

Kabulwarnamyo School: the need to be different

Located in Western Arnhem Land, the remote Aboriginal outstation community of Kabulwarnamyo came into being as the result of the desire of one old man to return to, remain, and to be buried on his ancestral land. That is exactly what happened.

Bardayal “Lofty” Nadjamerrek was an extraordinary man, born in a time and place before white influence. He grew up on the Arnhem Land plateau, lived most of his life there and in his old age devoted himself to the preservation of his extraordinary knowledge that had elsewhere been generally lost. He lived to a great age. Now he is never spoken of other than in tones of love and respect.

He did not live to see a school at his beloved Kabulwarnamyo, which is now home to a committed population of landowners and Aboriginal rangers and their families. The community does not qualify for a school, and even if a government funded school could be established it is unlikely that the children would receive a satisfactory education.

Remote Indigenous education in the Northern Territory is a history of failed government policy. The domain is currently dominated by statistical representations of educational achievements and outcomes, most visibly the NAPLAN score. Decades of sub-optimal outcomes have resulted in policy remedies such as that characterised by “closing the gap”. Sadly, the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in policy development seems to be seen as detrimental to educational achievement, and even as running counter to government objectives targeting employment. This is arguably an unintended consequence of the NT Intervention, but has strong links to prevailing education ideology. Whatever its foundations, the current approach is not working.

Cyde Miller, writing in 2005, asserted that positive outcomes for Indigenous education relied on a range of factors including: community ownership and involvement; the incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values; the establishment of strong partnerships with communities; the capacity to be flexible regarding course design, content and delivery; the quality of staff; and the availability of extensive student support services.¹ The literature is unequivocal in declaring that Indigenous knowledge and local development aspirations must form a central component of educational design.

However, despite the gravity of this seemingly intractable educational situation there appears to be little available analysis of the interaction between Aboriginal people’s own aspirations for educational and socio-economic futures and the prevailing education policies. The ubiquitous education and employment pathway is not of Aboriginal making and is not necessarily consistent with the realities of Aboriginal social and cultural mores nor with available job markets.

There is a dilemma in the discourse. Undoubtedly education can lead to better job prospects, increased wealth and better health, but if this is at the expense of cultural identity or loss of culture then it may be seen by Aboriginal people as simply not worth it.

In considering the development of guiding educational principles for a school project like Kabulwarnamyo, one is continually challenged by the inescapable influence of anthropology. It is difficult to think about remote Aboriginal education without thinking even more about the context in which it takes place.

If you google guiding educational principles there is no shortage of material eg;

1. The learning environment is supportive and productive
2. The learning environment promotes independence, interdependence and self-motivation
3. Students' needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the learning program
4. Students are challenged and supported to develop deep levels of thinking and application
5. Assessment practices are an integral part of teaching and learning
6. Learning connects strongly with communities and practice beyond the classroom ²

Or;

1. to develop disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and skills through study and research-based enquiry, at internationally recognised levels of excellence
 - a. to think, reason and analyse logically and creatively
 - b. to question accepted wisdom and be open to innovation
 - c. to acquire the skills needed to embrace rapidly changing technologies.
2. to further develop the skills required to learn, and to continue through life to learn, from a variety of sources and experiences
 - a. to develop attitudes which value learning
 - b. to acquire skills in information literacy.
3. to develop personal, social, and ethical awareness in an international context
 - a. to acquire cultural literacy
 - b. to develop ethical approaches and mature judgement in practical and academic matters
 - c. to develop the capacity for effective citizenship, leadership and teamwork.
4. to communicate clearly, effectively and appropriately in a range of contexts
 - a. to develop spoken and written English communication skills at high levels
 - b. to acquire skills in critical literacy and interpersonal communication.³

All very correct, but very difficult for remote and traditional Aboriginal people to identify with or adopt, and frankly vapid.

