

Chapter 12

The Quest for Community Control at Yirrkala School

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Dedicated to the inspirational Both Ways education work of Dr Mandawuy Yunupiju (dec.), Dr Raymattja Marika (dec.), Mr Wāli Wulanybuma Wunungmurra (dec.), Ms Dayṅawa Nalwarri Njurruwutthun (dec.) and the many Yolḷu Ṃalapaḷmirri ('Elders') who shared their vision and knowledge with us.

In the 1960s two Ṃalapaḷmirri, now old men and respected Elders, had been young determined Yolḷu Land Rights fighters who signed the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition to the Commonwealth House of Representatives, asserting their Aboriginal rights to their Yolḷu land, their Yolḷu languages, culture and way of life. They had fought through the Australian legal system voicing their opposition to the improper leasing of their lands for mining and they had parried bureaucratic and administrative bluster, later sending a further Bark Petition in 1968 insisting that the new mining township being imposed on their lands be given its ancestral and proper Yolḷu name, Nhulunbuy (Wilkinson et al. 2009; Wuyal Galtha Workshop Report 1989).

Recently, as we talked together, those two Ṃalapaḷmirri pointed out that for decades Yolḷu had continued their established tradition of consultation and negotiation as a means of openly expressing their desire for self-determination and control of their lives, including the direction of education. Yolḷu have remained resolute about this, one of the old men asserted, despite changes in Government policy: "The political climate we are working under must be taken into account, it can cause problems ... we have seen this before" (Wunungmurra, personal communication 2014). The other old man, who was preparing to return to his Homeland Centre, added, "For years and years we have told you mob what we want our kids to learn at our schools; bilingual, both ways ... secondary education and more training at Homeland Centres. You just don't listen to us" (Munungurr, personal communication 2014).

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The Yolŋu story has changed little—their desire for the right to again control their lives resounds through the decades. Yolŋu have consistently reiterated their claim that they wanted recognition of their proud tradition of self-determination on their country and an understanding of the importance they placed on the maintenance of their culture and languages for their children and their grandchildren. Yolŋu did not want assimilation, instead wanting to face the future with respect and strength along with a return of their right to self-determination, self-management and self-sufficiency (Marika-Mununggiritj et al. 1990).

With the major change in the national political climate during the 1970s, the Yolŋu took the opportunity to make the crucial decision in 1973 to implement bilingual education at Yirrkala School in Gumatj and English. This decision was to have far-reaching consequences in providing their children, speakers of Yolŋu Matha as their mother tongue, with an effective and balanced bilingual education for their future (Graham, personal communication 2013). It was a positive step towards the maintenance of Yolŋu languages and culture and was to have major ramifications for the movement towards Yolŋu control.

A further opportunity to demonstrate the Yolŋu desire for control of the direction of education arose during consultation concerning education at Homeland Centres in 1974 by Maria Brandl, Daymbalipu Mununggurr and W. W. Wunungmurra. The Brandl Report (Brandl 1974) accurately reflected the strongly held belief that the Yolŋu community needed to be involved and consulted about Yolŋu education decisions and that bilingual schools should be established to teach their children at their Homeland Centres. The Yolŋu focus was on self-determination and their persistent request that community-appointed teachers have the opportunity to undertake teacher training using a community-based delivery model, resulted in the first on-site Teacher Education program being established at Yirrkala in 1976. Twelve years later, in 1988 at a UNESCO conference, second year Remote Area Teacher Education students said,

The Stage Two RATE program at Yirrkala is run in our community. This program was established at Yirrkala as a response to strong community request. The program is part of our community's plan for controlling the development of Education in our community (Yunupijju et al. 1988).

The 1980s saw a group of committed fighters emerge in the struggle for a return to community control of Yolŋu education in Yirrkala and Homeland Centres—these were the mature children of the 1960s Land Rights warriors. The relative stability of the self-determination and self-management policies gave the Yolŋu space to challenge the authority structure and curriculum delivered at the school. The feeling among the Yolŋu was for change. In his important record of these changing times Greg Wearne refers to “an increasing resolve by Aboriginal people to have a voice, to be listened to, and for their wishes to be translated into action” (Wearne 1986).

