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OUTSTATION SCHOOLS - A CASE HISTORY

Derek Pugh

Maningrida is one of the largest of the Aboriginal communities in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory. It is located on the eastern bank of the Liverpool River and is home for some 1000 residents. Maningrida is identified on most maps but what is not so readily identified is the large number of smaller communities, located within a 100 kilometre radius of Maningrida and provided with services from there (see Map 1). These small communities (outstations or homeland centres) are found on the homelands of the families who live within them and the groups are usually quite small.

Within the Maningrida community, educational services are the responsibility of the Northern Territory Department of Education (NTDE) which provides staff and resources for the Maningrida Community Education Centre (CEC). The CEC provides daily programs for the 300 plus students resident in Maningrida and, in addition, it provides a number of support services for students who live, and receive their education, in the surrounding outstation communities where 'schools' have been established. Such 'schools' range from a tree or bough shelter to a substantial steel and iron roofed area. Educational services for these outstations emanate from the Outstation Schools Resource Centre building which houses office space, (for the four visiting teachers), a classroom, (for out - station students who visit the 'hub' school on an irregular basis and wish to continue their formal education) and a radio room, (where daily reading in English by all out-stations students is heard by a rostered home based teacher).

The provision of educational services to these outstation schools, with particular reference to the school community at Wurdeja, is the subject of this brief paper. The paper will focus on the role of the visiting teacher and on the process whereby a trial outstation school achieves the status of a permanent outstation one.

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Outstation or homeland centre education is becoming more significant for many Aboriginal communities. From the 'hub' school at Maningrida CEC we now service twelve outstation schools which have an enrolment of one hundred and sixty eight students with up to one hundred and fifty attending regularly.

One of the schools, at Wurdeja outstation, is now approaching its second birthday and it will soon, with the construction of a permanent structure, be accorded the status of a permanent outstation school by the Northern Territory Department of Education (NTDE).

There are prescribed procedures for the establishment of outstation schools and Wurdeja School's history outlines the path that other communities may have to follow when they wish to provide aspects of a Western education for their students.

Wurdeja is a small Burarra community which has many of the features of a typical outstation. There are only three or four families with many children of school age living there depending on the season. The total number of children could range anywhere between twelve and eighteen.

Two other small outstations, Dam-dam three kilometres away and Ji-malawa Malawa seven kilometres away, add another ten children. They also wanted to send their children to Wurdeja school. (Ji-malawa, too far to walk and having experienced a lot of transport problems in the past started a school of their own in late 1991).

In early 1990, the Wurdeja community leaders expressed concern that their children could not get a Western education if they remained at home. They were already ensuring that their traditional Aboriginal education was continuing but needed assistance in providing the rest.

At a general meeting of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Council (BAC) a request was made for the establishment of a school at Wurdeja. (BAC is composed of representatives from all outstation communities in the region.) This body then passed on this request to the CEC principal.

As the visiting teacher to other Burarra outstation schools nearby, I dropped in to Wurdeja to meet the people, count and identify the children, and to set up a meeting the following week with the CEC principal.

The CEC principal visited Wurdeja with me the following week and he discussed with the community leaders their responsibilities in supporting the school and what I could do for them as the visiting teacher. He approved my visiting their school on a trial basis and then reported back to the NTDE in Darwin.

The outstation 'teachers' are initially required to work without pay for the first term, supported by the community to prove that the school is really needed and supported. They commonly have no formal teaching training but some undertake correspondence courses with Batchelor College once they have begun work.

"The NTDE requirement for establishing a school in communities which express a desire to have access to a Western education follows a set procedure.

They need:-

- a minimum student population of twelve.
 - to allocate a teaching space.
 - to select a 'teacher' who conducts an educational program for at least six months with minimal support."
- Beattie & Raeburn, July 1991,

"A SKETCH OF THE CURRENT HOMELAND CENTRE EDUCATION CONTEXT."

Once these initial criteria were met, schooling commenced and I took out a wooden box, a tarpaulin, a portable blackboard, pencils and books. The area identified to be used as the school site was under a shady tree. The outstation teacher had previously worked at Maningrida CEC and had done part of stage 1 of the RATE course (Remote Area Teacher Education) at Batchelor College. She had a capable level of literacy and the school thrived with the help of other women in the community, sometimes with up to twenty five children aged from three to sixteen years old present.

The first teacher left after six months and her sister took over. This lady has had little Western education herself so her literacy and numeracy levels are low. She makes up for this, in part, by sheer enthusiasm and happily runs the school every morning. The school day lasts four hours but during my visits it is often extended through the afternoons and into the evening. Some afternoons are devoted to staff development activities during which I assist the outstation teacher to improve her literacy and numeracy skills. It is pleasing to note that some of the students now have greater literacy skills than she does herself, but her own are improving rapidly.

All our outstation schools follow the *School of the Bush* series produced by the NTDE. These are graded workbooks which the children work through from year one. They are designed to be used by untrained teachers for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. They are limited in scope and will take students to about a grade three or four level and need to be supplemented with other resources.

To further assist the students' development I take out other worksheets, extra reading, cassette tapes, special theme materials, art and craft resources, and sports equipment. I also transport anything else that is necessary, or other teaching materials requested by the outstation teacher.

