Chapter 5
Country as classroom
Bill Fogarty

I am sure that many of you reading this book will be aware of the appalling state of education in remote Aboriginal communities. Over the past decade stories in the mainstream media about the failure of schools to educate Aboriginal children have become a regular feature of the national news and current affairs cycle. In particular, The Australian newspaper has been at the vanguard of the reportage, with journalists like Justine Ferrari and Verity Edwards leading the charge.1 Such stories are invariably characterised by the latest set of bleak educational outcomes, poor test scores or low school attendance figures. These reports are generally written in a tone that carries a certain ‘moral outrage’. The outrage – often implicit rather than overt – is over the fact that such a dire educational situation can exist for Aboriginal people in a modern, rich, first world democracy like Australia. Indeed, on the face of things our consistent inability to educate such a small minority of the population beggars belief. Ironically though, the latest bout of public policy and media attention has done little to help reverse a status quo that has existed for at least 50 years. In fact, the latest policy responses to this not-so-new ‘crisis’ in Australia’s remote north may be pushing educational approaches in a direction that is doing more harm than good.

In this chapter, I want to dig beneath the statistics and the outrage that dominates discussions about remote Indigenous education to talk about some common sense approaches to learning in the bush that seem to be working. The perspective I am presenting here is informed, in part, by the research I have undertaken in remote parts of the Northern Territory over the last six years. This has been done in collaboration with some of my colleagues at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and while originally focused firmly on education, my research concerns have increasingly come to rest comfortably within the multidisciplinary team of the People on Country project. In part this is because research


on Indigenous education has become increasingly narrow in its focus over the last decade and the People on Country direct action approach provides a refreshing and practical antidote to this. Primarily, however, the approach I outline in this chapter is shaped by my experiences as a teacher in a number of small outstation schools in Arnhem Land between 1998 and 2003. During this time I taught over 200 Aboriginal students across 14 schools and I learned two very important things. The first was that education that is not connected to the reality of a student’s life will fail. The second was that for the Aboriginal people I worked with, country was what mattered, and that learning on, through and about country also mattered, and mattered deeply.

So, it is with these personal lessons firmly in mind that I want to shine the spotlight on an educational approach called ‘learning through country’. In some of the most remote pockets of the continent this type of education has been quietly led by Aboriginal people in partnership with switched-on educators, scientists, land managers and researchers. First, however, I need to briefly outline the current situation to show why there is so much angst and renewed urgency in the ongoing Aboriginal education ‘problem’.

The contemporary state of Indigenous education in remote Australia is impossible to fairly consider without taking into account the dismal practices of both religious and government education systems in the past. In remote Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, the most consistent features of schooling for Aboriginal students over the last century have been chronic under-development coupled with linguistic and cultural repression. The most obvious examples of this are to be found in the common historical practices of banning students from learning in their own languages, the training of Aboriginal students solely for domestic servitude and a complete absence of access to secondary education for the majority of remote Aboriginal students. These systemic failings have been compounded by gross under-funding, which can only be considered as willful neglect by state education providers and all tiers of government.

Unfortunately, these issues are not limited to some distant past. In the Northern Territory, for example, a recent analysis of funding to the community of Wadeye found that the school was receiving approximately half of the funding per student that was being provided for schools with predominantly non-Indigenous students in Darwin.2 Similarly, the recent release of a cabinet document in the Northern Territory shows that Indigenous students in remote communities were still being denied access to high school in their own areas, 20 years after the Country Liberal

Party government of the day ignored its own recommendations. Incredibly, access to proper high school education in remote communities in the Northern Territory only began in 2001. The result of this is best summed up by Chris Burns, the current Minister for Education in the Northern Territory who commented that ‘two generations of Indigenous kids have missed out on vital education opportunities. There’s twenty years lost.’ Indeed, it is very difficult to do well at high school if you can’t even find one to go to. Furthermore, the ‘knock on’ effect of such negligence is sure to be felt for generations to come.

The gross ineptitude and neglect of Aboriginal students by governments and education departments is, of course, only part of the story. The education outcomes of remote Aboriginal students are also affected by a host of other social and economic variables that could be termed the social determinants of education. Some of these structural factors include poor health (especially hearing and dental health), high levels of incarceration, low levels of parental education, endemic poverty and highly restricted local labour market opportunities which provide sparse learning incentive. Boyd Hunter and Jerry Schwab add to this list a number of other causal factors for educational ‘failure’. These include inter-cultural conflict, cross-cultural miscommunication, and institutional racism.

