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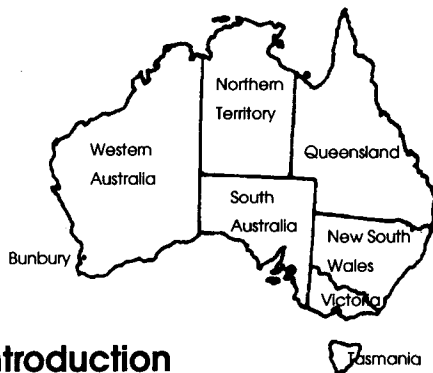
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Section C: Conference Reports

The Strelley Community School Nyangumarta Language and Cultural Maintenance Program¹

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Introduction

The Strelley Community School is an Aboriginal Independent Community School — the first one established in Western Australia in 1976 and remains the oldest continually operational school of its kind in Australia. The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation is the school authority responsible for articulating school policy and administration.

There are now 13 Aboriginal Independent Community Schools in Western Australia and twenty three nationally (Mack, 1995). They share a common philosophy of being non-government school systems created and administered by the community. Parents and students have a proactive role in determining school policies.

Historical Background — From the 1946 Strike to the 1976 School — an epic struggle

Strelley Community School is situated in the far north-west region known as the Pilbara — a hot,

dry, desert environment. A policy of bi-lingual education is the foundation of the Strelley educational philosophy. In the words of Don McLeod (1984: 138) 'the linguists hired by the Nomads are the servants of the traditional language authorities, not their masters'. Don McLeod, now 88 years old, continues as a mentor and spokesperson for the Nomads in regards to their pastoral, political and educational interests.

Known as the 'Strelley Mob' or 'McLeod's Mob', the community is famous for the 1946 Pastoral Strike, in which Aboriginal workers on the cattle and sheep stations went on strike for fair wages and working conditions for the first time in Australia. Don McLeod was a key figure in the strike's organisation. It is often said that the Mob are still on strike today, as they never returned to work as labourers for the Pilbara station owners.

The Strelley Mob are rarely credited for a series of major historical Aboriginal initiatives towards achieving independence from the dominant Australian culture: industrial wages equity, land rights, pioneering the mining industry, and the topic of this discourse — preserving their culture and language by establishing the first independent Aboriginal-controlled school, in an historic era when government and religious institutions tightly controlled Aboriginal education with the policies of assimilation, which effectively ignored Aboriginal language and culture, and concentrated on western world views. In the words of one former student at the New Norcia Mission in Western Australia, 'We used to have to learn Latin and religion but we were never told anything about our Aboriginal

¹ The three papers included here in the Conference Reports Section were all presented at the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference — Education 1996, Albuquerque, New Mexico, June 17-21, 1996.

culture, or that we were actually Aboriginal' (Ashworth, 1995).

After years of hard work in a range of enterprises, the Mob purchased Strelley Station in 1971 and over the next decade established a number of communities on pastoral leases where school annexes were located. The school is the social centre of each community.

In 1976, Strelley Community School commenced under the guidance of the Elders and Principal John Bucknall and his teacher-linguist wife, Gwen. The Bucknalls are still associated with the School, as consultants, working on educational policies and providing induction training for new teaching staff. Gwen Bucknall developed teaching strategies in consultation with Aboriginal teachers and linguists that will be elaborated on shortly.

The Nyangumarta Language Faces Many Challenges to Survive

In the Pilbara region, there were 28 languages spoken, known by linguists as the *Pama-Nyungan* family. With the pressures of European settlement, many of the languages have become extinct. Nyangumarta remains one of the strongest languages of the desert region. It is one of the six groups of the Pama-Nyungan family, known as *Marrngu* (Sharp and Thiebsberger, 1992).

The Strelley School has maintained a strong Nyangumarta language program throughout its history. In the 1990s, a combination of social factors is challenging the maintenance of the language with the youth. The advent of western pop music, ubiquitous in car radios and home stereos via commercial cassette, bombards the senses, along with TV and video. American popular culture has invaded the outback, along with the cult image of rock stars and basketball heroes. Aboriginal youth admire Bob Marley, Michael Jordan and many other pop and sport icons. The 'times are a-changing' in the remote Strelley communities. The Elders worry about the introduction of slang words and mixtures of English and Nyangumarta words not pronounced properly. The school is viewed as the formal social system to keep the language strong.

The Aboriginal teachers responsible for language teaching interviewed Elders about the way young people speak the language and made the following comments on the situation.

