



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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# *DHINTHUN WAYAWU* – LOOKING *for* *a* PATHWAY *to* KNOWLEDGE: TOWARDS *a* VISION *of* YOLNGU EDUCATION *in* MILINGIMBI

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## ■ Abstract

In this paper we present a brief history of education at the community of Milingimbi in northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory from the mission times to today. In focusing on the emergence and implementation of bicultural curriculum initiatives we explore some of the difficulties and ever present challenges encountered by Yolngu educators, leaders and elders in developing a local vision of education which, in order to meet community needs and aspirations, needs to be grounded in Yolngu stages of learning, cultural values of identity, responsibility and structures of authority.

## ■ Introduction

We cannot know the place we are going unless we know the place whence we came. The voices of what we were, what we forget and what we can be. Culture is the past, the present and the future, continuity and coherence. Building on the past gives meaning to the present and hope for the future (Bobby Wunyimarra).

A few days after my arrival at Milingimbi community in 1990 to begin my fieldwork research, I, Franca Tamisari, was invited to dinner by some Balanda (White) teachers who had been working in the community for several years. As I recall, the teachers were discussing their concerns about the ability of Yolngu teachers to gain control and full responsibility for the teaching and administrative management of the school. In fact, following the so-called "Aboriginalisation" of schools that had been proposed by the Education Department of the Northern Territory in 1988, the Yolngu educators were supposed to, as the teachers put it, "take over" key management and educational positions at the school in the following few years. Everybody agreed: "they are not able to", "they are not ready yet", "they will never manage to do it". I was taken aback by the forcefulness and finality of these statements and, despite the fact I did not know the situation, I could not help wondering whether Yolngu teachers and community members in general were not ready because they might have not *wanted* "to take over", indeed a plausible possibility. I said something to this effect, but it was dismissed altogether. As it happened, my first two years of research in the community and my subsequent collaborative work with Yolngu educators have convinced me that this might have been the case then. As in the past, it is still not a mere question of ability as such, but of subtle Yolngu tactics of resistance aimed to maintain a certain degree of political autonomy in the face of changes which are imposed from above (cf. Fold, 1987, p. 12ff).

Since the launch of the bilingual policy in the Northern Territory in 1973, Yolngu teaching staff, elders and leaders of the Milingimbi community in northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory have been involved in

and committed to the development of a culturally appropriate education according to the social and political principles, needs and aspirations of the community. In drawing from an ongoing collaborative research project between Elizabeth Milmilany (Teacher Linguist at Milingimbi Community Education Centre (CEC)), her late husband Bobby Wunymarra (Educator and Leader), and Franca Tamisari (Anthropologist, University of Queensland), this paper starts exploring the ways in which Yolngu educators and community members have for a long time recognised the limitations of bilingual education models, and have been consistently striving towards the recognition of a more systematic integration of Yolngu knowledge and ways of teaching and learning into mainstream curricula. As the early Yolngu published literature and unpublished reports on "two-ways" or "both-ways" schooling well illustrate (Marika Mununggiritj, 1991; Milingimbi CEC, 1991, 1993, 1996; Ngurruwutthun, 1991; Yirrkala CEC 1988, 1990; see also Watson, 1989; Yunupingu, 1991; Yunupingu, 1993), a Yolngu vision of education has not only derived from a sophisticated approach based on Yolngu ways of knowing, but it has also been progressively developed within the broader political struggle for the maintenance of local authority structures and the assertion of control and decision-making in the school.

From this perspective, drawing from the unpublished school reports and documents written by Yolngu teachers from Milingimbi, and in conversation with community members, this paper aims to present some fundamental values and processes which inform a Yolngu vision of education and discuss some of the difficulties encountered by Yolngu educators in pursuing this vision over time. To this end we will start from the beginning of schooling in the mission times, and, by focusing on the design and development of local curriculum initiatives, we will explain key notions and values which constitute Yolngu stages of education. Thus this paper is, in the first instance, an exploration of the rationale which underlies local bicultural curricula rather than an evaluation of their real or expected outcomes, and an explanation of central Yolngu notions of developmental maturity rather than an analysis of the co-existence and/or incommensurability of Yolngu and Western modes of knowledge and learning (on this issue see Christie, 1985a; Harris, 1990, 1991; McConvell, 1991). Finally, the paper aims to offer an understanding of Yolngu bicultural curriculum initiatives in relation to issues of Yolngu participation in the broader political processes of decision-making.

