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The Development of Homeland Centre Education in Maningrida

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This paper outlines the history of education in Maningrida homeland centres. It is an extract from a larger report titled *The Maningrida Homeland Centre Education Program* (Pugh, 1993).

Background

Maningrida is an Aboriginal community situated at the mouth of the Liverpool River in central Arnhem Land. It is about 400 kilometres by air from Darwin and is serviced both by Arnhem Air and Air North Companies with several flights daily. In addition Barge Express has a weekly barge, and Remote Area Transport recently began operating transport by road during the dry season for all freight needs. The road out of Arnhem Land is usually in poor condition and only open from May to November, so transport for people is usually by four wheel drive vehicle or aeroplane.

The community is run by an Aboriginal Council that employs a Balanda (white) town clerk, accountant and various service personnel, such as plumbers, mechanics, builders and youth workers. There is also the Maningrida Progress Association (MPA) which runs a supermarket and take-away food shop, a video hire service and a fuel station.

There are about 25 homeland centre communities supported and serviced by organisations based in Maningrida. MPA runs fortnightly 'tucker runs' by four wheel drive, boat or aeroplane, to sell basic food stuffs and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) provides administrative and general support for the logistics of homeland centre life. The Maningrida Health Clinic runs a medical visit program on a fortnightly or monthly basis to all the homeland centres, weather permitting.

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History of the homeland centre communities and their schools.

The settlement of Maningrida has a relatively recent history for Arnhem Land communities. It was established as a government administration and medical centre in 1957 to reduce a migration pressure on Darwin. In the beginning it attracted and encouraged people to move back from Darwin, in from the surrounding bush and from missions. There were always people living in their traditional country (Coombs, 1973, p 14) around the Maningrida area and movement between the settlement and the bush and back still continues. When the Labor Government of 1972 gave government support for a homelands movement various groups established a number of decentralised communities that became known as 'outstations' or homeland centres. Homeland centres (HLCs) are defined as "small decentralised communities of close kin established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them" (Return to Country, 1987, p 6)

There were several reasons why the homelands movement gained as much momentum as it did in Maningrida. The community had become a conglomeration of many Aboriginal groups and inter-clan feuds were common. Also large numbers of Europeans, (about 500) employed in the forestry industry, lived in the majority of the houses in the community and Aboriginal people had tended to become fringe dwellers in their own town. They had a dislike of this European domination, there were problems associated with alcohol and there was a religious yearning to be close to spiritual homelands (Gray, 1974). Birrtjalawuy (1992, p 14) writing about Galiwinku's homelands movement claims that;

out station people have a better chance of exercising Aboriginal autonomy without any Balanda power..

and that

people want them (HLC schools) there so that they can determine their own destiny (p 14).

The homelands movement was also seen as a remedy for petrol sniffing which was one of the severe social problems that arose in Maningrida and other Aboriginal communities (Eastwell, 1979, p 221).

There was little educational support for Maningrida's outstations in the early years, but some teachers at Maningrida School, then known as 'The Gordon Sweeney School', volunteered to assist them in 1974. It was a time of experimentation. The visits were done on a roster system where the volunteers would each go out to the outstations for two or three weeks whilst their main school class was looked after by other teachers (Deslandes, 1979 p 22). This was recognised as having limitations but it served to show the Homeland Centres that the school was willing to support their ideas for schooling.

Deslandes (1979, p 23) reported on the early attempts to develop programs and curriculum material suitable for HLC schools.

It quickly became evident to all - especially the community - that these activities (art, physical education, music etc) could be best done by the Aboriginal leaders so that after only a few weeks the community agreed to a suggestion by the principal that, if they were going hunting or whatever, the children should go and join in. It was imperative that 'school' did not interfere any more than was absolutely necessary with normal camp life.

In those days it was intended that school be nothing more than "a solid two hours in the morning concentrating basically on the 3 R's" (Deslandes 1979 p 23). The guiding principles when setting up this kind of education were to supply the educational needs of Aboriginal people as they see them so that their own culture is preserved whilst giving them sufficient knowledge to deal with Balanda society (R. Haslett 1978, p 1).

This system continued into 1975. However, the Education Department provided four new teachers to become visiting teachers as only one of the 1974 volunteers agreed to volunteer again. Many of the problems they faced are the same as those of 1993, namely transport, HLC teacher training, the physical demands of the job and the time required for administration (Parry 1975, p 2). In second semester of that same year all four of the visiting teachers had resigned.

