AT THE HEART OF LEARNING

(SERIES: PAPER 3 OF 4)

Kurunta kanyintja: Holding knowledge in our spirit

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Abstract

In recent years, Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) education and remote education more broadly have strongly focused attention on key areas such as attendance and literacy and numeracy benchmarks. Remote schools have implemented a number of policies, programmes and strategies, but national statistics show that student attainment remains "behind" and the "gap" is increasing on these measures. In this paper, the authors explore the key ingredients that build confidence and "open the spirit" of young Anangu students to be receptive to acquire new knowledge as they encounter new and unfamiliar experiences in school. In order to achieve this, remote educators need to consider the role of family members and the intergenerational learning environment that cements knowledge deep within the spirit. Educators are encouraged to consider the critical tools and processes required to acquire "codes of power" (Delpit, 1993), building mastery and confidence in the Western social context of schools and mainstream society.

Keywords

Anangu, remote education, power, language, leadership

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Introduction

This paper is the third in a series of four. We have titled the four papers in the series "At the Heart of Learning":

1. "Putuna Kulini: The Trouble with 'Hearing'" (Osborne, 2014)
2. "Witulya Mulapa Nganana Mantjintjaku: From Cultural Devastation to Cultural Re-invention" (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014)
3. "Kurunta Kanyintja: Holding Knowledge in Our Spirit" (Katrina Tjitayi & Sam Osborne)
4. "Kuranyu-kutu Nyakula Nyaan Nyanganyi? Imagining the Future" (Burton & Osborne, 2014)

The purpose of this series is to afford an opportunity to remote educators to kulintjaku (to hear, think and understand) Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) standpoints about the things that constitute "the heart of learning" from their perspective. Nakata (2007b) explains that "standpoint accounts … depend on reflexivity and the distinction between experience and standpoint" (p. 11). For further discussion on Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007b), see the introduction to this series in paper #1, "Putuna Kulini: The Trouble with 'Hearing'".

In this paper, Katrina Tjitayi and Sam Osborne highlight approaches to learning within an Anangu context, with a particular focus on family-based and historical approaches to teaching and learning. These approaches have much to offer current teaching and learning contexts as they engage families and intergenerational knowledge, build the confidence of children, and open the spirit to acquiring new knowledge. The purpose of this paper is to encourage remote educators and remote education systems to consider the deeper aspects of learning and education more broadly that are critical to the success of students as they engage in dominant culture contexts into the future. We suggest that students need "family voices" to be involved in the learning process to build confidence and that educators can build on this confidence by explicitly teaching the social and academic "codes of power" (Delpit, 1993).

The language of "the heart"

One of the hallmarks of cultural/linguistic difference is the way we talk about the same things, yet approach from a different position (see for example Bain, 2006; Eckert & Hudson, 2010). An example of this is the title of this series, "At the Heart of Learning". Whilst this makes complete sense and makes an emotional connection in English, Anangu have a very different sense of expressing the essence of meaningful learning.

Recently, I (Katrina) prepared a workshop for young mothers to encourage them to consider the "spiritual" needs of learning; that is, meaningful learning that builds the spirit of young children, causing them to be strong and confident as they grow. In bringing the idea of learning to the schooling context, the Western emphasis on the acquisition of cerebral knowledge as learning *feels* different for an Anangu child and it makes it very difficult for them to engage in meaningful ways. I am encouraging young mothers to see the importance of the learning they can provide for their children, but also the supports they can provide their young children to build confidence and resilience in school-based learning.

In order to develop this new work, I have been working with and learning from my mother. Through this process, I have been able to develop a deeper understanding of how young mothers can teach their children through engaging with old knowledge and new knowledge in supporting their children through the early years of schooling and education. It was exciting to see young mothers hearing this message and responding enthusiastically. These concepts made sense to them both as mothers and as learners and they began to explore the

needs of their very young children and how they might build a sense of spirit and identity that will go beyond "being healthy" and will foster a strong spirit in their children and prepare the children for acquiring and retaining knowledge and learning into the future.