### ■ Background: Milingimbi Community and School

Milingimbi, a small island located 440km east of Darwin, is one of the major settlements in northeast Arnhem Land, a region that extends from Cape Stewart in the east to the Koolaton River in the southeast and comprises the communities of Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak, Ramingining and

Yirrkala. The term Yolngu, literally "human being", is used to refer to the people who occupy this region and by extension, also refers to "Black" people in relation to "Balanda", or White people. Milingimbi community has a population of around 1,000 people of whom 30 are Balanda "service providers" including teachers, contractors, administrators, mechanics and managers. Yolngu society is divided into two patri-moieties (*Dhuwa* and *Yirritja*) comprising several patrilineal groups speaking their own distinctive languages (Yirritja languages: *Gumatj*, *Dhaluwangu*, *Birrkili*, *Wobulkara*, *Wangurri*, *Waramirri*, *Gupapuyngu*; Dhuwa languages: *Liyagawumirr*, *Wagilak*, *Walamangu*, *Ma:lara*, *Gorryindi-Gamalanga*, *Ya:n-nbangu*, *Dambu-gala-wumirr*, *Djambarrpuynu*, *Ga:lpu*, *Ngayimil*, *Da:tiwuy*, *Gulumala*). Despite the fact that the *Gupapuyngu* clan is one of the largest groups in the community, and the *Gupapuyngu* language was chosen by the Methodist missionaries to teach and spread the Gospel in the region (see below), in the last 30 years, *Djambarrpuynu*, one of the languages of the Dhuwa moiety, has become the lingua franca in the community and in the region. Each patrilineal group of both moieties exercises ownership and authority over a specific territory and is responsible for the enactment of the associated knowledge through ceremony and social practices enshrined in the Law (a set of jural and moral rules as well as social practices which were set down by ancestral beings who shaped the land and bestowed it to humans, cf. Williams, 1986). The Methodist missionaries withdrew from the region in the early 1970s and were substituted by self-managed local governments, funded directly from the state and elected every three years.

The local school, Milingimbi Community Education Centre (CEC), is one of three bilingual schools in the region. It has an enrolment of approximately 300 students, a third of which live in one of the five minor settlements or outstations on adjacent islands and mainland. The School Council is composed of 11 parents, including three from the homeland centres, two teachers, the Principal, the School Secretary, a member of the legislative assembly, and a person nominated by the Milingimbi Community Council (Milingimbi CEC, 1995).

### ■ Schooling during the Mission Times

Many Yolngu people at Milingimbi perceive that education in general and schooling in particular, have been bilingual since the establishment of the Methodist mission on the island in 1923. The beginning of bilingual "education" in its broadest sense, in contrast to the beginning of more or less formal schooling, is traced back to the first encounter with the missionaries. Makarrwala and Batanga, two Yolngu leaders and cultural brokers at the time are still remembered and celebrated today as having translated and thus effectively "educated" both Yolngu people and the missionaries about each other's ways. The first school was closed in 1924, a few

months after it had started, as missionaries thought it had a negative influence over the children as they were separated from their parents. Methodist missionaries have consistently opposed the "dormitory system of child training" (Webb, 1938, p. 68ff) in northeast Arnhem Land (see also McKenzie, 1976, p. 40).

After this unsuccessful attempt, a group of 25 girls of different ages started attending classes on a regular basis in 1926. While the teaching of reading and writing was limited, a missionary, Ms Lowly, taught the girls with the help of two Yolngu assistants, a formula which, despite its evolution, was in many ways similar to the way in which Balanda and Yolngu educators team-teach today. During the early mission years the teaching of English remained rudimentary and a pretext for imparting "sanitation and practical hygiene" (Webb, 1938, p. 67) and especially discipline, a fundamental component of an education conceived in terms of training people to carry out menial jobs and trades (domestic chores and activities for the women; farming, saw-milling and building for the men). Parents who would not send their children to school did not receive their share of rations and they were often punished by being sent away from the mission for a period of time (Milmilany, 1989, p. 3).

It was only in 1952 that the first fully trained teacher (Ms Beulah Lowe) was appointed by the mission. Most of the teaching remained elementary and it was carried out mainly in English - the children were taught to repeat sentences and maths tables by rote. The curriculum continued to include practical training such as building, accounting and agriculture. Lowe studied and became proficient in *Gupapuyngu*, one of the Yolngu languages, and introduced its regular use in everyday teaching. Most importantly, she developed the first bilingual program using the Gudchinsky method based on a syllabic approach and, with the help of Charles Manyjarri, she produced many readers consisting of stories in *Gupapuyngu*. This tradition was continued through the 1970s in the newly established Literature Production Centre staffed by Michael Christie (Teacher Linguist) and a number of literacy workers and illustrators. These stories were recently collected in a CD database by Charles Darwin University (CDU) in 2000 (M. Christie, personal communication, 9 October, 2003). Despite the crucial role that several Yolngu teaching assistants played earlier in the mission school and their increased participation in the school with Beulah Lowe, they felt relegated to "sharpening pencils" and translating the simple sentences taught by Ms Lowe (C. Manyjarri, personal communication, 23 August, 2000).