Then for the next year, up to the middle of 1976 when a second visiting teacher (VT) position was created, the assistant principal took on the task of visiting each school, (there were now nine, to advise and train staff) as soon as possible. Deslandes (1979, p 25) says this was not a success, probably because it placed a greater burden of responsibility for the school on young untrained local people with little experience and with minimal support from the hub school. Also it was an unrealistic expectation and too big a job for one person.

Most of the schooling had to be carried out by the Aboriginal teachers so what was needed was a resource package that they could use with the wide range of ages and abilities they had in their schools. This was the beginning of the 'School of the Bush Books' still used in many HLC schools across the Northern Territory. They were aimed at the basics, in six levels that led children to a literacy level equivalent to year 3 standard. Four HLC schools were chosen to trial the books, giving each of the two VTs a load of two schools. Currently a second, updated and improved, edition of the program is used in many parts of the Northern Territory.

In 1977 a new system was initiated because of the larger number of HLCs requesting schools. This involved two teams of three teachers. One team would visit and teach in the outstations whilst the other was based at the hub school, working on outstation correspondence programs and teaching children from the outstations who were visiting Maningrida (Bonney, 1977, section III). The teams would swap roles fortnightly. Bonney claimed that this system worked well, because the work loads were shared among the teams, children would always have a teacher to identify with when they were in Maningrida, and because children of minority language groups, who usually did not attend school when in town, began to attend (Bonney, 1977, section m). The number of teachers it involved however was high.

Through the early 1980s to 1987 there were usually two teachers in the HLC unit. Some schools that were begun died a natural death after a year or two as people moved on, elders died or circumstances changed. Sack (1985, p 1) reports the reasons the people of Ndjudda Point stated when they requested help with a school. They said that their children were "walking about at night", "petrol sniffing", "up too late at night" and generally just "playing around". Ndjudda Point is very close to

Maningrida and the HLC has never actually got off the ground. However the thoughts are indicative of the sentiments of Maningrida people at the time. An outstation school would provide valuable education for their children and solve some social problems at the same time. They also wanted a bilingual program to be run and said that they would return to Maningrida in the wet season.

John Bonney stated that in 1986 and 1987 the transport of the VTs was a major problem with only one vehicle being assigned to the unit (1993, personal communication). The two teachers therefore paired the HLCs geographically and travelled to the eight HLC schools together; Yilan and Jimarda by plane on Mondays, the rest by truck during the week with Friday as a preparation day. One day per week was spent in each school and the teachers returned each night to Maningrida and thus a vast amount of time was spent travelling. In the wet season two of the schools were visited by boat and by walking from the river landings. Mumeka school was a 13 kilometre walk with a backpack full of school resources (Sack, G., 1993, personal communication). It was in 1986 that the radio program was first instigated and Aussat satellite receivers were bought to provide television services to the HLCs.

Bonney claimed that the arrangement they had for visiting schools then, particularly the large schools, was totally inadequate (visit report 1987). Schools had one visit per week and it seemed to Bonney that little was being done outside of visits. Marrkolidjban HLC began requesting a full time female Balanda teacher to visit and stay all week.

The lack of regular schooling is a perennial problem. George Sack in 1985 recorded complaints from the Marrkolidjban HLC leaders that not enough school was being done whilst the VT was not there (Sack, 1985, p 4). This, then and now, where the problem occurs, may reflect to some extent the lack of training and the inability of some HLC teachers to develop teaching programs in a system that only minimally supports them. Sometimes for a time in some communities it seems that school is just not wanted. In 1985 the elders requested that Garmedi school close and it remained closed until 1991. Murray Garde wrote once of Mumeka school:

when we returned all the children ran away, or went hunting,
and nobody wanted to have school (Garde, 1989, p 2).

Another HLC complained that "too many balanda" were visiting because of the school and only wanted occasional visits by one visiting teacher (Sack, 1985, p 4).

In 1988 the HLC unit began to expand again and it had two and a half teacher positions. The half position was a senior teacher in the hub school who visited two schools when he could. Ingram reported that of the 8 HLC schools operating at the beginning of 1988, two of them (Yilan and Jimarda) were not being visited by teachers due to low numbers of students, however they were being supported with some materials (1988, p D2). Ingram termed them as 'non-schools'. Also at that time Jimalawa HLC which had never had a school was being supplied with resources for the six children living there.

In 1990 a third position was assigned to the HLCs, another in 1991 and in 1993 a fifth visiting teacher position was approved in the second semester. Table 1 summarises attendance and enrolment figures in Maningrida homeland centre schools, shows the numbers of HLC schools supported, and the numbers of visiting teachers employed over the years.