I (Katrina) have also been reflecting on how it is that so many older people in Ernabella have such strong literacy skills in English; there are a number of them. Looking back at the process of learning for their time, I think there are some important things for us to consider. Firstly, for knowledge to be received in the mind and in the spirit, repetition and connection are important. In the past, Anangu children grew up being physically close to their relations all through the day and received consistent messages and stories. Through hearing them over and over, they were able to take hold of that knowledge, those stories and those messages with confidence. They would hear from their father or mother or other relations in the morning and through the day and late into the night, they would hear the old people telling stories over and over again. The other important message is that the hearing of our language opens the spirit to be receptive to learning. The Ernabella model for the generation my mother taught was that she and other family and community members provided the consistent and close voice to those children in their early years of education, teaching them and guiding them in Pitjantjatjara language. The Piranpa (non-Indigenous) teacher (Nancy Shepherd) made a commitment to learn and teach in Pitjantjatjara language too, so the reinforcement of the language and the close voices provided opportunity for repetition and reinforcement of language and identity. The incredible thing about this is that through this process and this learning environment, many Anangu were very well educated and have incredibly high levels of understanding in English literacy.

Although schools and education have changed dramatically since the 1950s, there are some strong foundations to learning in the Anangu context that can be adopted in schools today. Prioritizing Pitjantjatjara (and/or Yankunytjatjara) language as close and constant voices in the early years is not an unattainable goal. Many early-years education programmes employ Anangu as early childhood workers, Anangu Education Workers or registered teachers. By providing targeted support, resource development and professional development, this cohort can be released to provide "close and constant" voices to young children in early-years programmes. Teachers could also be supported and encouraged to improve their own skills and understanding in local languages to improve and inform their own teaching practice in the Anangu community context. It seems that since the 1950s there has been a gradual shift in the apparent necessity of Anangu voices as educators in schools. There are a number of reasons for this including the increased attention on improving English language skills, policy interventions that require teachers to have university degrees, and the relatively small pool of Anangu who are both qualified and positioned to take on various roles within schools. An important discussion is waiting to be had about how we might begin to turn this trend around and once again prioritize "close and constant" Anangu voices in Anangu education.

In thinking about this process, I am concerned about what happens for young people who are in Adelaide or other places, going away for school. They face a real and significant struggle, disconnected from the consistency of the "close (Anangu) voices" day by day that builds confidence to be receptive to the new learning they need to embrace. In some cases, families receive regular feedback saying, "Your child is behind", but I worry about how they might ever "catch up" in the context of a boarding school that is disconnected from the elements that open the spirit and build the confidence necessary to learn new knowledge in these unfamiliar social contexts.

For remote Piranpa educators, developing a

sense of how students "feel" about what they are learning, how they learn it and the sense of self in the learning process can be vitally important in informing the kind of approach they may take to their teaching (see for example Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richards, 2003; Delpit, 1993; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003; Nakata, 2007a). It is also critical for Pi<u>r</u>anpa educators to be aware that for A<u>n</u>angu, deeply embedded axioms, epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies inform this sense of self that differs from their own position, values and sense of self in the classroom (see for example Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2007b). This raises important questions about how schools and educators might make room to bring together the "close voices" of family and community and the knowledges they have; traditional knowledge that still has strong connections; the knowledge of young people and their struggles in formal schooling contexts; and how to speak to them in a way that gives them confidence. This is not always done in a way that Pi<u>r</u>anpa would approach the task of affirming and encouraging children to engage in school "whole-heartedly" (or with an open spirit). In a 2013 education survey conducted with families from A<u>n</u>angu communities in the southern region of the Northern Territory, a Docker River grandmother explained it this way:

> Some kids have tried so many schools. My granddaughter has tried [school x—name withheld] and other schools but she runs away. I talk to her about how I am her grandmother and how I'm related to help her think about education. She is doing really well at the College. (Ninti One, 2013, p. 30)

"Family voices" are important in that they locate children, affirm identity and allow them to see that they are not alone, but there is a network of support to draw on for advocacy, protection and encouragement, building confidence to try new things and take risks.

"They all die"

In a recent interview, a senior man at Ernabella (Elder, 2012) reflected on the enormous sense of love, acceptance and learning that he received from his parents. This foundation enabled him to collect an impressive list of achievements, skills, knowledge and accolades over his lifetime, but perhaps most impressive is the life-long adherence to the values instilled in him as a child. When asked how he talks to his grandchildren about these things, given that he learned through observing the sharing of meat, making spears, hunting and cooking kangaroos and so on, he told the following story:

