

Think Big Wiradjuri Youth Participatory Research Project – what happened?

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Abstract

Wiradjuri are the largest Aboriginal Nation in New South Wales. Wagga Wagga, a Wiradjuri word meaning ‘dancing place’, or ‘place of many celebrations’ was the proposed site for a Think Big project, a multinational youth collaboration project. The Wagga Wagga based Think Big research never reached the stage where children carried out their research. We share that it is important to identify the factors that hindered the project so that with hindsight we can anticipate where future research pitfalls might be avoided.

Keywords

Wiradjuri; multinational collaboration; Youth Participatory Action Research.

Introduction

The Think Big multinational collaboration project developed participatory research projects with children that involved adult and child coresearchers from Australia, Chile, Colombia, and the United Kingdom. The aim was to build solidarities between adult researchers from different countries and disciplines. In Wagga Wagga working with Wiradjuri children the researchers’ intent was to act as mentors, adding value to the inclusivity credentials of the project, and be of benefit to the local Wiradjuri (people of the three rivers) community. Wiradjuri are the largest Aboriginal Nation in New South Wales. Wagga Wagga, a Wiradjuri word meaning ‘dancing place’, or ‘place of many

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celebrations' (Wagga, 2021). The Wiradjuri based branch of Think Big project never eventuated: not through the willingness of the researchers; not through the desire of the Wagga Wagga Wiradjuri community, not through the support of the Think Big international team managers who did all in their power to assist this project. So why did a project with such overwhelming support not get off the ground? This article lays out the work and effort placed into the project to use and know how and why a project intended for the benefit of the Wiradjuri community, was subverted. The authors also hope that the disruptive process articulated may be of use in early recognition of pitfalls for other researchers and organisations.

In Australia 'Closing the Gap' since 2006 identifies the disadvantage in health and education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. But the gap for Aboriginal children is widening. The most recent reports tells us that "the gap in life expectancy by 2031 is not on track" (Australia, 2022, p. 11) and that only "34.3 per cent of First Nations children commencing school were assessed as being developmentally on track... a decrease from 35.2 per cent in 2018 (the baseline year). The national target of 55 per cent is not on track to be met" (Australia, 2022, p. 63). The measure above uses the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) gage across five domains of development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language [English] and school based cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. While these measures provide an important baseline for 'general' national child wellbeing none of the domains specifically measure cultural or local language development. The focus on numeracy and literacy skills, attendance and retention, training pathways and workforce development is acknowledged.

Through the Think Big Project Marcus Wright and Dominique Sweeney planned to mentor, in collaboration with the Wiradjuri community of Wagga Wagga, a group of young Wiradjuri researchers that would ask questions about their concerns for the future, analyse their findings and generate a response. The project considers children and adolescents as agents of social and political change recognized by the United Nations since 1989 (United Nations, 1989). In many Aboriginal communities that Chief Investigator (CI) Sweeney has worked with children are already recognised differently to the way Australian government and commercial youth based organisations operate. It was welcome that local elders were immediately interested in the likely benefits of the outcomes for all concerned particularly with VicHealth funding in a project where local resources were not expected to be drained (Chavez *et al.*, 2021).

The idea developed from Sweeney's doctoral research and then an opportunity to join the Think Big project (Sweeney, 2010). Many elders across the northwest of Australia want their children to learn their cultural songs and dances, the children are keen to learn

and face many obstacles and are often prevented from this simple process happening. Native Title meetings, Land Council meetings, Mining Company meetings, Health meetings, Education meetings, Court hearings and formal school all take priority. Even though the teaching of songs and dances is considered important this often drops to last on the list of priorities. When someone is sick or dies, for cultural reasons months will pass when nothing can happen and so... cultural transference of knowledges becomes increasingly hard to maintain in the day to day grind of events. It is a fragile environment and the opportunity for young researchers to have their say about these processes through the Think Big project was timely and fortuitous.