### Self-Determination and the Beginning of Bilingual Programs

With the launch of the policy of self-determination at federal level by the Whitlam Government in 1973, Milingimbi was one of five pilot schools chosen to begin the first official bilingual program. Since this time

Milingimbi school has undergone a series of accreditation processes (in 1982, 1984, 1988, 1994 and 2003) which measure the outcomes of the bilingual programs. The "Breakthrough" series handbook (adapted from the methods and materials of the British "Breakthrough to Literacy" scheme used for English literacy) provided by the Northern Territory Department of Education, was added to the existing programs to teach the children to write (M. Christie, personal communication, 9 October, 2003) and it was developed until the 1980s. According to policy guidelines *Gupapuyngu*, which remained the official language at the school, had to be learnt first in order to facilitate children's literacy in English, however, the teaching and learning methods and especially the role of the Yolngu teachers remained fundamentally the same. Using flash cards with matching words and figures children were taught to pronounce and write simple words and sentences focusing on sounds and syllables. While at the beginning of this bilingual program Yolngu assistants simply translated and explained what the Balanda teachers were saying, it is important to note that many had started official teacher training courses at Batchelor College in Darwin and at Deakin University in Victoria. Some of the Yolngu assistants who started training in the 1970s and graduated throughout the 1980s and early 1990s now have 30 years of teaching experience and continue to work at the school. These include: Munymuny, Djambutj, Waymamba, Ngalambirra, Wambirrirr, Milmilany, Bamunyah, Djuwandayngu, Boykarrpi, Paula, James Gaykamangu, Murarrgirarrgi, and the late Wunyimarra.

It is also important to remember that it was in 1979 that the first "Action Group" was formed by the Yolngu assistants at the school, indeed, well ahead of the "Aboriginalisation" process proposed by the Department of Education in 1988. The Action Group, the executive arm of the School Council, comprising all teaching and non-teaching Yolngu workers at the school, was formed in response to the difficulties that Yolngu school staff were experiencing in relation to decision-making and curriculum development (cf. Ngurruwutthun & Stewart, 1997, p. 20). In recognising the language barrier between Yolngu and Balanda teachers and the consequent lack of sharing of information - resulting in the exclusion of Yolngu staff from decision-making - the Action Group started meeting once a week to discuss ideas which were then taken to the general meeting for further discussion. Several Yolngu staff pointed out that the Action Group meetings gave everybody an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns in their own language without being misunderstood or intimidated by the formal structure and agenda of the school general meetings dominated by the Balanda staff. More generally, the formation of the Action Group can be understood in terms of the perceived contradiction between the recognition of the Yolngu right to self-determination and the introduction of a bilingual policy,

which limited the local decision-making promised by the policy of self-determination. In other words, the introduction and the development of the bilingual program in 1973 saw an increase rather than a decrease in the number of Balanda teachers employed in the school, the reinforcement and institutionalisation of their authority in managing the school, and in controlling the development of all programs.

In 1980 the Department of Education proposed a new curriculum model called "Curriculum Wall". While the program introduced several teaching and learning strategies in order to improve literacy outcomes, it was not fully developed because of staffing problems and because it did not offer adequate training to Yolngu staff. Due to these difficulties, Yolngu curriculum initiatives emerging from the Action Group were limited in number and in scope. With the help of some sympathetic Balanda staff who understood the needs of the Yolngu community (among others, Michael Christie, Kathy Gale, Barry Keppert, David McClay, Tony Thorpe, Kaye Thurlow and Melanie Wilkinson) a few one-week maths workshops were organised. These workshops allowed Yolngu staff to develop and experiment with novel ways of integrating Yolngu knowledge into the existing bilingual curriculum. The only other cultural activities that were introduced and run by Yolngu teachers and community members alone took place on Friday afternoons. Although dismissed by several Balanda teaching staff as mere entertainment, the dancing, singing and painting taught to the children did not only affirm the cultural significance of these activities for a Yolngu vision of education, but they also constituted the basis for the first bicultural program, "The Arts Wheel", which was developed and introduced in the school curriculum in 1988 (see below).

### ■ Aboriginalisation

Following the "two-way schooling" program implemented at the Community Education Centre at Yirrkala in the previous years (Yirrkala CEC, 1988) the so-called "Aboriginalisation" process was proposed by the Department of Education across the Arnhem region in 1988. The term "Aboriginalisation" describes a process which aimed at appointing Yolngu qualified teachers and administrators in positions which had always been held by Balanda staff. Yolngu staff and community members at Milingimbi thought that this was the chance that they had been waiting for from the introduction of self-determination: namely, participation in decision-making and control in the management of the school. As Milmilany (1989, p. 3) points out in one of her reports: "[Yolngu people] want to be able to have a sense of pride in managing the School by themselves like other ethnic groups". However, apart from the official appointment of several Yolngu staff in training positions such as Deputy Principal, Teacher Linguist, Adult Educator, Liaison Officer and Literacy Production Supervisor, Aboriginalisation turned out to be a change of name rather than a change

of structure as it "offered opportunities of self-management and control with one hand but took them away with the other as there are many hidden aspects of this policy" (Milmilany, 1989, p. 10).