Doris Thomas: The language is getting mixed with English and Nyangumarta. They want kids to learn real Nyangumarta because now Nyangumarta is getting weaker.

Beryl Ponce: The old people want the children to speak real Nyangumarta and not put any English words in their story.

Elsie Ginger: Children make up their own words and sometimes they borrow words from English.

Stuart Ingie: The children's pronunciation is bad because the older people are not insisting on the proper word. It's up to the Aboriginal teachers to make sure the kids say the words the right way. Older people hope that having many tribal ceremonies will help save the situation (Buchanan, 1993).

In the summer months, from December to February, young men continue to pass through traditional 'Aboriginal Law Business' or initiation ceremonies. During these periods of the year, practice of cultural beliefs and language is dominant.

In the remaining months of the year, a number of the youth are lured into regional towns and join the fringe dwellers, many of whom are alcohol-dependent. Alcohol abuse has been a major enemy of the people, causing poor health, crime and imprisonment.

Given this social milieu, the school stands like an island whipped by storms, boldly holding its own ground and winning some back. Critics of the Strelley School in the 1990s, including some ill-informed Australian government officials, lacking an educational awareness, said there was too much emphasis in the school curriculum on the teaching of Nyangumarta. They advocated more instruction in English or other subjects. In day-to-day practice, quite a fair balance is maintained to ensure both languages are taught.

The philosophy of the school is steadfast in its determination to remain bi-lingual. In fact, English is taught as a second language — a solid reminder of the true first language. To ensure the survival of Nyangumarta a number of innovative strategies

were formulated from 1993-96. These included special focal activities on field excursions, CD-Rom computer technology, video and book production, written-oral expression, singing and songwriting, art, photography, mapping exercises and challenging student work in and outside the classroom. Of course, many of these activities were on-going and the 1990s work enhanced the existing traditions.

The Focal Activity Approach

The Elders of the Strelley School Committee agreed in 1993 to begin a series of 'Culture Camp' field excursion experiences. In what may be termed a 'concentrated Nyangumarta language approach' based on focal activities, the excursions involved a variety of learning experiences.

Focal activities are designed to provide/facilitate an environment and context in which children can learn as they gain meaning from a given situation. On returning to school these learning experiences are consolidated and recorded. (Bucknall, 1993)

The walls of the Strelley School Primary and Secondary classrooms portrayed a collage of data representing a stimulating outpouring of student expression in Nyangumarta about their travels.

Strelley School was comprised of four annexes in the mid-1990s. Warralong was the administrative centre and location of the Literature Production Centre. The other schools were based at Mijijimaya — the most remote school on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert — Woodstock and Strelley Station. In each of these locations, a small community exists with children attending from pre-school through to secondary levels. The four annexes joined forces to unite during the 'Culture Camp' weeks, all participating in the same types of language activities. Woodstock, however, on some occasions, developed their own camps to introduce a new program promoting Yinyjiparnti language. (Note: the preceding spelling of Yinyjiparnti is the preferred way of the Woodstock, or Mumbultjari community.)

The aims of a Culture Camp

- 1) To speak Aboriginal languages, principally Nyangumarta and Yinyjiparnti during the camp.

- 2) Aboriginal community Elders and teachers were responsible for educational focal activity objectives. The teacher-linguist played a key role in supervising and recording all focal activities. Students conducted the taping of stories and oral histories for later transcription back at school.
- 3) Consultative process: all decisions regarding educational purposes and the itinerary were based on consensus amongst Aboriginal teachers and the community. The Principal assisted with facilitating meetings and the logistics of supplies for the field trip. This pre-planning stage was initiated at the start of academic year and lasted several weeks, with numerous meetings to discuss all issues.
- 4) Historical/cultural perspectives: the itinerary for each field trip included stops at historical sites, both traditional and contemporary, and included mining locations and significant food resource gathering places.
- 5) After the camp, school class work (one quality session per day) was devoted to the learning experiences on the camp. Story-telling and singing, visual arts, mapping and written expression formed the basis of lessons from primary to secondary levels. Students also explained in English to non-Aboriginal staff the details of their experiences.

A Brief Profile of the Key Aboriginal Educators and Elders

The success and design of the culture camps were the result of the work of a number of community members. The following information is a concise account of the roles of significant educators.