In 2012, National Curriculum Services analysed 11 schools in remote regions that were considered to be improving. They listed seven key factors of success that work; these are:

- Leadership – this is critical
- Making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive
- A school culture built on high expectations for all students
- Empowering, supporting and engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enhance their learning capacity
- Building and sustaining teacher capacity to deliver whole-school practice
- Coherent whole-school approaches to evidence-based literacy and numeracy teaching
- Profound understanding of the importance of school-community partnerships⁴

None of these observations are new, but they may be a useful guide to inform the development of our own principles.

A consideration of customary Aboriginal education is warranted in any planned development of schooling aimed at Aboriginal children. Traditional knowledge can essentially be divided into three themes. The first of these is the encyclopaedic knowledge of the natural environment and how to exist within it. This was simply a matter of survival and learning was not optional. Learning commenced at a very young age and continued until the body of knowledge was essentially absorbed in its entirety. The teachers were parents, grandparents and older siblings. There was a commonality in the resulting knowledge base that ensured that all members of the group effectively held the power bestowed on them by their knowledge of how to survive. There was little specialisation other than that exercised on a gender basis.

The second theme was the knowledge of how to relate to others. All societies of course have their own variations of this. Newcomers to Aboriginal Australia are seriously confronted by the complexities of the Aboriginal system with its elaborate rules and rituals. Much of it seems to be the exact opposite of the white Australian system and the last layers of mystery seem never to be revealed.

Thirdly, Aboriginal people were educated in what might be termed the secret/sacred knowledge of their group. This progressed in a linear staged fashion and the acquisition of this knowledge was integral to one's identity and to the respect one could expect to be accorded. Lack of progress meant lack of respect and shame; the worst thing of all. Consequently, Aboriginal children developed a natural craving for this knowledge. Old people, the holders of the knowledge, cleverly withheld staged advances from difficult or ill-

disciplined children or adolescents as a way of ensuring respect for the system and ultimately as a way of equipping them for a fully productive adult life. Aboriginal people thus developed a profound and culturally intrinsic respect for knowledge.

However all this is totally inconsistent with the western style education system that has been imposed on them. Schooling is often seen as a low value form of extreme deferred gratification. This leads to resistance, often misidentified as apathy by non-Aboriginal people. This is further complicated by the rites of passage to adulthood occurring at a younger age than in western society. Initiated males instinctively may reject school attendance as an inappropriate activity for their newfound adulthood. Non-attendance is a way of exercising what power they possess.

Simply put, if we can lead children to respect and crave knowledge to the degree afforded by their own ancestral system then we stand a good chance of making a success of the Kabulwarnamyo school. However nobody wants to be part of a failed experiment, and we need to recognise that the traditional system did not teach children how to actually be learners in the sense that the western system does.

That leads us to how we consider and incorporate facts, opinions and circumstances that will influence and guide our decision making in respect of the school. We must also consider what is achievable, what is appropriate, what will garner support and above all aim at what will succeed.

Most importantly, we must take account of, and never lose sight of, the influence exerted by the extraordinary social, cultural and physical environment within which the school is proposed to operate. We should also never assume that we have an adequate understanding of this environment. The complex natural environment, which in reality can be decidedly hostile, is complicated further by the rapid and irreversible social change that has been visited upon Aboriginal people. This has not however been allowed to overwhelm the recognition by Aboriginal people that their obligations to protect sacred places and to teach their children about their values, ceremonies, language, country, law and kinship systems remain largely intact.

These things can be extremely cryptic to western eyes and are difficult if not impossible to simplify, and the guidance of parents and old people is essential to insure against loss of Aboriginal ownership without which the project is doomed, or at least relegated to achieving mediocre outcomes at best. How lucky Kabulwarnamyo is to have people still living, born in the bush before the diaspora, and who were schooled in the traditional way.

The Australian education system is inherently top-down and prescriptive in ways that can be instinctively offensive to traditional Aboriginal people. There is little satisfaction in bowing to a system that is not of one's making, bereft of a sense of ownership and purpose, is confounded by more sticks than carrots and which is essentially a "white thing".