> Listen, I was watching a movie today; two movies with cowboys and Indians. Listen, I want to talk to you all. Maybe you'll all listen and you'll understand some important things from listening to what I have to say. This is what I was watching, I was watching a movie with cowboys and Indians and the Indians have spears and rifles but the cowboys have those guns with the powerful bullets, pistols, but they are very powerful and they shoot them all and destroy all the Indians. They all die. In the same way, you might think the wrong way and sniff petrol. And from the petrol, it's just like the cowboy's bullets; it's too strong. The petrol is so strong and it kills A<u>n</u>angu. I'm talking to you so this doesn't happen. They killed the Indians, those big, strong bullets and I'm thinking it might kill you all and you will be destroyed. But stay on the right track, like me or like my older brother or like others and you will grow to be old men, but otherwise your generation, you will all die young. (Elder, 2012, p. 19)

Here, the elder uses a stark but cautionary tale to compel his grandchildren to understand that the world has new and devastating challenges for the ill-equipped. Substance abuse, violence and social dislocation are indeed causing A<u>n</u>angu to "die young", as the elder warns.

The challenge for young Anangu to map their way through their youth and life amid the chaos of post-colonial community life and education could result in an annihilation of sorts, unless they find the "weapons" or "tools" (right thinking) to match the oncoming challenges. In this case, the "weapons" or "tools" he points to throughout the interview are the values of unconditional giving, a commitment to disciplined learning through observation of family members, and in all things, love.

Finding the "way in" to an Anangu child's world, their thinking and their spirit to encourage them to stay on the "right track", whether that be the choices they make about school engagement or the values they adopt in their broader lives, is a difficult task. We (Katrina and Sam) are suggesting that it is important that remote educators and Anangu families share these deeper conversations to consider how a collaborative approach to building the confidence of students can improve school engagement as well as the wellbeing of students more broadly. This speaks to notions of a place-based approach to teaching the national Australian Curriculum as well as pedagogical considerations. Both authors contributed to the Sidney Myer Rural Lecture on 18 September 2013 held in Alice Springs titled "Red Dirt Curriculum: Reimagining Remote Education". Here, it was argued that student confidence as a foundation for knowledge acquisition is critical in Anangu schooling and Katrina highlighted a range of strategies that teachers can consider and employ. Sam argued that a "Red Dirt Curriculum" must bring the knowledge and expertise that exists outside of the school fence into the school's core business of teaching and learning. In doing so, an Anangu education should privilege Anangu, their knowledge and values in what is to be known and what is important for Anangu young people in a future that finds them in their element, confident in their own knowledge and in engaging with Western knowledge, and capable in their leadership of generations to come in the Red Dirt context of Anangu communities. These ideas are further discussed throughout the lecture (see Osborne, Minutjukur, Tjitayi, & Lester (in press), or via http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xLtnYbV6uc).

Katrinaku tjukurpa (Katrina's story; see Tjitayi, 2012)

Here, I (Katrina) discuss the essence of learning that "sticks" and the challenge for Anangu tjitji kulunypa tjuta (young children) to take hold of Western knowledge and education with an open spirit.

Kurunta kanyintja (Held in our spirit)

For children to learn, we sometimes take them out bush to learn our ways. I'm teaching that grandson of mine and so he was going around gathering bush tomatoes. And having returned, he said, "Hey? She's doing something with the soil!" I was cleaning the bush tomatoes with the soil and he asked, "What's that for?" I told him, "You do it like this so that you don't get a sore tummy, and then you burn the discarded skin." This reminded me that I too saw things like this when my mother did them. I did these things (without my mother) so that my grandson could see me doing them.

I'm reflecting on the fact that we don't write things like this in books. It's only there in our spirits to learn. It's inside our spirit. That child has taken it and is learning in his spirit and perhaps in the future, he'll go out and do this sort of thing, and as the bush tomatoes are being gathered, he'll see it and think back, "Hey? That's what my grandmother was doing a long time ago, just like that!"

Our children really don't go outside and walk around with books. The things we say, our knowledge, our practices, they take them into their spirit and all of these things are kept totally in their spirit. In the old days, we used to think, "Before I lose my grandmother, I

need to keep learning her ways, learning our culture. How can we keep learning from her?" And we don't write these things down; it's in us, going right into our spirits and dwelling there. It's all there, it's there all the time, it's our knowledge.

So when a child sees this and learns these sorts of things and internalizes it, when it resides in their spirit, they go out bush and they think, "Yes, that plant is kampa_rarpa (bush tomato)." And he will go on knowing this, thinking, "After collecting the bush tomato, you clean the fruit with the soil." Other people tell me off, saying, "No, don't do that! He needs to be at home so he doesn't wreck everything!" But I thought about it and I decided, "No, I'm taking him so I can teach him. By sitting at home, he won't know all of our ways." He goes and he learns all sorts of other things too. He's taking hold of these things from a very early age. And so it's stuck there in his spirit, totally sticking, so that our knowledge will be there forever.