One of the major disappointments was the realisation that the power of Yolngu staff was limited to proposing recommendations rather than making autonomous decisions. In their reply to the Aboriginalisation plan proposed by the Department of Education the Action Group responded by exposing several problems and counter-proposed specific solutions which were unsuccessful. The proposal of appointing several named Yolngu staff in permanent positions was not accepted by the Department on the grounds that these people did not have any official qualification or were completing their training. This refusal was experienced as a form of discrimination as Yolngu teaching staff, with a working experience ranging from five to 30 years, were not recognised and treated like their Balanda counterparts. Another point of contention and protest of the Yolngu counter statement on Aboriginalisation related to the fact that Yolngu teachers, in contrast to their Balanda colleagues, were not entitled to housing accommodation provided and subsidised by the Department of Education. It is clear that, at this time, an increased involvement of Yolngu staff and community members was seen as instrumental in strengthening Yolngu decision-making at the school.

However, just as a bicultural approach to education is not necessarily achieved merely through bilingual programs, Aboriginalisation is not "doing away with Balanda staff" or their input in the teaching and running of the school. Aboriginalisation is rather a matter of equality, respect and control. As it is often stated by Yolngu teachers and community members, "We need the support and the expertise of Balanda teachers; however, they should work for us and not the other way round". Finding balance in education (cf. Yunupingu, 1993) not only involves the successful integration of Yolngu knowledge in mainstream curricula, but, and most importantly, it also requires a restructuring of the power relations within the school and other political and economic institutions at local, state and national levels. "The general aim of both-ways schooling ... is to shape and ... to participate in implementing curriculum and to establish a firm foundation according to how Yolngu see the world around them" (Milmilany, 1990, p. 83) as well as to "shift the balance of power" (Yunupingu, 1991, p. 103) especially "in the process of decision-making ... and self determination" (Milmilany, 1990, pp. 83-84). Despite the bitter confrontation and difficulties faced by Yolngu teachers during this time, the first bicultural curriculum initiative was developed and implemented.

### ■ The Beginning and Development of Bicultural Programs

The Arts Wheel program was first formulated by Elizabeth Milmilany and Rosalynd Djuwandayngu, respectively the Teacher Linguist and Deputy Principal in

training, at Milingimbi school in 1988. Like in the past, the program was only implemented on Fridays, the day allocated for so-called cultural activities, but it was carefully designed according to fundamental notions and principles of Yolngu knowledge and ways of teaching and learning (cf. Christie, 1985b). The program was innovative in many ways. First of all, it structured the content thematically; a characteristic to be maintained and elaborated in the development of subsequent bicultural programs (see below), and involved the active participation of community members in the stage of program design and implementation.

The program revolved around the figure of the *Mokuy*, a spirit being who shaped and named the land of many clans of both moieties and taught humans right ways of behaving and relating to (*rom* or Law in English) and taking responsibility for country in hunting and gathering practices as well as in ritual dancing, singing and painting. It is crucial to note here that each patrilineal clan of both moieties has a named "spirit being" (*Mokuy*) who is associated with particular places, events and practices on their clan land. All children, from early childhood up to secondary age levels, were divided into groups according to clan and inter-clan membership and divided by sex. While the smallest children, both boys and girls (*yothbu*), were taught the story of a clan's *Mokuy*, the older boys (*gaduku*) and girls (*maralmaral*) followed the elders to collect bark and ochres for the paintings and the adolescent boys (*yawirriny*) were taught about the same story by the male elders in the seclusion of the men's camp. Everybody then regrouped on the school grounds to enact the songs and dances of *Mokuy* which were performed by each moiety in turn. Although limited, by including teacher training and evaluation stages, this initiative set the basis for the development of the more elaborated and sophisticated programs that followed (see Figure 1).

In 1990 Elizabeth Milmilany proposed the first school-based bicultural curriculum which aimed to integrate 50% Yolngu content in the existing curriculum. After consultation with clan leaders, the program was entitled "*Dhanarangala Murrurinydji Gaywanagala*" (DMG) an expression from the *Wangurri* clan and homonymous language of the *Dhalingbuy* homeland centre (*Yirritja* moiety). The name refers to the central authority which brings people together and governs the conduct of all ceremonies, marriages, the resolving of disputes and other socio-political negotiations where knowledge is shared and transferred among groups by reaching consensus (Milingimbi CEC, 1991). Parallel to the metaphors and principles of two-learning programs such as "*Galtha Rom*" and "*Ganma*" developed at *Yirrkala* school (cf. Marika Mununggiritj & Christie, 1995; *Yirrkala* CEC, 1988, 1989), the expression DMG refers to a place where "negotiations are carried out" and "it points to the whole process of meeting, discussing, planning, agreeing and acting" (Watson-Verran, 1992 in Ngurruwutthun & Stewart, 1997, p. 40).