This decade saw the culmination of a number of significant and interrelated education measures which had been put into place at Yirrkala and Homeland Centre Schools over the past 20 years. The bilingual program was successfully operating at Yirrkala school and establishing an expanding library of Yolŋu Matha literature and

teaching resources; Homeland Centres were consolidating, developing essential infrastructure and establishing schools; Yolŋu teacher training utilising the community-based Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program was working well with trainee teachers at both Yirrkala and Homeland Centres undertaking Yolŋu education action-research projects (Burarrwaŋa-Ganambarr 1994); Deakin University and Batchelor College extended the qualifications of graduates through the Education Arts program (D-BATE); and the provision of secondary education for Yolŋu adolescent students at Yirrkala was underway.

The long held hope to see more Yolŋu knowledge and Yolŋu ways of learning and teaching incorporated into a balanced Both Ways education continued to drive the development of the workshop-based Yolŋu curriculum. Galtha Rom content negotiations were receiving vigorous and collaborative community endorsement (Wununmurra 1989) and the developing Garma Maths curriculum research was being trialled at the school and supported by Melbourne University (Yunupijŋu et al. 1986). Much of the learning, at primary, secondary and at a tertiary level during this time, was based around a workshop model involving close inter-generational collaboration between the Elders, teachers and learners (Marika 1990).

The next opportunity for the Yolŋu community to engage in consultation and negotiation with the school to plan future directions for Yolŋu education in the best interests of their children was the co-operative Yirrkala School Appraisal in 1983. The School Appraisal involved Regional and School staff, community members, parents, kin and community organisations forming working groups which completed surveys, conducted personal interviews and attended meetings. The comprehensive recommendations of the School Appraisal convey a strong sense of self-determination: with the Yolŋu re-stating their wish for bilingual education for their children and the need for Yolŋu languages to extend into the Post Primary/Secondary age students. Among other recommendations the School Appraisal endorsed increased support for Homeland Centre Schools and recognised the success of the community based RATE program in training local Yolŋu teachers. Positive school and community interest in the formation of a School Council was noted and included an accompanying recommendation to employ a Yolŋu community-school liaison person (Yirrkala School 1983).

During the 1980s the Yolŋu sought control of Yirrkala School, but importantly they sought more; they wanted to Aboriginalise their school. With the support and direction of their *Nalapaŋmirri* changes were being made in the school decision-making processes. These changes placed the School Council as the body setting the direction of Yolŋu education through designing and implementing Both Ways curriculum at Yirrkala and Homeland Centre Schools, while the Action (Djarma) Group enacted those directions through decisions made on a weekly and daily basis at school. Community control of the administration involved the selection and deployment of all staff and meant Yolŋu and Balanda working together towards the common goal of community control of Yolŋu education.

Formation of the initial Yirrkala School Council in 1983, as a governing body of the school, was a step towards fulfilling Yolŋu aspirations for self-determination and control of the direction of Yolŋu education. However, their vision was hindered

by the Balanda (non-Yolŋu) principal's lack of understanding and support for Yolŋu involvement in the operation of the school. He perceived the operation of the school, including staffing issues and curriculum matters, as being the function of the principal and Education Department alone. From his point of view the function of the School Council was to solve community problems, raise funds and meet visitors: in other words, to be a token Council. The Yolŋu School Council members definitely did not see themselves as token:

At first the school principal at the time supported the idea, he was happy to support some Yolŋu involvement in the school. But soon the Council was starting to make important decisions, and the principal got worried. He tried to stop the Yolŋu from having meetings without him. The Yolŋu had to fight to gain control (Yunupinju 1989).

A 1984 paper by Dr M. Yunupinju and John Henry proposed that a more Yolŋu way be introduced into the school, a Both Ways approach, to make it a more Yolŋu school. They suggested that changes to the administration and curriculum of the school could be achieved through changes to the communication structure of the school. This involved the formation of the Djarrma (Action) Group to guide the work of the school and staff, under the direction of the Yirrkala School Council and Community representatives.

We will be able to move forward on this issue of making our community school a 'both ways' place when we have a structure of communication linking the classrooms in our school with interested community people. We propose that the Yolŋu teachers in our community form an Action Group ...*(and that)*... the Yirrkala Community School Council become closely associated with the Action Group (Yunupinju and Henry 1984).