When Wiradjuri elders were presented with the idea to use the Think Big project the gaining of permission to go ahead was in three stages. First the idea was suggested at the local weavers session in Wagga Wagga where elders regularly meet on Mondays. In particular, Aunty Lorraine Tye, experienced in participatory action research, voiced her approval for the idea and suggested potential approaches. The idea was then taken to Mawang Gaway Wiradjuri Council where it was given another hearing and gained endorsement to continue. At the Wiradjuri cultural and wellbeing centre 'Visual Dreaming', Wright and Sweeney met with elders and significant Wiradjuri people including Professor Sue Green and James Ingram. Everything was in place for the project to go ahead and all that was required was the CSU ethics application to be approved. The Wiradjuri Think Big project had Wiradjuri community support and the overall ethical concerns with child research already had Melbourne University ethics approval.

What happened then was a series of disruptions from Charles Sturt University (CSU) which eventually stopped the project. The intent of this article is not to lay blame but to show how a research proposal which recommended culturally appropriate modes of managing the research and provided the necessary examples of safe practice was unable to proceed.

To start at the beginning, right at the outset of the project the Head of the CSU School of Communications and Creative Industries School was in the process of devolving the school. During the project's development the head of school changed three times as part of a disruptive process between 2018 and 2021. The revolving door management holdups, a widespread issue even prior to Covid, effectively ground to a halt any ongoing research within the school. The first major holdup came from the Dean of the CSU Faculty of Education and the Arts who stopped CI Sweeney from attending the 2019 Think Big introductory workshops in Chile. The workshops developed a set of principles for working with child coresearchers in a participatory way allowing for each local team to adapt their study to the local context. After the workshops, approval was subsequently granted from the Ethics Research Committees at the University of

Melbourne, at Universidad de la Frontera, Chile, the Universidad del Norte, Colombia and the University of Bristol, UK (Chavez *et al.*, 2021, p. 310). There was no cost to CSU to attend these workshops with all expenses paid through the Think Big project.

The most important aspect of any outside funded participatory action research project is clear agreement from the community or recognised authority that the project is worthwhile and will not be a fly in fly out proposition. By that we mean that there is an ongoing interest in how the project will positively contribute to the betterment of the community and that the research stays within the community after the project ends. Many of these considerations were immediately overcome through Wright, a young Wiradjuri researcher, as the focal point of the research. The University did not recognise this and held up Wright's funding and then the ethics proposal compiled by Wright in coordination with Wiradjuri Elders. CSU never consulted any Wiradjuri authorities on the project. This is a major point of contention. The CSU ethics committee representative also asked eight months after the application had been submitted that we provide an authority who could affirm the credibility of the project. We had already provided the overarching Think Big Melbourne University application that included their ethics approval. Even though we had a Wiradjuri researcher working under Wiradjuri community guidance and we had guidance through Melbourne University School of Population and Global Health with support from internationally recognised academics, the application was shelved as inadequate.

CSU's great contribution was funding Wright through an internal University grant as a Wiradjuri researcher over a period of 12 months to work on Think Big. This positive outcome provided the project and Wright the opportunity to establish solid relations with the Wagga Wagga Wiradjuri community. That was money well spent. Wright then worked as the Wiradjuri arts consultant with Eastern Riverina Arts encouraging and developing a number of arts projects. He currently works as a digital producer for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

The way CSU managed the project through their Ethics Committee process leaves many unanswered questions. The following summary of the proposal along with all the required supplementary appendices was submitted to them by Wright in 2019.

This part of the Think Big project is to be Wiradjuri driven.

That means the research here [Wagga Wagga] will not follow the general research proposal scheme but instead be guided by the way local elders want it to happen.

Last week we were endorsed by Mawang Gaway Wiradjuri Council in no small part due to Marcus Wright's potential involvement as a Wiradjuri researcher.

Wright's initial job will be to develop and ensure the ethics proposal is correct and appropriate both from the University's viewpoint but also from the Wiradjuri viewpoint. The ethics proposal is being done through Melbourne University, Wright will also be responsible for finding child researchers and connecting with them.