Against such a bleak backdrop it is hardly surprising that Aboriginal students in the most remote areas of the country are performing well below students in other parts of Australia against standard measures such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Indigenous Northern Territory (%)</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous Australia (%)</th>
<th>Gap in Percentage Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 3 Reading</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3 Writing</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3 Numeracy</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 Reading</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 Writing</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 Numeracy</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7 Reading</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7 Writing</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7 Numeracy</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 Reading</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 Writing</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9 Numeracy</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>58.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority)

As the data in Table 5.1 shows, there is a marked gap between the test achievement of Indigenous students in the Northern Territory and non-Indigenous students in the rest of Australia, with Indigenous students performing only half as well across all key performance measures. While the data represented in Table 5.1 is subject to some very minimal movement across years and cohorts, overall these tests tell us that the gap is failing to close in any real sense and remains stubbornly and persistently wide.

However, some caution is needed in attributing too much to these test scores. Given my earlier points about systemic neglect and the relationship between social determinants and educational outcomes, some key questions need to be asked. What are these tests really measuring? Are they measuring educational performance or simply reflecting the relative social and economic status of Aboriginal people in our society?

Many education researchers have noted that standardised scores such as NAPLAN should be viewed with scepticism. This is because student results are more attributable to access to learning, different social and cultural contexts, or due to student experiences and socio-cultural background. For example see V Klenowski and T Gertz (2009) Culture-fair assessment: Addressing equity issues in the context of Primary Mathematics Teaching and Learning, paper presented at the Australian Council for Educational Research Conference on Assessment and Student Learning: Collecting, Interpreting and Using Data to Inform Teaching, Perth, Western Australia, 16-18 August. See also JC Altman and W

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5 It is important to note that while secondary education was not provided on site to these remote communities some students were sent to boarding schools in major centres like Darwin. However, the majority of Aboriginal students have always chosen to stay in their home communities rather than pursue education elsewhere.


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Table 5.2 School attendance in the Northern Territory for term 3 collection 2010 and 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geolocation</th>
<th>2010 Indigenous (%)</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
<th>2011 Indigenous (%)</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Remote</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>87.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Northern Territory Department of Education and Training)

Similarly, school attendance figures tell us that remote Indigenous education is broken. As information in Table 5.2 shows, in very remote parts of the Northern Territory nearly half of all the school aged students are not going to school.9 Worse still, attendance in some remote schools is now so low that, on any given day, only a quarter of students are actually attending school. Another important point to note is that in very remote areas many Indigenous students do not stay in school beyond year eight. There are myriad variables that can cause particular groups of students to attend poorly and drop out of school early. Perhaps though, it is understandable after years of broken promises, inequities in service provision and compounding socio-economic barriers to success, that Aboriginal students are disengaging from, and becoming resistant to, formal education. At the very least it seems certain that a great many remote Aboriginal students are finding the current schooling offer completely unpalatable and are simply opting not to go.

Unsurprisingly, reversing this situation has become a highly politicised issue, particularly for the federal and Northern Territory governments. Education has been firmly positioned as one of the cornerstones to the Commonwealth’s Closing the Gap and Stronger Futures policies, and the Northern Territory National Emergency Response.10 With this has come an increasingly desperate set of education and social policy measures designed to improve the schooling results of Aboriginal students. These include an almost obsessively narrow focus on literacy and numeracy programs designed to improve test scores. Unfortunately, over a decade of such programs, there has been little or no real change in key education outcome measurements.11 In fact, such dry and often boring models of learning have done nothing to engage students in schooling. Indeed, I would argue that a ‘drill and kill’ approach to learning has been instrumental in further exacerbating and entrenching low performance and school attendance issues to the point of near intractability.

The latest policy response to these ongoing school attendance problems seems equally devoid of imagination. Somehow, the quest to morally and socially re-engineer remote communities in light of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response and a concomitant obsession with welfare reform seems to be overshadowing common sense. For example, the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance (through Welfare Reform) Measure trials, which began in January 2009, are already being conducted in 30 schools in Queensland and 14 schools in the Northern Territory and have focused on punishing the parents of children who don’t go to school. This is achieved by suspending their welfare entitlements. Despite no evidence of their success, and at a cost to date of $28.2 million, the trials are now being extended.12 The trials will effectively work in conjunction with the Northern Territory policy ‘Every child, Every day’ which also legislates a punitive system. The Northern Territory version allows for parents to be fined, starting at $1995 and going as high as $2600, when a child consistently misses school.

So, it would seem that in a dire educational situation where we have a history of structural neglect, deep seated suspicion of schooling and its history, and a generation of parents battling extremely complex and severe socio-economic barriers in getting their children educated, the best we can do is to fine parents, and perhaps even jail the poorest parents in the country for not paying a fine. Sooner or later, a key question confronting policy makers and educators must become, ‘how can additional approaches to traditional classroom practice – which is not working – be used to provide meaningful educational engagement for remote Aboriginal students?’

Luckily, some of the government’s more self-referencing and unworkable interventions are being challenged by the traditions of practicality and inventiveness in the bush. Throughout parts of Arnhem Land, the Central Desert region and in the far north of Queensland and Western Australia there are quiet, commonsensical

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partnerships being forged between people on country and innovative educators, researchers and local Aboriginal organisations. Together, they are working to provide schooling and training geared around two of remote Indigenous Australia’s greatest assets: land and youth. These partnerships come under a number of banners. Some of these partnerships are being called ‘land and learning programs’, some ‘environmental science’ or ‘community studies’ programs and still others are called ‘junior ranger programs’. Collectively, these educational arrangements are being termed ‘learning through country’ programs.