The Arnhem Land plateau is of national and global conservation significance. It is fair to say that this fact is largely subsumed into the Aboriginal purview, within which nobody's country is more significant or important than that of anybody else. However, in Australia in this day and age where employment is critically important, the conservation and management of this particular country itself provides an immediately adjacent job market.

A practical aim of the school should be, at a minimum, to equip students to progress to land management careers on their own country.

This is not however meant to be a limitation. The Kabulwarnamyo school will have failed if it does not provide students with the means to progress to higher education and with the confidence and knowledge to operate in both worlds.

When considering the characteristics of the proposed Kabulwarnamyo school the most dominant thought is the absolute need to respect language. There is a large body of academic work which concludes that children respond best to being taught in their place of residence and in their own language. Which of course brings us to our first compromise; for obvious reasons the school must be bilingual.

Perhaps the most exciting component of this project is the scope to develop a unique curriculum centred on land, language (kunwok in Kuninjku) and culture. Much of the system of traditional intergenerational transfer of knowledge relies on language. Put simply, much knowledge is encoded in kunwok and the meaning is lost in translation. We must respect the directions of others in choosing which language is appropriate for which subject matter.

The basis of curriculum development will centre on decisions about which mainstream principles we are adopting and which we are rejecting. This will provide a mandate for cementing a permanent sense of ownership in key people, which will in turn be likely to stimulate the necessary optimism and inspiration enabling continuous engagement by parents and children alike. Whatever processes are adopted and applied, they must be communicated to stakeholders effectively. This will be the first step in securing and unifying stakeholder support and an absolute necessity if we want to secure what might be termed "public confidence" in our model.

The curriculum is a key mechanism for maintaining the stimulated interest of children and parents alike. There is scope for ownership that is absent in mainstream education. Few white Australian parents own the land under the feet of their school children nor do they feel a sense of actual ownership of the knowledge that their children's school curriculum delivers. Commonly they take it for granted, assume the system is working, and express exasperation when that is evidently not the case. They lack the means or the power to modify or change the system, at least with any degree of immediacy. This should not be the case with the Kabulwarnamyo model.

Technology is likely to play a key role in complementing the traditional foundations. Children should be acculturated to the internet and are exposed at a much younger age than white mainstream children to novelties like planes and helicopters and to devices such as satellite telephones and PDAs. Every effort should be made to harness the power of digital communication technology as an aid to the 21st century hybrid education model.

The Kabulwarnamyo school provides an opportunity to achieve unprecedented outcomes in difficult circumstances. However this will require new approaches and can only start with the act of discarding much conventional thought. A different school culture should be allowed to develop, not limited by conventional assumptions about learning and classrooms. The cornerstones of this might be a sense of place, two-way learning, an emphasis on mental and physical health, respect, responsibility, a blend of formal and informal approaches and with greatly elevated expectations. All of this both individually and collectively.

The respectable land management work undertaken by the Warddeken Rangers provides early inspiration and purpose to children and helps to reaffirm their identity and heritage. A close relationship between the school and the Rangers is taken for granted, but the importance of it should be continuously reinforced by observation of a balance of practical applications of land management, cultural heritage and conservation practices from both systems.

This will all require quite deliberate and collaborative strategic thinking and action along the way, and will in the first instance require the commitment of a very special person in the form of the initial teacher.

1.

Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations:
A systematic review of research

CYDDE MILLER. 2005

2.

<http://www.youthpartnerships.vic.gov.au/Resource-Centre/Lists/Common%20Practice/Attachments/13/Development%20of%20an%20Effective%20Services%20Delivery%20Model%20for%20Victoria%E2%80%99s%20Youth%20Justice%20Custodial%20Clients.txt>

3.

http://www.teachingandlearning.uwa.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2320030/Att_B_-_Education_at_UWA_-_Key_Statements.pdf

4.

http://www.whatworks.edu.au/upload/1341805220784_file_SuccessinRemoteSchools2012.pdf