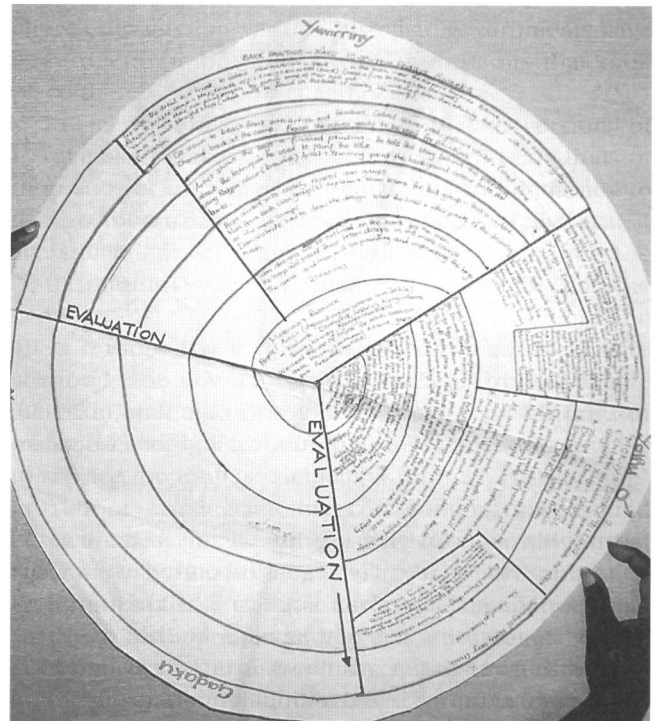


Figure 1. Arts Wheel: The first bicultural initiative developed at Milingimbi school by Milmilany and Djuwandayngu. The poster indicates the activities to be taught to the children at different stages of maturity and include the evaluation phases.

Despite the fact that the DMG program was renamed and elaborated as *Gattjirrk* in 1993, the current name of the school-based bicultural curriculum at Milingimbi school today, it represents a crucial moment in "working towards a truly 'both-ways' education ... a vision of education which Yolngu involved in the school have held for many years" (Milingimbi CEC, 1991, p. 4). The DMG was innovative in the thematic structure and the pedagogical processes it integrated and the cultural and political rationale it started articulating in terms of a broader vision of Yolngu education. The program aims are stated at the beginning of the DMG document (Milingimbi CEC, 1991, p. 1) and a statement signed by some members of the School Council follows them.

#### *The aims of the DMG program:*

- Learning to communicate in the Yolngu languages that each child and their family used each day.
- Through the Yolngu language learn about Yolngu ways of viewing the world, relating to and using things from the environment.
- To develop literacy in the Yolngu language as appropriate to local needs which will also support the learning of literacy in English.
- Both-ways education, a 50/50 curriculum, will enable students to understand both Yolngu and Balanda ways of thinking, communicating and living.
- Through Yolngu management of the curriculum, increase the amount of parental involvement in the daily operation of the school.

**Statement:**

We don't want to lose our culture with too many Balanda ways of living. In other words we don't want to learn more Balanda education and less Yolngu education, or more Yolngu education and less Balanda education. We want to learn both with even understanding (Faye Ma:tjarra, Charles Manydjarri, Gwen Warmbirriri, Nancy Djambutj).

Despite the fact that the program was written to be carried out over a 10-week period, it was only trialled a couple of times a year for two years in the form of 10-day workshops due to the lack of funding and the difficulties in collaborating with Balanda teachers. At the time, Yolngu teachers would have liked Balanda staff to participate in these workshops in the same way as Yolngu teachers have always collaborated with their Balanda colleagues over the years first as assistants and later as co-teachers. The first workshop elaborated the *Mokuy* theme of the previous Arts Wheel program (Figure 1) and the second was on maths. In the following years the program was extended to include other themes such as "season cycles", "meaning and knowledge of proper names", "kinship" connections to other groups and individuals, knowledge of "bush food and medicine", and ownership of land and associated knowledge expressed through ceremonial "songs and dances".

The DMG curriculum document (Milingimbi CEC, 1991, p. 9) also recognised the conflict inherent in the control of curriculum initiatives at the school and the need to develop a rationale that would include a Yolngu pedagogical orientation not divorced from principles, practices and structures of political authority and leadership, which articulate all Yolngu knowledge (Milingimbi CEC, 1991, p. 4). In 1993 The *Gattjirrk* curriculum (Figure 2) was further structured and expanded to include topics which more closely reflect Yolngu educational priorities and stages of learning. The themes are presented in the diagrammatic overview of *Gattjirrk* (Milingimbi CEC, 1993). The name "Gattjirrk" simply refers to the geographical area in which Milingimbi is located in relation to the further eastern reaches of Arnhem Land region as far as Yirrkala (*Miwatj*), and the territory further to the west around Maningrida (*Madbakal*). The *Gattjirrk* curriculum was written by the curriculum development team which consisted of the Principal, Teacher Linguist, Aboriginal Curriculum Writer, representatives of the School Council and Action Group, members of the community and critical friends.