Working with Children is a consideration and why Mawang Gaway Wiradjuri Council endorsement is critical. Wright will then work with the child researchers to help develop their questions, work out what platforms they will use to follow up with their questions and once they have collated their research work assist them in conjunction with the Melbourne University researchers. From their analysis and findings, they will then create the form in which they choose to represent their results. Black Words, a publishing agency of AusLit has agreed to use their resources to help (AusLit, 2023).

Wright will work with the Melbourne team for assistance in developing the original questions for the platform, working collaboratively with our other partners, and extend the current literature review for the Wagga Wagga environment which will provide the basis for two papers. Marcus will also be responsible for documenting and collating the process for the final report.

We are genuinely seeking to learn from what the children researchers develop and discover. In other examples of this pilot, children are using digital news based polling and presentations however the final report from Wagga Wagga could be a news reportage, a documentary, a painting, a comic, theatre/dance or song, a short film or a poem or something else again. The target audience for the questions may be peers, only local elders or sent to a wider community. That will be determined by the participants in consultation with their elders.

We work with Leanne Sanders at Wagga Wagga City Council and with Aunty Mary Atkinson Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer in the Wagga Wagga Diocese. The group of children will be selected, as directed by Mawang Gaway. To enter into this kind of engagement it is appropriate that a Wiradjuri researcher is central to the process.

The Think Big project proposes 5 stages:

1. Develop agreements to implement Think Big: The partnership agreements

will include clarification of intellectual property, data management arrangements, data sharing and co-authorship policies, working with children clearance according to local regulations, and applicable ethical standards.

2. **Identify child priority issues:** Co-develop and explore possible topics with local child co-researchers.
3. **Determine scope of issues:** Work with media outlet and co-researchers to identify the most newsworthy topics that will meet the media partner requirements.
the poll with child audience/users through digital, radio or mobile phone platform depending on context.
4. **Share de-identified data with the researchers.** Analyse the results: Adult and young co-researchers analyse and interpret the results and develop recommendations for different stakeholders.
5. **Seek action:** Co-researchers present their findings and recommendations to local and national stakeholders including their peers, parents, schools, service providers and government; seek commitments for action and accountability.

The original target group were boys from the Mount Austin Clontarf Academy. The following Research Sheet was submitted in the ethics application to be distributed to participants and their parents.

Information to participants and their parents about the Think Big project, titled “Indigenous issues and social problems” at Charles Sturt University’s School of Communication and Creative Practice which is being conducted by researcher Marcus Wright.

If you are interested in your child participating, please read the following information. You can also contact us for any further questions.

What is this project about?

This project invites young indigenous boys from various age groups through the Clontarf program to participate in a study about their experiences and their ideas on cultural issues and social problems.

What will my child be asked to do during the program?

- First, they will be asked about their thoughts and ideas on the project, how being involved could potentially make them critically think about indigenous problems and social issues that exist.
- If they choose to continue as co-researchers we will meet up an additional 3-5 times across the rest of the year, mostly at the school that the program is run out of. Group discussions will go for roughly 45-60 minutes.
- During these sessions they will be able to suggest potential questions or platforms for an online survey, article or video. This will be conducted through indigenous publishing group *Black Words*. *Black words* are an indigenous publishing agency based in Brisbane, Queensland mainly focused on publishing works with indigenous artists. The study will be sent to various organizations including universities, Elders programs and internet sites to help gain information about the questions that your child will pose.
- Once the research is done and the information is available, the boys will be asked to discuss their views about them also. They will be invited to propose ideas about which important people should hear about the questions and results.
- If they are interested the boys will have an opportunity to contribute as a co-author/co-researcher to the reporting of the study findings in reports and presentations at University of Melbourne.
- All of the group discussions will be audio recorded as well as notes taken. This will allow us to remember what was said. If the boys wish they can take photos/videos as well, if parental consent is provided.

What are the possible benefits?

We anticipate that the participation in this research will be rewarding as your child is contributing new knowledge and will contribute helping adults think of better and easier ways to improve young indigenous lives by hearing of their experiences and views. There is evidence that involving young researchers in research that is relevant to them can have positive effects, boosting self-esteem, awareness of self and others, hope for the future and more active contribution to the community. They will also develop further skills to help them at school and for their future.

