a long-term/continuing tourism project but rotating the tour teams between the three communities with training and work.

My son and others sometimes dance at Yulara for the tourists. They learned the dance from their grandfather.

They can talk about their culture to visitors, tourists, like tour guiding ... When we get older, they've got to look after this place too.

Maybe Anangu will pass away and they [these young people] can take over then.

A director explained the value that cultural expertise and life experience on the land potentially offers in the workplace:

To be a ranger, you need to know how to track and recognise the different animals and know which directions they went. Sometimes whitefellas come and they don't know much at all. They just know about how to work with computers. We teach them for years sometimes. Often they have to go back to see their families [for some years] and then return. Even though I'm a grandfather now, they [many organisations] still invite me to come to meetings. I go on panels to select new workers and ask them questions like "Where have you worked before?", "Have you worked with Anangu?". Some people such as those from Warburton Ranges went to college and learned lots of English. But we just learned Pitjantjatjara, not English. We learned to speak English on the station. My schoolteacher was the station, branding, mustering.

Other comments focused on the role of family and other dynamics that are connected to work:

Be strong together and be humble and support each other to work.

Support your partner to work: emotional and/or practical support back home for them to work, like cleaning, looking after the house and other things.

I have young people in my family who are very young and they are married. Maybe they can take tourists out but they need a license. Maybe they could work with [a family member] at [the homeland].

There was an awareness of existing training programs such as the Certificate in Child Care and the Certificate in Rural Operations training which was conducted in Cairns:

[The College] should keep them training like in Cairns, keep going on that stuff. They should use what they have learned like fencing, welding. Possibly they could build a fence around the playground at Mutitjulu or other projects to practise what they learnt.

Young watis (men) - keep them training, finding out about what work is.

A semi-residential model was advocated in relation to boarding alternatives, but also in terms of short-term training opportunities:

They could do short training courses of one or two weeks at a time and then return. They could take turns for each of the three communities to host the training.

There was sometimes an assumption that there are no jobs in communities and that young people must leave in order to find a job. This notion is not supported by the data shown in

Table 1, which highlights the large number of jobs available to those who come from outside the region. Some of these roles require formal training or qualifications, although many do not. Comments made by students, community members and directors made it clear that hopes for attaining work are “red dirt aspirations”, that is, situated in the context of community:

Young people don't want to work at the resort or in cities. They want to work in their own communities because they get too homesick living away from home. They could do short training courses of one or two weeks at a time and then return.

They need to learn about their own country so they can look after it and they won't leave.

Local employment narratives were largely supported by students:

I'd like to find work in Mutitjulu. Probably in childcare.

I wanted to come back here [to the community] and work.

Now I've got the certificate from Cairns I'm thinking of finishing school this year and doing ranger work. We learnt about growing plants, working on chainsaws and mechanical stuff.

I'm thinking of going to Cairns and getting my certificate and finish school and getting a job here maybe working with dad. Not sure what.

I want to work in my own community but sometimes go [away] for meetings.

However, some student comments suggested a preparedness to live and work outside of the community:

I was thinking of finishing school and getting a job in mining in Groote Eylandt. Now I'm thinking of doing ranger work and work here. I did a course in Cairns and I got a Certificate III that will get me a job anywhere. Just show the certificate.

I could work in Alice Springs.

Participants also explained some of the difficulties in securing jobs in the community and that the College could be assisting young people with the practical and administrative elements of preparing for work:

The College should prepare them for work. Mechanics, building houses, etc. They should be able to go into jobs when they leave school. The kids are missing out here. They learn lots and then when they leave, they can't get jobs. They need ID, police check, Ochre card.⁴

In Cairns they learn about driving. They should continue in school to year 12. While at school, they should learn to drive and get their licence.

Directors described the ongoing process of learning through work and further training and the important role that family, community, Piranpa (non-Aboriginal) peers and managers play in supporting:

We need to teach them by continually talking. But if they start taking drugs they will get side-tracked and lost. This stops them from working. They need to keep climbing like a ladder,

⁴ A card to prove that the holder is cleared to work or volunteer with children in the Northern Territory.

keep learning new things (step by step) and after that he will be really knowledgeable and get the good important jobs.

Sometimes Piranpa are in the jobs and Anangu leave discouraged because the Piranpa are arguing about who is the boss and telling them to do this and that but not teaching them properly. That's why lots of rangers have stopped working.

This mentoring responsibility extends to other aspects of community life:

Encourage them to be a leader to look after the community.

Young people should be invited to the meetings to listen, look and learn. We could invite one from each community.

Bringing young people to board meetings to let young people learn about board work.

In summary, participants identified training and work as the College's most significant priority in supporting young people for the future. Other themes identified intersect with the training and work category. For example, some participants discussed how families can support young people to have a job. The idea that families are central to building confidence and supporting young people to get (and maintain) work was raised consistently throughout community narratives. These contributions can be viewed in the research report (Osborne, Guenther, et al., 2018).