Kul_uny-ngur_u nintiringkunytja (Little ones learning)

I have a second image here to share about meaningful learning that I am seeing in our early childhood programmes. For example, a granddaughter of mine sings all of these songs in English and after closely observing her, I realized, "Wow! These children are learning here from a very young age."

From long ago, they have learned from their mothers taking them out bush, but here they come to child care and are learning all of these Western things, important things—looking at books, DVDs and singing songs. It's so important and she will learn from such a young age. We were probably looked after in pre-school, but it wasn't enough. I look at what child care is doing and I think, maybe we should be teaching the really young children earlier, through the things we teach at home.

I was seeing that child at home and noticing her doing all of these things like singing songs, doing actions and using English as she does it. I saw this and thought, "This is really amazing!" At home, these children have learned these things already and they're so confident at school, in the child care; they're confident.

That learning gives them a strong sense of confidence wherever they go. They will be taking on challenges with confidence in the future, but without the learning, you can't do it. If you can't take on the new challenges, you might think, "No, if I touch it, I'll do it wrong and the kids will laugh at me; people will laugh and I don't want that to happen." She was singing so confidently and we started to laugh because she sang so beautifully. She sang everything and finished the songs, she was doing the actions, saying the ABCs perfectly and it caused me to see that because of her learning from a young age, she was engaging with activities with complete confidence.

We don't have all of those things in our houses like Pir_anpa do—books, computers, all of those things—but there is a chance to use them at the child care. In our houses, we only have DVDs, but not books, no posters, not all of those other things. But they are learning those things there at child care.

Long ago, the mothers, with the grandparents, had high levels of expertise. They knew about the animals, they had great expertise with plant foods and to raise honest children, they knew how to keep them strong. But these days, many children are too afraid to learn because they don't have any understanding; inside, they don't understand and so they have no confidence and they're unable to learn. I see this constantly.

I think for this younger generation it might be different because they're learning from a very young age. My generation were probably writing in pre-school, but not enough, perhaps? We can't understand. They gave an iPad to that child and she knows how to use it! From learning as a young child, having all of those skills, she will be trying things with complete confidence.

And so I began to think that maybe the future will be so strong for these children. They can open the door on their own, now they have this knowledge; the children have such expertise now. But maybe they're missing other things, other knowledge. Maybe they're all missing that key to enter into those more important things, to get employment. I'm seeing that they have skills and confidence, but they still can't understand. Where will we get meaningful work? How will we work in the same way Piranpa do?

Missing pieces

I've described two situations within my own family of meaningful and important learning, but now I want to talk about a third story that lies hidden in between these two scenarios. I saw this image when someone bought a self-build chair that has all of those nuts and screws and other bits and pieces, and when they couldn't understand the instructions, they just left it right there. That chair laid there for a long time and then broke.

In the same way, there are small pieces that we're missing for our children, poor things! That chair's just laying right there and I always see that chair and think, "What a shame!" The instructions are there but we can't really do it. We try and assemble it, do it up again, take it apart again; we can't do it. And education is like this; maybe we're missing tiny little pieces along the way and because of that, we don't understand how to do it.

In our children's education, it seems all of the pieces are there, but they're missing small but important pieces along the way. The chair seems fine, but under pressure it breaks and then just lies there, broken.

The "codes of power"

Lingard et al. (2003) explain that all academic institutions have two goals of education and learning: social and academic. In remote education, much effort is directed towards improving the process of academic learning, but the aspect of learning that occurs through the socialization process is far less explicit or intentional. In part, this could be because of the lack of certainty for Piranpa educators in their role in determining what social aspects of a remote education could or should look like in the Anangu context, and is perhaps aided by the apparent lack of agency for Anangu in the leading of this aspect of education (see Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014).

Delpit (1993) emphasizes that educators, who teach "other people's children", need to understand that there is a "culture of power" that has its own implicit rules, or "codes". These are powerful social understandings for successful engagement in the social context. Frequently, remote educators are non-Indigenous and construct a learning environment where the prevailing social norms are implicitly understood by the teacher, and students are expected to engage and comply within this social context. As Delpit explains (p. 122), the "rules of the culture of power" need to be explicitly told to the students, not simply assumed as shared understanding. This applies to social norms, but also speaks to the deeper philosophical underpinnings of knowledge, Western logic and reason and a sense of "how to learn" in a Western schooling context.