What are some possible risks?

There is a small risk from participating that your child may experience distress or feel uncomfortable during the research due to the topic of discussion. Rest assured your child will not be forced to participate in anything they do not want to be

involved in and they are free to leave at any moment.

We also provide youth support services headspace and kids help lines in case they would like to speak with a confidential support service. This is an ethical obligation of ours.

Will I hear about the results and the findings of the project?

Yes. We will summarize the projects findings and present them to all the people that participated, along with their families and schools. The results will also contribute to various thesis papers at the University of Melbourne and the results will also be shared at conferences and in journal articles. The boys can present their own findings to other groups if they wish.

Will the things my child say be kept private?

Yes, only the researcher and the other people in the group discussion will know what has been said. The information your child will tell us is confidential, within the limits of the law. If they tell us something which indicates that they are unsafe we will need to seek help. Identifying information will be removed when reporting the findings but your child has the option to be acknowledged as a co-author for the research. We will keep all the information at Charles Sturt University then it will be destroyed when the project is over.

Does my child have to participate?

Participation is completely voluntary and can stop at any time.

Wiradjuri Think Big reached stage 1 of these 5 stages. A factor contributing to the hold ups in the organisation of the project was the blanket ban across all new research in Australia with Aboriginal communities to protect them from Covid-19 infection (Chavez *et al.*, 2021, p. 315). This directive did not last the whole period of our project and is not the reason why the project could not go ahead. However, it is important to identify all the factors that hindered Think Big in Wagga Wagga so that with hindsight we can anticipate where future research pitfalls might be avoided.

What might the project have produced?

Both researchers are in the performing arts and both have worked with young people creating performances from original concepts. There was undoubtedly a skills emphasis

as mentors towards a performative outcome and this aligned with the development of Corroborees being performed across NSW. These corroborees are public performances of traditional songs and dances. There is a wealth of literature on both Arts Workshops for children benefiting communities and Service Learning as modes of using the arts in mental health related support, however this article does not attempt to cover those areas.

The difference in the Think Big Participatory Action Research (PAR) project to Arts specific projects is in the way the research was to be carried out - not taking information in with which to begin a project. Working closely as research mentors with children the opportunity was to encourage the young researchers to ask the questions most important to them and to help them carefully dig deep. Defining who should answer those questions and how they would be presented was also the young researchers' decision. Once the responses to those questions arrived back the task was then for the group to develop a response; a way to report back those findings. In the Think Big Bristol project the young UK researchers produced a submission to parliament reporting on their findings on attitudes to the newly introduced policy on relationships and sex education in schools. Think Big encouraged children to question the world around them, a world where they are adept at understanding current technologies and using communication systems.

In Wagga Wagga we were approaching the questions with culture and respect for elders as a starting point. In the arts it is given that the experiences should promote health and wellbeing however we had the added respect for Wiradjuri culture and ownership as a primary concern. Arts projects don't usually start with the children asking the questions. The trend is for artists to engage with a community and develop projects based on the strengths and interests of the participants. In the past circus played an important role where performance academic Gillian Arrighi says the "overlapping practices of contemporary 'youth' and 'social' circus [are] direct descendants of the community arts movement" (Arrighi, 2014). There are a range of models for community youth arts and the most contemporary popular model across Australia is with HipHop artists taking workshops into communities. Skinny Fish, Monkey Marc, MC Organics and Wire MC are some of the artists who run community workshops and the academic work of Professor Suzi Hutchins details further how this works (Hutchings & Crooke, 2017). At the same time in Wagga Wagga and across New South Wales there has been a renewed interest in traditional dancing. In 2019 more than 6000 people gathered beside the Murrumbidgee River to witness the Wagga Wagga Corroboree (Shields, 2019).