Monty Hale: The Marrngu Principal of Strelley Community School. Monty learned to read English from jam tins as a boy and was taught the orthography of Nyangumarta by Professor G.N. O'Grady, a Canadian linguist, in the 1960s. Monty's role in the Nyangumarta Program is varied and instrumental. He takes a keen interest, correcting student work for spelling and grammar, and pronunciation in oral communication. At significant sites, students sit in a circle and listen

as Monty tells stories, many of which review the history of the Mob. Monty writes and edits articles for the school newspaper and the Literature Centre. He has written schoolbooks and is currently writing an autobiography and compiling a dictionary of 'old' Nyangumarta words that are seldom used in vernacular conversation.

Fred Bradman: Artist-writer-teacher at the Woodstock or Mumbultjari School annex. Fred is an animated teacher who also illustrates in pen and ink and writes stories for students. He has been involved in the revival of teaching the Yinyjiparnti language with Gordon Pomeroy, another Aboriginal teacher. Fred's lively classes have students speaking fluently. 'Fred uses a variety of techniques to encourage his students along the road to literacy. Fred's experience and skill make him one of the best teachers of Nyangumarta' (Hunt-Smith, 1994).

Snowy Judamia, Billy Thomas, Crow Yougarla are Elders responsible for individual communities and have input into school curriculum and the organisation of culture camps. These men were involved in the 1946 Pastoral Strike and are regarded as respected Aboriginal Lawmen. They are custodians of law, stories, songs and dance. Their involvement in the Nyangumarta language program is one of the most significant factors in the success and quality of community involvement.

Beryl Ponce, Elsie Ginger, Doris Thomas: A number of women in the community work as Nyangumarta teachers and have considerable input into the school curriculum and activities on the culture camps. Young women, after secondary education, have been employed as teachers.

Beryl Ponce, Elsie 'Jititi' Ginger and Doris Thomas have all attended Batchelor College teacher training courses and are responsible for classroom teaching of basic reading and writing of Nyangumarta and other aspects of the curriculum. They are supported in their work by a number of women who are highly respected in the community, including Rosie Oberdoo, Mae Larry, Selina Mick, Biddy Bunwarrie and many others.

The community strongly supported the culture camp concept and the 'school on wheels' visited many sites in the Pilbara. In the summer of 1994, there was general alarm from the resident Nurse

when the campers were overdue and the temperatures were over 40°C. However, the Mob was camped beside waterholes in the very remote Skull Creek region, where the historic meeting of Aboriginals from the north-west first took place to discuss the strike in 1942. There were 23 different language groups at the meeting that lasted six weeks (McLeod, 1984: 40-41). The students had an extensive history lesson at the site where it all happened. The Elders re-enacted history, making it come alive again and of course they made a safe return. One can imagine how much more interesting this oral tradition must be compared to reading about it on the printed page.

The Role of the Teacher-Linguist

Richard Hunt-Smith commenced work in 1993 as the teacher-linguist for Strelley. He is still continuing in this position, as well as being Acting Principal. He travelled with the Mob and assisted with documenting the language work on the camps and the follow-up classwork. His reviews of the camps, published in the *Mikurrunya*, the School's quarterly newsletter, explain the key strategies involved in Nyangumarta language maintenance:

The year 1993 is a particularly important year for the Strelley Community Schools. It is intended that the context for education in the mother-tongue will be provided through a series of focal activities the richness and variety of students' work flowing from these experiences attest the power of place and language in the lives of the Marrngu and the resonances which pass from generation to generation. (Hunt-Smith, 1993)

The Role of Consultants

For twenty years, Gwen Bucknall has worked with the Strelley School as a teacher, Principal and, in recent years, as the main consultant for developing the Nyangumarta Language Program and assisting with literature production. She played a major role in pre-planning and implementing the new Nyangumarta Focal Activity Program. In addition to Gwen Bucknall, a number of other talented linguists and consultants, including the staff of the Aboriginal Independent School Support Unit, have provided valuable contributions to the language program.

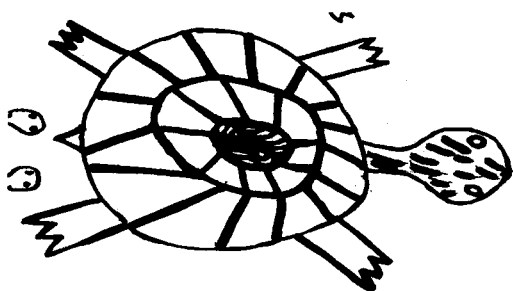
In 1993, Gwen Bucknall wrote a review of focal activities that pointed out the achievements of the culture camps and recommendations for the future. A selection of her comments included:

Positive Outcomes

- 1) The excursion allowed students to participate in a culturally appropriate activity which provided a forum for utilising their more traditional social roles away from the pressures of camp life.
- 2) Students were given many opportunities to practise story telling and retelling.
- 3) Community members, throughout the excursion and during the follow-up activities, provided historical and traditional information for students.