The present

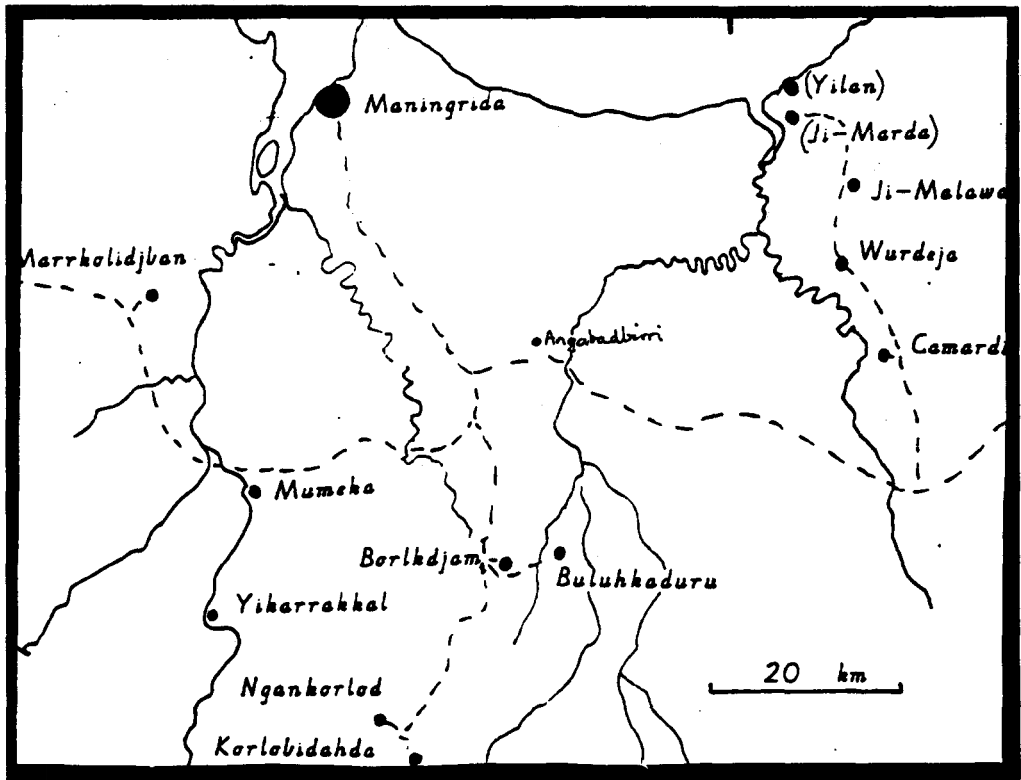
Currently the unit is involved in providing an education service for about 200 children in twelve homeland centres. Some of the communities now have well designed and functional school buildings that are equipped with solar power and provide accommodation for the visiting teachers. Others still use rough bush shelters and great amounts of improvisation. Nevertheless, where the community and their homeland centre teacher are enthusiastic and supportive of their school and their visiting teacher a great deal is being achieved.

Problems still exist with transporting the visiting teachers and training opportunities for the homeland centre teachers, but slowly things are changing in the bush. Homeland centre education was an Aboriginal led initiative that has evolved from a rather haphazard system of support from the central school to the current team of visiting teachers and homeland centre teachers committed to further developing and improving the educational opportunities of homeland centre children.

TABLE 1 Attendance and enrolment figures since 1977.

	<u>Enrolment</u>	<u>Attendance</u>	<u>% Attendance</u>	<u>No. Schools</u>	<u>No. VTs</u>
1974				5	staff rostered
1975				6	4
1976				9	1
1977	207	129	62%	11	6
1978	202	96	48%	9	2
1979	135	102	76%	7	2
1980	79	71	90%	5	2
1981	112	91	81%	7	2
1982	133	70	53%	6	2
1983	101	58	58%	6	2
1984	124	62	50%	9	2
1985	129	72	56%	9	2
1986	126	71	56%	9	2
1987	111	52	47%	8	2
1988	118	64	54%	8	2.5
1989	134	85	63%	9	2.5
1990	142	96	68%	10	3
1991	183	131	72%	12	4
1992	219	169	77%	13	4
1993				12	4-5
Data source; NTDE Statistics unit					

Map of Maningrida Homeland Centre Schools (1993)



Map source: Pugh ; 1992 a, p26.

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