



Nhulunbuy Primary School opens its doors to parents

An important social centre

Nhulunbuy Primary School is located in the mining town of Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula, East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. The town of 4,000 has no easy land links to the outside world and has to rely on supplies being either shipped or flown in. Like many Territory schools, Nhulunbuy Primary has issues around remoteness and poor access to mental health support services.

Shelley Martin has taught at Nhulunbuy Primary for twelve years and says the town's isolation can be challenging. "We have very few services here. There is no counselling service at all for children aged up to eight years old. This is a typical mining town made up of many different people from different cultures and countries. It can be a little volatile – and like all towns there are a number of family breakdowns," Shelley said.

Shelley said the school becomes a particularly important social centre as the new families in town, who have often travelled from outside Australia, adjust to the remoteness and limited facilities. "A lot of the wives find it difficult – even though it is a friendly town there is not much support for them. Many of the women come from situations where they had lived in the same town as their parents and extended family so it can be hard for them. There are no shopping centres for example, so the school is indeed a very important place for these women to initially develop social connections," Shelley said.

The school's population of 600 represents a rich mix of diverse cultures that adds to its uniqueness. "We have so many different cultures represented at the school from French-Canadian, Swiss, Tongan, New Zealand, South African, Papua New Guinean, Thai, Filipino, Greek to Samoan. Approximately seventy students are from local Indigenous families," Shelley said.

Due to the nature of the mining industry, which relies on external labour supplies, the average child stays at the school for approximately 2 – 3 years.

Getting teachers and parents on board

Shelley was keen for Nhulunbuy to become a KidsMatter school as she believes that Social and Emotional Learning is the most important thing for children. However, knowing they needed a whole-of-school approach, some of the staff initially felt a little daunted by the enormity of the task ahead. But the implementation of KidsMatter has been seamless, Shelley said. "At first we thought KidsMatter seemed too big and we didn't think we would be able to do it but after the professional development days with Claire (KidsMatter NT Project Officer 2007) and the gradual implementation, we have had no problems. All the teachers are onboard – it has been really great," Shelley said.

Feedback from surveys distributed to staff and parents resulted in the school agreeing that more work needed to be done in all four components of KidsMatter. The school would, however, begin by focusing on *Social and Emotional Learning* and *A Positive School Community*.

In order to develop a positive school community, the school focused a lot of its work on opening its doors to parents by inviting them to be part of morning teas and opening night celebrations. A Families and Schools Together program has been implemented by NT Christian Schools Association which sees parents meeting together to talk about parenting skills, problems they may be having and working out solutions together. Afterwards the parents spend quality time with their children participating in arts and crafts activities.

The school is also developing a parent support room which will contain good quality parenting resources. They are also looking at how to better inform the school community about the resources that are available to them. "We have had some really great success stories with some of the parents. Before KidsMatter they had nothing to do with the school and weren't involved at all with any of the activities. Now they are much more aware of mental health and wellbeing issues with their children. They are good at identifying problems but had had trouble coming up with solutions. Our early intervention processes are really good for them," Shelley said.

Teachers are now more proactive

A key component of the school's early intervention policy has been the establishment of a student support team. The team is comprised of the assistant principal, early childhood teacher, upper primary teacher, special education teacher, KidsMatter Action team member and the wellbeing officer. The team meets at regular times to assist and advise teachers on students who may be at risk of developing mental health issues.

"Now, teachers are much more proactive rather than reactive. This team has now given them somewhere to go to say: 'This is what I have observed, what do you think?' We can now talk about a situation and manage it before it becomes more problematic. The support team has become the first port of call, which is great," Shelley said.

After much consultation and reflection the school decided to implement *Bounceback* and *Friendly Schools and Families* programs as part of the *Social and Emotional Learning* component. "Most of the teachers were already TRIBES-trained but KidsMatter gave *Social and Emotional Learning* the backbone and impetus that we needed to adopt it across the school," Shelley explained.

Implementing KidsMatter has opened the doors to new ways of creative thinking. A teacher's passion for information technology resulted in Nhulunbuy organising a GROOVY MOVIE night which saw 350 locals turn out to view short films written and produced by their children. "Our teacher Amber is passionate about IT and wanted to raise money for more equipment. She encouraged the kids to make small films of any topic they wanted and then enter them in a competition. Entry was open to all children in East Arnhem Land," Shelley said.

Children dressed up as their favourite characters on the night with winning filmmakers receiving awards and prizes donated by local businesses. Money was raised through tickets at the door and by selling refreshments such as popcorn. "It was wonderful for the children. Seeing their films up on the big screen filled them with so much pride and gave their self esteem such a great boost," Shelley said.

Claire Cowen, KidsMatter's Northern Territory 2007 Project Officer says GROOVY MOVIE is a great example of what can be achieved through collaboration and some risk-taking. "Amber's innovative idea was a great success and everyone was surprised and excited by the response of the community. It was an incredible achievement and showed how proud the children were to be able to show their films to not only their parents and teachers but to the whole community. Why did 350 people turn up? Because it was fun, a visual thing and it was their kids!" Claire said.

KidsMatter has given us a process to follow

Nhulunbuy is a school that has wholeheartedly embraced KidsMatter's framework – one that gives schools the space to plan and implement with the support of funding, a project officer and quality resources.

"The implementation has been a nice slow process – we haven't been rushed. It has given us a process to follow. We can try ways of doing things first and see how they go instead of rushing in and making a muck of it and having to try all over again," Shelley added.



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