The Djarrma Group meetings, beginning in 1984 were meetings of a different kind to any previous regular planned school meetings. It is astonishing that in a Yolŋu school, these meetings were the first regular school meetings in which Yolŋu had the space and comfort to think, speak and reply in their first language. The weekly Djarrma Group meetings quickly became a place at school where Yolŋu felt empowered and were able to discuss and consider Yolŋu education and control issues within the security of their own cultural and linguistic environment (Ganambarr, personal communication 2014; Mununggurr, personal communication 2014; Yunupinju, personal communication 2014).

The Djarrma Group was comprised of every Yolŋu working at the school, including teachers at Yirrkala and Homeland Centres, RATE student teachers, literature production workers, clerical, administrative and ancillary staff. The Djarrma Group were the workers for the School Council and it was the Djarrma Group who would shoulder much of the hard work required to drive the change of control and curriculum at the school during the ensuing years.

As the work of the Action Group got going the hierarchical structure of the school had to start changing. The Action Group identified problem areas and looked for ways to start exerting control. As a sub-committee of the School Council the Action Group was the mechanism through which the School Council achieved control over everyday matters: the power, opportunities and ability to control our school because we are now able to make all

decisions, plan, evaluate, raise important issues and make recommendations for our school - the way we want it to be (Marika-Munungiritj et al. 1990).

A demonstration of the Yolŋu resolve to translate their wishes into action came about at the end of 1984 in the issue of staff selection. Although the recent co-operative School Appraisal, involving both Yolŋu and Balanda, had encouraged self-determination in many of its recommendations, when it came to the point of Balanda relinquishing control of the hierarchical power structure, the Balanda decision-makers did not actually want change.

There had been no consultation in 1984 with the Djarrma Group or the School Council regarding decisions around the staffing of the senior teacher positions for the following year. This of course, was the usual situation. Despite that, the Djarrma Group discussed and presented their ideas for staffing of the senior teacher positions in 1985. The Balanda principal and senior teachers' response to this plan was fierce, refuting and opposing the staffing ideas (Munungurr, personal communication 2014). And worse, in an attempt to discredit and disempower the Djarrma Group, the dissenting Balanda declared that the ideas must be the product of 'Balanda interference', not even the work of Yolŋu. The Djarrma Group responded:

As you know, the Action Group consists of the entire staff of Aboriginal teachers who teach here at Yirrkala School. We had talked about the teacher selection situation that was emphasised on the school appraisal document, giving the community more say in who they want to teach at their school.

We the Action Group feel that we are merely following up on recommendations put by this community and the Homeland Centre Communities and the hard work of the previous School Council (Wearne 1986).

The School Council Chairman, W. W. Wunungmurra, definitely saw that control of school staffing was a part of School Council and Community business, and he wrote concerning this issue in 1984,

During School Appraisal we were often told that Yirrkala had a Community school and that we 'would work together to make things better'. We agree that this is the way it should be but as parents and community members we must say that we are worried about the way the school is staffed. It is time for you to listen to our wishes, and to start 'working together to make things better'. We cannot agree to European teachers who are unsatisfactory or to senior teachers who do not understand our wishes (Wearne 1986).

The School Council and Djarrma Group were establishing their control as they turned their aspirations for self-determination and Aboriginalisation into action. Their future plans for the long term directions of Yolŋu education for Yirrkala and Homeland Centre schools were continuing to evolve, including community-based teacher training, Both Ways curriculum development and a strategy to regulate staff selection and placement.

Towards the end of 1985, the executive of the NT Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (FEPP) met at Yirrkala. The Djarrma Group explained its revolutionary work of changing the balance of power and instituting a Both Ways curriculum at the school and also discussed the difficult working relationship facing the School Council. It was decided that in an effort to meet community expectations

and to gain the support of the Department of Education, the School Council needed to be strengthened and re-constituted. The Secretary of Education also attended this meeting and said that,

He recognised the steps that the community were taking towards taking over control of the school. He, at that time, said that if we wanted to take control of the school we had to first establish and form a proper school council. He said that the Education Department would support our move in this and then give it real power ... (Yunupiju 1986).