The Think Big project works internationally for the betterment of mental health by digging deep into underlying questions that concern children. The group of adult researchers offer guidance in formulating the questions and secondly in how to approach the analysis of the responses. The final part is where our particular local version would

have offered assistance to assist expressing beyond facts and figures and to suggest ways to transform gut feelings into an artistic statement. This is already being done through the renewed interest in corroborees. By dancing and singing traditional songs in local languages a range of questions about relationships to country are being raised and answered in the process.

For some attuned to the connection to country the line is disappearing between arts initiatives and health-based projects like Think Big. A wonderful example of such an interdisciplinary approach is Jute Theatre's schools' program 'Dare to Dream'. The program covers sensitive topics that address and aim to help prevent childhood trauma. Jute begin by presenting a play to a young audience that addresses sensitive topics. The Jute team then return a week after the performance to work with students creating their own stories of hope which the students then perform. Jute say that 'Dare to Dream' "is changing lives" (Jute Theatre, 2023).

Email from Marcus Wright reporting to the Charles Sturt University Ethics Committee 3/08/2021

My name is Marcus Wright, I was hired through a Research Assistant Grant through Charles Sturt to assist Dominique Sweeney work with Wiradjuri youth through the Vic Health program 'Think Big' run out of the University of Melbourne. I was hired in the back end of 2019 and helped develop and plan, ethics proposal, gather resources and analyse the results of working with the Wiradjuri Youth.

Just after I got the Ethics proposal off the ground, with the help of the sister program in Melbourne, I sent the proposal through to the ethics department for review and approval. It was denied. They denied it due to lack of written documents like permission forms, photo forms, and other forms of documentation. I submitted these documents with the Human Research Ethics Application (HREA) but it seems like the board did not review any attachments. I replied letting them know that our application did in fact have the documents they required and also addressing any other issue they had. I wanted to have full correspondence, but they referred me to an 'Ethics Cafe Workshop'. Upon attempting to attend the 'Online Cafe Workshop' it would not allow my participation with my Charles Sturt credentials. Ethics would not respond to my emails further.

During this period (thanks to the help of various Wiradjuri elders' guidance) *Visual Dreaming*, a local business revolving around community health, was willing to help us. They assisted in securing a group of participants and other community members

to help. I still struggled to have clear correspondence with the ethics committees. Professor Sue Green, a local Wiradjuri woman, who was on the ethics board for Charles Sturt University during this time informed us that she had no idea that the project was taking place or had any idea that an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander project was attempting to get ethics approval. By the time we met with her she was no longer on the committee. Covid-19 struck, things got put on hold and by the time we were trying to get up and running again I reached back out to Ethics. They informed me we needed recognisable people, ie people that had done Masters, PHD's or more that are familiar with the project, but not in the project, to send letters of approvals in with a new HREA. I had no idea why this was needed but I referred them to Professor Lisa Gibbs. This year was my last time talking with Ethics, they advised me we needed to start the entire process again. I told them to contact Dom Sweeney.

I am a Wiradjuri man, who had permissions and support from my Wiradjuri elders, to work with Wiradjuri community members to give Wiradjuri participants a platform, but sadly, a white ethics board that was too challenging to cooperate with, indirectly said no. How is this allowed?

... I hope Wiradjuri country is shining like it always does.

I miss my sunsets in Wiradjuri Country.
Say hello to everyone for me...

Think Big did not end in 2021 when the three year VicHealth grant funding ended. This journal is part of ongoing relationships that this project initiated between international interdisciplinary researchers. The findings from the Think Big project in Chile contribute to ongoing national advocacy for participatory research on children's wellbeing, health, and education. The Melbourne project provided the basis for developing a digital platform to launch children and young people's ideas and contributions for overcoming the challenges of Covid-19 and they continue to work with ABC's Behind the News educational TV show. The Bristol project contributed to evaluating the recently introduced UK educational policy on relationships and sex education in schools. The relationships created in the Wagga Wagga Think Big project while "delayed due to university restructures that were partly influenced by Covid-19" (Chavez *et al.*, 2021, p. 315) have just begun. The researchers trust that the time and work employed on the project remains valuable to the Wiradjuri community and that we

have provided useful observations for everyone including ethics committees, academic and research managers.

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