African-American academic and feminist writer bell hooks explains the "terror" that she experienced as a child as she did not grow up around white people and had no way of "reading" them, their motivations or intent. She writes, "Did they understand at all how strange their whiteness appeared in our living rooms, how threatening?" (2009, p. 96). As an adult and renowned academic, she describes a situation where an experience of feeling powerless and "othered" revives a haunting feeling: "The feeling of terror that I had known so intimately in my childhood surfaced" (p. 104).

Even with awareness of these issues and critical self-reflection, it is difficult for Piranpa

educators to understand the social and emotional impact of being brought from "outside the culture of power" and into our schools and classrooms where tjitji tjuta (children) have no lived experience within the culture of power (Delpit, 1993). By de-mystifying these implicit codes of power for social and academic success and making room for "family voices" in a Western schooling context, remote educators can go some way to assisting the students to gain confidence and build the spirit.

"Secret English"

The desire to be "let in" to the culture of power is sometimes expressed by Aboriginal people as the desire to know the "secret English"; that is, when "whitefellas say one thing but mean another" (Bain, 1979). Bain (1979) describes a request in an Anangu community discussion about education:

> We want them to learn English. Not the kind of English you teach them in class, but your secret English. We don't understand that English, but you do. To us you seem to say one thing and then do another. That's the English we want our children to learn. (p. 113)

It would seem that the issue of "say[ing] one thing, but mean[ing] another" is less about language acquisition and perhaps more aptly described as mastering the "implicit codes of power". The observation of young Anangu children learning skills and knowledge from an early age is an important development, but they will need to be able to negotiate knowledge, skills and language within a broader socio-political context, brokering knowledge systems (Indigenous and Western; see Nakata, 2007b) within a dominant (Western) culture context in the future. Remote education, like the image of the self-build chair, needs to prioritize building strength in the less obvious but critical underpinnings of a robust education, affirming a sense of identity and belonging, building confidence to acquire new knowledge and then de-mystifying the social and academic implicit codes of power so that students can apply knowledge in dominant culture contexts both competently and with confidence.

If the goals of a remote education are limited to improving attendance and merely aspiring to the acquisition of (minimal) National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing benchmarks, we have only achieved the redistribution of "lesser codes", and ultimately, disadvantage. Hayes, Mills, Christie, and Lingard (2006) emphasize that a socially just or "powerful" education requires the opportunity to engage with the routine disciplines of acquiring basic skills in literacy and numeracy, but must provide the opportunity to explore high order thinking and reasoning, and also the skills of critical thinking that unlock the hidden elements of cultural and linguistic elitism.

This may require educators to be more flexible in providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge (with support) in a range of cultural contexts. Engaging strategically with metropolitan schools as a "both ways" (Yunupingu, 1999) knowledge exchange, for example, could provide opportunities to experiment with knowledge within the context of long-term relationships, building student confidence to engage with dominant culture contexts. For example, Anangu students could engage with their own ecological knowledge and language and then be part of sharing this knowledge with metropolitan students. Alternatively, Anangu students could engage with metropolitan schools and engage in environmental science activities that draw on their understanding of the environment but in a new context. Developing ongoing relationships with metropolitan schools would be an important part of creating such opportunities to be meaningful and sustainable.

Here we (Katrina and Sam) are emphasizing that Anangu children are capable of both

acquiring and retaining "traditional and scientific knowledges" (Nakata, 2007b). We are arguing that building confidence is critical to underpinning a desire for the acquisition of knowledge. To offer a "powerful" education, teachers must first acknowledge that a "culture of power" exists, and secondly, explicitly teach the implicit "codes of power" (Delpit, 1993).

Learning must have a sense of meaning and purpose, build confidence and strengthen the identity of the learner. School-based learning and education is critical but has its limitations, unless learning finds its way into the spirit. This has implications both for families and educators in the way they prepare and support children in their learning. As children approach school with confidence, an open spirit provides an opportunity to take new knowledge in and to hold on to it.

Glossary

Anangu	an Aboriginal person (this is the term Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people of Central Australia use to refer to themselves)
Anangu tjitji kulunypa tjuta	young Anangu children
kamparrarpa	bush tomato (or desert raisin), *Solanum centrale*
kulintjaku	to hear, think, know about, feel and understand
Kuluny-nguru nintiringkunytja	"Little ones learning"
Kurunta kanyintja	"Held in (our) spirit"
Piranpa	a non-Indigenous person
tjitji tjuta	children

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