However the *Gattjirrk* curriculum continued to be trialled on a workshop basis and only at preschool and primary school levels until 1995 when it was run for the first time for a 10-week period thus constituting 50% of the school curriculum. Students at secondary levels were excluded from the school-based curriculum and according to the guidelines of the Foundation Studies they should

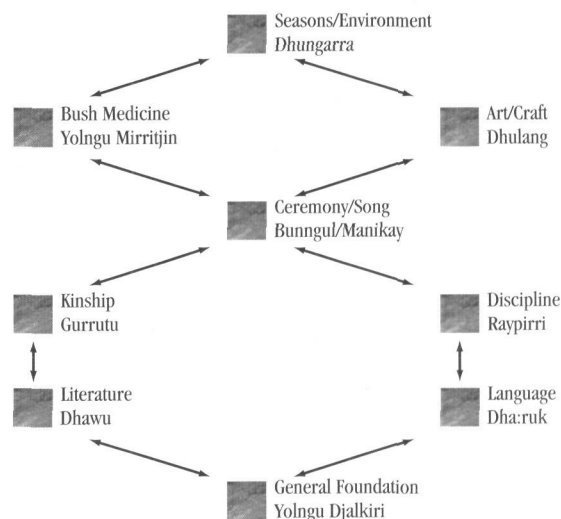


Figure 2. Schematic overview of the *Gattjirrk* curriculum from Milingimbi CEC (1993).

have only attended one lesson in Yolngu language a week. However Yolngu teachers wanted to ensure that the secondary kids would not miss out on participating in the cultural program and proposed to retain the general assembly on Fridays and continue the cultural activities initiated with the Arts Wheel program in 1988.

This was not possible for two reasons. First of all, the Department of Education argued that the general assembly was not necessary as the *Gattjirrk* curriculum was integrated into day-to-day teaching and learning; and second because this proposal was, at this time, opposed by several Balanda teaching staff. It was only in 2002 that the *Gattjirrk* curriculum was also trialled at secondary level and integrated in the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Framework, 2001, p. 161ff). Here we want to draw attention to the difficulty encountered in retaining the general assembly on Fridays, mainly consisting of ritual singing and dancing, in order to emphasise the central role and significance that these cultural activities play in a Yolngu vision of education. As the diagram shown in Figure 2 illustrates, "ceremony and song" occupy a central position in relation to other curriculum themes as they condense key Yolngu notions such as moral responsibility and obligation; codes of correct behaviour; the acquisition of skills through seeing, doing and active participation; and an understanding of one's position in the political negotiations of authority and (personal and group) identity (cf. Christie, 1992, p. 12ff; Tamisari, 1998). We want to stress that Yolngu "ceremony" is not only a rite of passage which marks the different stages of socialisation and maturation of children into responsible adults (see below), but, most importantly, by stressing that political and cultural principles cannot be separated from the social practices in which they are embedded, "ceremony" provides a frame and logic which is central to Yolngu strategies of education and pedagogical programs in the context of institutionalised schooling.

*Dhinthun Wayawu:*  
Looking for a Pathway to Knowledge

A Yolngu vision of education is a social and political process with precise phases of personal and group engagement in, and commitment to, particular activities, which at each level involve the recognition, maintenance and reproduction of the participatory structures of authority and leadership as the basis of negotiation and transferral of all knowledge from generation to generation. The expression *Dhinthun wayawu* refers to this process - it encapsulates fundamental notions that are seen as essential to the further development of the *Gattjirrk* curriculum and with it, a realisation of Yolngu needs and aspirations.

While the literal meaning of *Dhinthun wayawu* is "following [a] pathway" this expression evokes images of connection with the land and the elders, notions of identity, knowledge and discipline. *Dhinthun* is not only the action of the hunter who is reading the traces, for instance the trickle of blood left behind by a wounded quarry thus forming a path (*wayawu*), but it also involves the decision, ability, discipline and sheer determination to follow it in order to arrive at the animal. *Dhinthun* is used here metaphorically not only to describe a mere following but an active commitment in desiring, searching, seeing, recognising and then following the path made by the elders (cf. Marika Mununggiritj & Christie, 1995, p. 60). This metaphor thus refers to a vision projected in the future yet informed by the past, or to paraphrase the words of Bobby Wunyimara cited at the beginning of this paper, a vision which depends on knowing the place we come from in order to be able to know the place we are going to. *Dhinthun wayawu* points to a journey that connects the past the present and the future - it is the elders who have shaped the way for maintaining and reviving our culture and languages.

It is from this perspective that the *Gattjirrk* curriculum has started identifying the structure and content of Yolngu educational phases by comparing and contrasting them with their Balanda equivalents. While the similarities and differences between the corresponding phases and their integration in the bicultural curriculum raise fundamental epistemological, cognitive and ontological issues (see Table 1), we will briefly expand on the skills and activities which mark each of the progressive Yolngu educational phases in order to demonstrate that Yolngu education is a complex social and political process which demands recognition of fundamental values and principles at the basis Yolngu life and being.

*YOTHU/MARRATHULMA (male and female), toddler*  
1-6 years

From birth children start learning their mother's language from her gentle rocking and singing them to sleep (*guyukuyuyun*), although later they will eventually

speak their father's language. At this stage, children learn how they relate to and address other people (*gurrukurr* kinship and skin names), and participate in all daily activities. Up to six years of age children enjoy a certain amount of freedom and play around and socialise with other children. One of their favourite games is to play-act in the role of a relative in a family unit (*wagnawagna*, literally camp/home). During this period children are allowed to vent their emotions and impose their will over others as these behaviours are seen as an assertion of identity and character formation. However they are also disciplined and taught what they can and should not do (*rom lakaram*, literally telling the Law or the correct ways of doing things). Most importantly, at this stage, children are taught not to be greedy or stingy (*lalkal*) and to feel sorry for others they have hurt (*ngayangu-wuyunhamirr*).