Recommendations:

- 1) That pre-planning, including the aims and objectives and ways they are to be achieved, be an essential part of the focal experience. It is necessary for the community members involved, including the Aboriginal teachers, the teacher Linguist and Principal, to meet regarding these matters prior to leaving.
- 2) That the language environment be developed with maps, charts, photos and negotiated texts prior to students initiating independent writing.
- 3) That consideration be given to students learning how to record activities and take notes throughout the excursion on activities such as collecting and recording details of plant and rock samples, outlines of stories and who told them, where, etc., sketches of maps and significant features. The above could be initiated throughout the excursion and students could be set a number of tasks prior to leaving, placing the responsibility of learning back on the students.
- 4) Following the presentation of final student work on display in the school to the community, an evaluation be made regarding the effectiveness of the focal activity in terms of changes that might be made and features to maintain. (Bucknall, 1993)



The Literature Production Centre

Books in Nyangumarta are produced and stored in the Literature Production Centre at Warralong. An extensive collection exists, with approximately 300 titles of mainly illustrated books for students of all levels to use for readers in class. The stories cover many themes, from the 'Pupuka' frog series, to everyday events, fantasy and animals — a wide range of genres.

The production centre at Strelley is the heart of the education system. Adults, particularly those in charge of bi-lingual programmes, dictate the content of books, newspapers and other productions. All of these must be approved by the school committee before they can be used with the children. The result of this arrangement is that a number of adults now read and write Nyangumarta (McLeod, 1984: 138).

Over the twenty years, many talented Literature Production Supervisors have worked with the community and teachers to create new works. In the 1970s an off-set press was used; now the computer and photocopier or professional printers are utilised. Young people have been trained in the skills of book and newspaper production. Each school term the *Mikurrunya* newsletter is published. The *Mikurrunya* is often tri-lingual and covers key aspects of school activities. The written maintenance of Nyangumarta is strongly preserved by the Literature Production Centre.

The Advent of New Modes of Production: CD-ROM and Video

In addition to paper creations, computers, scanners and software were purchased with a Commonwealth Government program to introduce new technology to schools. In 1994, staff were in-serviced on methods of producing a CD-ROM. The first one was titled *Waparnu* and was based on an existing, recently produced booklet generated by a story illustrated with colour photographs of a sea osprey and its nest. Students found this new medium of expression fascinating and a novel change from previous teaching resources based on the print medium. Their computer literacy and interest in writing in Nyangumarta has been stimulated by CD-ROM projects.

Video production was also made possible by special government funding for remote schools provided by the Priority Country Areas Program. In 1993 the video *Warrarn* was produced under the direction of teacher Brian Deutschmann. The whole film is narrated in Nyangumarta and Yinyjiparnti and features students, Aboriginal teachers and community members. Secondary students assisted with the filming and editing at David Batty's Desert Pictures studio in Broome.

Is the Strelley Experience Relevant to Other Indigenous People?

Many Indigenous people share the aims of preserving their languages despite myriad social pressures of the current times. Many forces have been at work to weaken the Nyangumarta language, but in retrospect the path of the Strelley Community School can be seen as positive in countering the challenges and creating educational policies to enrich and preserve Nyangumarta and now Yinyjiparnti language.

It may be relevant to conclude by reminding educators to 'listen to Aboriginal voices', as John Bucknall (1982) stated as a basic rule to follow: 'listen and listen carefully for the group's hopes, expectations and educational plans'. In this fascinating field of Aboriginal language maintenance, it is imperative for teachers and linguists to hear the message from the community through extensive consultation and negotiation in conjunction with them before organising vernacular language programs.

The techniques of language maintenance and Aboriginal control of educational policies developed by Strelley Community School are worthy of consideration and implementation in other Indigenous Schools.

Essentially, the focal activities on the culture camps turned the school curriculum over to the oral traditions of Marrngu Elders and teachers. They returned the well travelled students to their school classroom with new knowledge and experiences upon which to keep the language practice thriving in many modes of expression.

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Richard Routh. For twenty years now, a bilingual program has operated at Strelley Community School in the remote Pilbara desert region in the north-west of Western Australia. Richard Routh was the Principal of the school from 1993-94 and was responsible for the school's curriculum and is still in regular contact with former colleagues working in the school. He is currently Coordinator of the Aboriginal Tertiary Studies course for Kurongkurl Katitjin, School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus, Western Australia. □