Participant feedback suggests that the College could practically and structurally engage parents in day-to-day on-campus activities and consider the importance of family in supporting young people in school, as well as education that occurs outside of school. There is a view that successful young people contribute to the family and take care of younger and older family members. This is a message that can be encouraged and reinforced through the work of the school, in partnership with family and community members.

Discussion and implications

The strong focus on training and work in this research highlights a need to better connect what happens at school with opportunities that exist for training and work beyond school. There are also implications for structuring school experiences that build social and (inter)cultural "capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) to support the community vision of being confident in "two worlds" as a marker of success in community and employment spaces. This intercultural capital is an asset with intrinsic value and may act to work against established agents who "tend to pursue conservation strategies" allowing "challengers [to] opt for subversive strategies" (Swartz, 1997, p. 124). The challengers in our study are those language speakers identified in

Table 1 who are under-represented in the labour force and over-represented among the unemployed. Subverting the existing structures then involves pushing back against the structures that are single-mindedly positioned towards dominant culture ideas about which cultural assets, skills and experiences are valued and deemed to have market value.

The evidence we have from the Centring Anangu voices project suggests that aspiration for obtaining work is strong, and local Anangu want their school to assist young people to find "work". But, as we see

in the findings, aspirations for work at the (Yulara) resort are not strong and this is reflected in the employment data shown in

Table 1 where the resort dwarfs other employers in the region in their combined capacity to offer paid work. The problem here for the College is that the types of employment that are valued as “real jobs” by Piranpa and their institutions do not necessarily correspond with those jobs that are valued by Anangu and aligned with their red dirt aspirations (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

The task of the College, then, is to develop and utilise spaces within the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007b) which effectively build on young peoples’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and their “funds of aspiration” (Zipin et al., 2015). We contend that real jobs do exist at the cultural interface and could well fit with the red dirt aspirations our respondents talked about and identified, including jobs in land management, ranger work and cultural tourism. But, to quote one of the respondents, sometimes the issue is not a lack of skill but a lack of confidence: “Confident, that’s what I’d like to see. No one feeling shame. This is our country and we’ve got to lead the way in our own communities.”

To achieve this kind of confidence within local and wider spaces, students need access to formal training and employment settings and programs, as well as authentic engagement with their own community language(s), knowledge, culture and histories. The presence of a resort at Yulara (Uluru) is a high potential asset for Anangu in this regard that is yet to be fully realised – not just a “Rock” with natural value, but a site of significant cultural value and access to wider social, cultural and employment opportunities all at the region’s doorstep. The resort is owned by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation and, while there is Anangu participation across the various programs, there is much work to do towards developing both-ways capacity in terms of employment, Anangu aspirations, cultural heritage and education opportunities for Anangu.

The question for the College is: How can it, as an educational institution, better build that “confidence” required to imagine the red dirt work opportunities that do exist?. The evidence from past surveys conducted for the College and discussed earlier suggests there has been some progression in community thinking about these issues over the last eight years. Where previously the idea of work largely excluded anything that looked like a “real job” in neoliberal terms, the discussion that emerged from this research points to the need for jobs that are on country, of benefit to the community and that fit with local aspirations. In this study, we found that participants were far more specific in naming jobs that they thought young people could aspire to than in previous surveys. We know also from our previous research in remote contexts that inspiration comes from family and community members and significant family members who have paved the way for the next generation (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014). School as a mechanism for inspiration does not always work well, except where respected community members covering a range of roles and experiences are brought into the educational process. As students see significant family and community role models engaged in their school, it is quite likely they will be inspired to follow in their footsteps. This is part of a process we have described as “red dirt curriculum” (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014; Osborne et al., 2014). The process of building a (localised) red dirt curriculum requires engagement and input from community members and external experts, making it a rich point for engagement at the cultural interface between school, community and the world of work.

In this study, families and communities are clear: they expect young people to learn about work, engage with training and transition from school to work, but it cannot be at the expense of connections to their Anangu identity, language(s), family and community.

Conclusion

According to Anangu narratives recorded for this study, successful young people are confident, have a strong sense of identity and belonging, take up training and work opportunities, engage in both-ways learning, and contribute productively to their families. Key areas of focus for Nyangatjatjara College include developing comprehensive training and work education programs; strengthening family and community engagement; producing local language and knowledges curriculum, resources and learning opportunities; and implementing a both-ways workforce development strategy to underpin the overall approach.

Government narratives for Aboriginal education focus on school attendance, English language instruction and boarding school as the preferred secondary education options. These themes are visible within Anangu narratives, but are by no means central. The importance of family, local community, local language and knowledges, community-based employment opportunities and intergenerational engagement are mentioned repeatedly across the communities and age groups we engaged with. These opportunities are consistent with red dirt aspirations and ontological realities. As the College responds, we anticipate the development of a rigorous curriculum and pedagogical approach that strengthens Anangu knowledge and identity and embeds school-to-work transition as a priority for all school leavers. Across remote Aboriginal schools nationally, centring local languages, knowledges and community as a foundation for building student confidence and strengthening identity is an important element in improving rates of student participation, retention and completion in school-to-work transition programs.

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