*GADAKU (male)/MARALMARAL (female), child*  
8-12 years

*Gadaku* is a term which refers to boys from seven to 11 years of age before they are circumcised and *maralmaral* to girls of the same age before the beginning of menarche. In this phase boys and girls follow their older male and female siblings and other relatives more regularly and start learning how to fish and hunt. During these activities, they learn the names and location of bush food and medicine, places and other information about the environment. In context these youngsters are also taught about the ownership of country and the Law associated with it. While children's mistakes in respecting the rules that they have already been taught (such as avoidance behaviour toward particular relatives) are condoned, after circumcision and, in the past, after the ritual held to mark a girl's first menses, discipline is enforced more rigidly and they start learning more complex knowledge relating to the Law. This mainly takes place during ceremonies when the boys start learning the songs and dances from their fathers and other relatives, both patrilineal and matrilineal, by sitting with them. It is at this stage that some of the boys may join in the singing by imitating (*yakarman*) their relatives.

*YAWIRRINY (male)/WIRRKU'WIRRKUL (female), adolescents between 13-15 years, BUNKUMU-WALKULMIRR (male)/GUNGMA'GUNGMAN (female), adults after 15 years*

The learning involved from 13 to 15 years of age, and for the few following years after 15 when an adolescent begins to be considered an adult, is very intensive and formative. The recognition of two phases which characterise the development of an individual in this short period of time points to the significance of this stage of Yolngu education. Adolescents continue to be taught about the Law and especially about the position



Table 1. Phases of Balanda and Yolngu education detailing skills to be achieved (from Milmilany, Tamisari & Wunymara n.d.).

Balanda Education	Yolngu Education
<i>PRE-SCHOOL</i>	<i>YOTHU/MARRATHULMA (male and female), toddler 1-6 years</i>
Children play, listen to stories read to them, learn social behaviour and manners from parents, start counting, begin formal schooling.	Children listen and copy adults, collect shellfish, sit with grandparents and parents, play, and start learning stories and songs.
<i>PRIMARY</i>	<i>GADAKU (male)/ MARALMARAL (female), child 8-12 years</i>
Children start learning the three Rs, arts and crafts of their culture and other cultures, practice sport and physical education.	Children learn about the environment, their country of origin, are aware that they need to reach next stage. Discipline begins: boys are circumcised, girls start being aware of their social responsibilities
<i>SECONDARY</i>	<i>YAWIRRINY (male)/ WIRRKU'WIRRKUL (female), adolescents between 13-15 years</i>
Adolescents develop writing, reading and their knowledge of science, history; they start managing their skills in order to enter the workforce or tertiary education; they begin to make choices, and to accept responsibility for their choices.	Boys learn to hunt and fish, make spears, the correct performance of songs and dances. Girls learn to weave and to sing women's songs.
	<i>BUNKUMU-WALKULMIRR (male)/ GUNGMA'GUNGMAN (female), adults after 15 years</i>
	Learning of Yolngu Law and their social position within it.
<i>TERTIARY</i>	<i>NGALAPALMIRRI YOLNGU (male and female), knowledgeable people</i>
Young adults learn more specialised knowledge either in universities or in job training.	Holding and managing Yolngu Law; men achieve this stage through restricted learning processes.
<i>POLITICS</i>	<i>DHARRPANHA ROM MALA (secret knowledge)</i>
Interaction in politics, commercial business, government and bureaucracy, legal and religious systems. This knowledge determines people's power and their decision-making abilities.	The secret/sacred aspect of this knowledge is completely left out of the school curriculum.

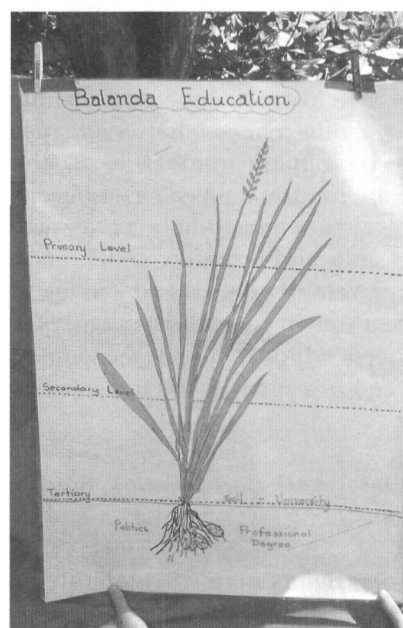
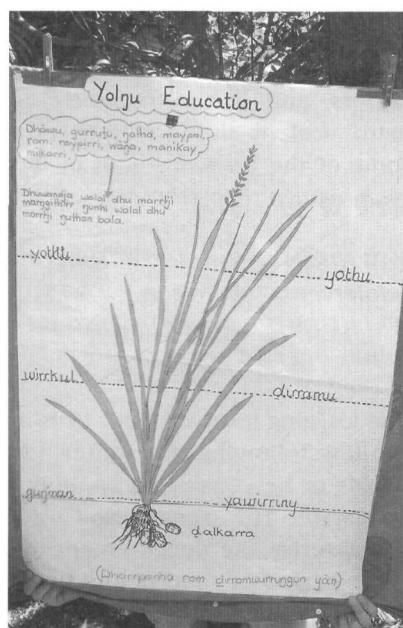