The Yolŋu knew that teacher development and corresponding community involvement and development were the keystones in bringing about the changes they sought in attaining effective control of their school. For Aboriginalisation to become a reality it was essential that the community-based RATE program produce a high number of trained teachers and that qualifications for Yolŋu who already possessed teaching experience and training be upgraded. With 17 of the 19 Yolŋu staff undertaking training in 1987, the School Council estimated that by the early 1990s, Yolŋu should be able to fill all positions at Yirrkala and Homeland Centre schools. It was also essential that the development of Yolŋu Both Ways education, through Bilingual and Multilingual programs, workshops and Garma maths be appropriately and properly guided by the Yirrkala and Homeland Centre Naŋapaŋmirri and the Yolŋu teachers working as a team.

It was important to identify appropriate Balanda colleagues who could be assigned by the School Council to various roles as teachers in classrooms, lecturers, or tutors for Yolŋu teachers in training or to act as mentors for key Yolŋu who had been targeted to work in senior positions at the school. In this change of governance the Yolŋu needed to step up and assume their rights to self-determination and control, while Balanda needed to let go and step back. Aboriginalisation meant learning new skills and working together in new ways; Yolŋu and Balanda, Yirritja and Dhuwa, learners and teachers, school and community, School Council and Education Department in the understanding that the Yolŋu community, through the School Council was recognised as having over-arching control and guidance of the Yirrkala School.

Extensive consultation for the important Balaŋaŋa Project on the Educational Needs of Homeland Centres (Munungurr et al. 1987) was conducted during 1986. The Yolŋu researchers for the Project were notable. Mr Daymbalipu Munungurr and Mr W. W. Wunumurra, both Bark Petition signatories in the 1960s, were also members of the team that compiled the Brandl Report in 1974. Dr M. Yunupiju, the son of Mungurrawuy Yunupiju, another Bark Petition signatory, was completing his teaching qualifications through the D-BATE program and was recognised as a Yolŋu leader in educational change during the 1980s.

The research and consultation for the Balaŋaŋa Report were good preparation for the October 1986 Education Leadership Conference, attended by the Minister of Education, at which the interim Nambarra School Council was established and the staffing plan accepted by the Education Department. In his November 1986 letter, Education Minister, Darryl Manzie expressed his congratulations, support and acceptance of the School Council plan for control of education directions at Yirrkala and Homeland Centre Schools for 1987 and 1988 (Manzie 1986).

In a statement by W. W. Wunujmurra and Dr M. Yunupijū the role of the Nambarra School Council was stated:

In the running of the School we would have the School Council as the highest authority. Through this body both the Yolŋu Community and the Education Department input into the school would be channelled. The Principal, the teachers and the advisors working in the school would be ultimately accountable to the School Council. We want this body to be such that it makes decisions in the same ways that decision making generally happens in our community. ... The functions of the Nambarra School Council will be to make staffing appointments and determine the duties of the people appointed. Through the Council curriculum policy will be determined (Wunujmurra and Yunupijū 1986).

In the 1960s Yolŋu had clearly seen themselves at a frontier and that their languages, culture, land, and indeed their very lives were under attack. Those Yolŋu were standing up for their human rights for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren. Yolŋu in the 1980s were standing up for those same human rights, which included the right to determine and control what Yolŋu believed was the best education for the future of their children (Article 14, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2009).

This is a story of struggle, of courage and of the determination of First Australians to shape their future in the face of relentless and rapid change. The principles that guided Yolŋu and their Balanda colleagues are as relevant today as they were then. However, it seems that the more difficulties regarding attendance and achievement are evident, the less Yolŋu are consulted and involved, and the less the wisdom and educational practices which yielded Yolŋu-approved outcomes are considered.

It is important to understand that the Yirrkala Aboriginalisation program, with its imbedded Bilingual Education and Both Ways curriculum and philosophy worked. Graduates of these schools are now cultural, social and economic community leaders. The educational agenda of today needs to be mindful of today's issues and current Yolŋu aspirations but as Mr W. W. Wunujmurra expressed, he feels sorrow at the loss of the progress made and the erosion of those fundamental Both Ways principles, "We need to go back a little bit before we go forward."

In the publication *Always Together, Yaka Gäna*, Banbapuy Ganambarr a second year RATE student at the time, draws our attention to the future of Yolŋu self-determination and the control of Yolŋu education,

Our work is not just for ourselves but for all the people in this community and the Homeland Centres. Our work is based here at Yirrkala, so therefore we are opening new paths, marking the way for others to follow us and continue our journey (Marika et al. 1989).

The Yolŋu struggle is ongoing.

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