The *School of the Bush* book sessions only take up part of the morning. The outstation teacher conducts rote learning lessons for counting and the alphabet, and mental arithmetic sessions. The children write stories each day or practise letters, participate in oral English activities and work through various maths or other worksheets I have supplied.

As the wet season approached in that first year the lack of any real shelter became a problem. In addition the students were learning to write whilst sitting on the ground. This was not very conducive to effective learning and the lack of physical facilities, even one wall, made it impossible to display either alphabet or number charts as well as displaying students work.

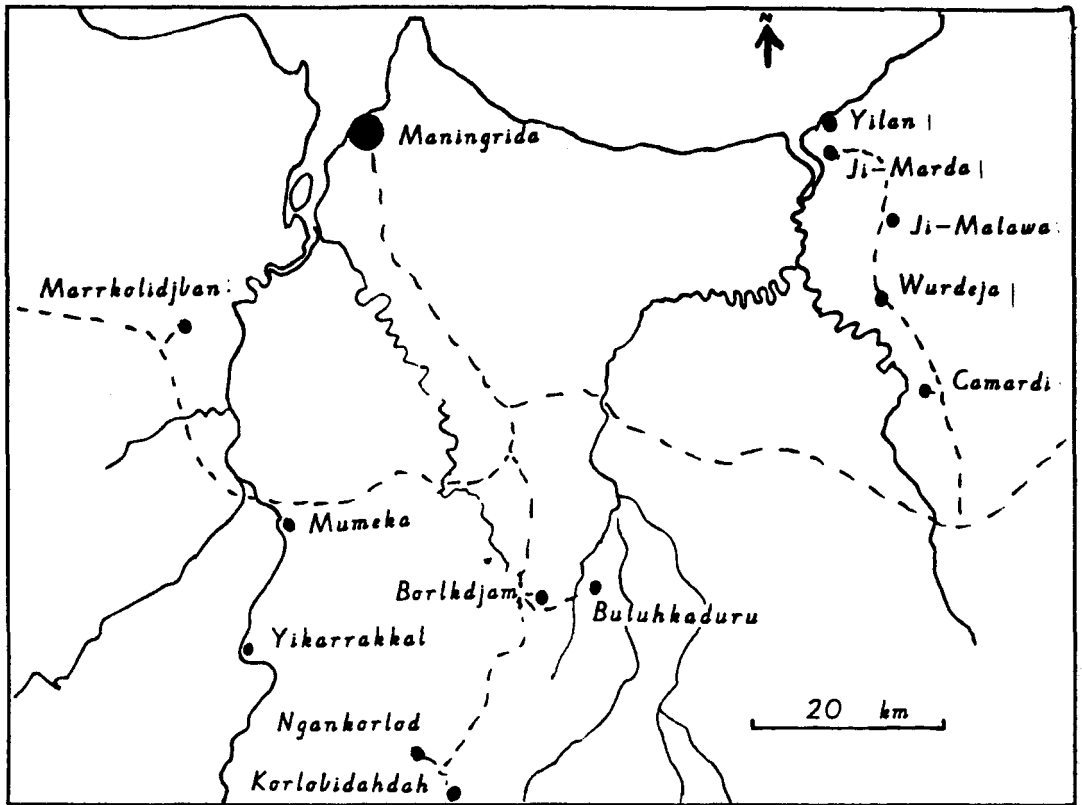
To alleviate the problem of a shelter during the wet season we, as a school project constructed our own school building. The children, utilising mathematical skills of measurement and estimation drew up plans. We cut timber from the bush, scrounged some corrugated iron, and found some old freezer panels which we painted as a blackboard.

Our building was very simple, consisting of a roof and two walls. We installed a table we had borrowed from a neighbouring outstation and we built benches around it. The cost to the Education Department for materials was nil.

I then brought out a metal storage cabinet and we installed a VHF radio in the school thus enabling the children to join in the daily radio reading program conducted from the outstation resource centre Maningrida. (See Garde M, 1991 'The Maningrida Outstation Schools Radio Program' in 'The Aboriginal Child at School' Vol.19 No.3 1991.)

My role as a visiting teacher involves team teaching with the outstation 'teacher', teaching her how to teach and providing everything necessary for the school to operate effectively. As I am the major, often the only, source of spoken English these kids are exposed to for months at a time, I try to make my fortnightly three-day visits as language intensive as possible. I join in their activities, we play games, I read stories and hear them read anytime they want and talk with them as much as possible. We have story-telling sessions in the evenings when everyone takes a turn at telling their own story in English. They are teaching me Burarra so there is an exchange of languages continually.

This year Wurdeja School will be two years old. It has proved itself viable and can now be officially supported with capital funding from the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). The NTDE is then responsible for the supply of and support for a position to provide an education for these students in their own community. Funds have been made available for a permanent school building and approval has now gone ahead. This dry season will see its construction and the establishment of a permanent educational facility for Wurdeja students will become a reality.



Map 1; Maningrida Outstation Schools

We would appreciate photographs or drawings that could be used on the cover of the journal.

Photographs or drawings of children in learning settings or to illustrate particular articles are especially needed

We can use any black and white or colour photo that has good resolution. All work will be suitably acknowledged and returned as soon as possible.

Hon. Editor.