Figure 3. These posters show how Yolngu and Balanda education phases rest and depend on participation in the political processes in which they are embedded.

they occupy in terms of the responsibilities and obligations they now must actively recognise and perform. It is at this time that male adolescents are introduced to the more esoteric aspects of Yolngu Law and participate in the secret/sacred ceremonies for the first time. Female adolescents are also taught more complex knowledge relating to the Law from their female relatives through the active participation in public ceremonies alone. At this stage female adolescents are also expected to perform women's songs (*milkari manikay*), which, modelled on men's clan songs, condense the complex knowledge relating to clan and individual connections to and ownership of land and the affirmation and/or claim of authority over it. Always under the instructions and permission of the elders, adults can start living with their "husband" or "wife" and form their own families.

#### *NGALAPALMIRRI YOLNGU (male and female), knowledgeable people*

Through the successful achievement of previous educational phases one becomes a knowledgeable and responsible older person who has the right and the duty of upholding and teaching the Law to the young. Some of these older people are recognised as leaders and, as custodians and enforcers of the Law, they are respected in their own person and consulted in all matters and concerns which emerge in all aspects of community life. This higher stage of Yolngu education applies to both men and women; however, men achieve it through the restricted learning process (*dharrpanha rom* or secret knowledge) which, as the diagram indicates, is not included in the curriculum.

Despite, or indeed because of, the rapid socio-political and economic changes brought about by colonialism since the establishment of the Methodist mission, the position and role of all older people in general and leaders in particular have remained fundamental to the maintenance, adjustment and renewal of Yolngu ways of life. Their active participation in institutionalised schooling is thus not only a necessity but also a priority. As the expression *Dhinhun wayawu* indicates, these leaders have the authority and the obligation to shape the path that the next generation will follow in the same manner that they have learnt from their elders.

#### ■ The Bigger Picture: A Political Process

The innovation that the *Gattjirrk* curriculum proposes is not only at the level of the program design, development, implementation and evaluation but presents a rationale which identifies and explains the principles of Yolngu education to the outside, at the same time recognising them as essentially incontestable elements which constitute knowing and being at the basis of Yolngu identity. In the words of Wunyimarra (personal communication, 30 June, 1996) the "Gattjirrk curriculum

aims to preserve Yolngu identity while learning Balanda ways". If, however, like similar bicultural program initiatives in the region, the *Gattjirrk* brings forcefully to the fore a complex notion of participation - with an emphasis on learning through doing and performing and the respect for local structures of authority in the transferral of knowledge from one generation to the next - it also recognises that education is a process dependent on the hidden yet pervasive political structures of authority and inter- and intra-relationships of power at local, regional and state levels.

As Table 1 shows, a successful implementation of a vision of Yolngu knowledge depends in equal measure on the respect of Yolngu secret knowledge and on an understanding of and participation in Balanda "political knowledge", which is defined as what "determines people's power and their decision-making". While, by pairing Balanda and Yolngu stages of education, the table raises the ever-present challenges of their integration in the processes of development and implementation of local bicultural curricula, an analysis of the epistemological and structural similarities and differences involved falls beyond the scope of this paper. Here we want to draw attention to the fact that a Yolngu vision of education is perceived not only as parallel to but equally based in the participation in the political processes in which it is embedded. In another version of the diagram Yolngu education is compared to a grass where Yolngu secret knowledge and Balanda politics are the roots, and the children (*yothu*) and primary levels of education are the shoots (see Figure 3). As Wanymulu (in Milmilany & Tamisari, 2003, p. 18) recently put it:

The new shoots of plants come from the roots and they become the plant which bears leaves and flowers. Like a plant that grows healthy and strong, children learn from the old people who are carriers of knowledge and wisdom. Everyone needs to learn from the origin, the roots of knowledge through ceremony, family and community.

Beyond or rather underlying the difficulties posed by the integration of Balanda and Yolngu approaches to knowledge and learning in "two-ways schooling", the table and photographs strongly convey that a pathway to knowledge and the realisation of a truly Yolngu vision of education are literally "rooted" in the power that only full participation in decision-making allows to realise, both in terms of Yolngu and Balanda conceptualisations, processes and practices.

#### ■ Acknowledgements

We dedicate this paper to the late Bobby Wunyimarra, husband and friend, whose vision of Yolngu self-determination through education is still an inspiration. We also recognise the support Milmilany's father, the late George Dayngumbu Dhurrkay, who taught and supported her daughter over the years. We thank the

Balanda and Yolngu teachers and members of the Milingimbi school and community and Michael Christie who have commented on a draft of this paper and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for the grant which made this project possible.

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