Learning through country programs have fairly eclectic origins. In many places the genesis has come through Aboriginal rangers or land owners, who work in land and sea management programs, engaging with their local schools. A typical beginning might involve a teacher asking the local rangers to come down to the school to talk about their work or perhaps some of the people living at an outstation might want their children educated about the damage feral animals are doing to country. The beginnings need not be complex. In fact, it is the underlying simplicity of such arrangements that makes them work. From such humble beginnings, some places have advanced their connections between the desire for environmental and social outcomes on their own land and the need to find alternate, local educational arrangements that work for their children. This has led to the development of increasingly diverse and sophisticated educational models.

There is nothing very new or radical about learning through country as a mode of education. Some of this approach to learning predates formal western education institutions in Australia. Much has been written about customary Aboriginal modes of teaching and learning, which relies to a great extent upon the experiential practice of watching and doing. The quintessential westernised version of this Aboriginal learning style would be a scene whereby a young man or woman is taken out on country hunting or gathering and, through a combination of direction and osmosis, key learning for survival is imparted. Of course, such simplicity is partly a product of a well-honed western gaze, whereby the purity of the noble savage is at the fore. Such versions of learning usually ignore the complexities of Aboriginal cosmology, deny the rigour and formality of ceremonial teachings that underpin the action taking place, and trivialise or essentialise the ongoing and deeply abiding connection between knowledge and country held so dear to Aboriginal peoples.


learning is certainly not new its use amongst Aboriginal students, as a targeted and supported educational program, is really only just beginning.

A major reason that this form of learning is gaining a foothold in the bush is because of the success of Indigenous land and sea management programs and the determination of the people on country who drive them. You can read about their stories in detail in the rest of this book. The emergence of the Caring for Country movement and the subsequent development of government-sponsored programs like Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Areas have seen a steady growth in the employment and participation of Aboriginal people in Indigenous cultural and natural resource management programs as a distinct livelihood option (see Chapter 2). In employment terms, this type of activity now comprises one of the largest industries of employment for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory as a whole, and outstrips mining as an employment option by more than three to one in very remote areas. With this has come a heightened demand for people with a set of skills and knowledge that encompasses both Indigenous knowledge and western science knowledge. Crucially, it is often forgotten that at the genesis of the Caring for Country movement, Aboriginal people clearly articulated a desire for intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge and for the teaching of young people in western land management skills and scientific learning to be at the heart of caring for country activities (see Chapters 2 and 10). The dual use of these knowledge sets to manage country is often called a two-way or two tool box approach (see Chapter 3).

In turn, this demand has seen a natural, but gradual, partnering between education providers and caring for country groups. From the caring for country perspective, this has often been to provide the training competencies necessary for work, such as safety certificates or certificates in conservation and land management, as well as to provide the western science learning and literacy and numeracy needed in the field for operations. More recently though, there is an increasing awareness of the urgent need for more comprehensive education programs able to cater for both Indigenous and western knowledge in order to grow the next generation of rangers. The expansion of Indigenous cultural and natural resource management programs into a range of environmental, social, educational, health and economic development activities is requiring exponentially growing levels of skills and knowledge in western science and English literacy and numeracy. As already discussed, young people are not gaining these from the existing schooling system. At the same time, there are also severe challenges to the education of children on country in an Aboriginal sense. Government policy aimed at centralising people into townships is failing to support the aspirations of people on country to stay on country; meaning that young people are spending far less time in the

bush and have less opportunity to engage in ceremony and customary pursuits. The effect of such policy is compounded by the early mortality of Indigenous knowledge holders and competing interests for youth, meaning intergenerational transfer is not occurring as it once may have. The combination of all of these factors is making education an increasingly important issue for the future sustainibility of caring for country.

So, while the future demand for educational services and work programs linked to Indigenous cultural and natural resource management may be very high, the capacity to continue to supply a group of people in Australia’s north with the right mix of educational skills to deliver such services in the future is looking very limited indeed. While a great deal of the current activity is based upon the two tool box approach, it is becoming increasingly apparent that both boxes might soon look decidedly bare. Such an outlook should be considered a serious threat to sustaining policy objectives through programs such as Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Areas, as well as for the future of national social and environmental goals more broadly. The continuation of the amazing work and developments you will read about in the rest of this book depend on getting this issue right for future generations.

From an education perspective, the activities and knowledge needs that have accompanied the growth of caring for country are providing a real opportunity for experiential learning and a pathway for students into employment. However, I should point out that learning through country programs are not just about getting young people to become rangers. There are, of course, a finite number of ranger positions available. Rather, these education programs are using Indigenous land and sea management and rangers as a vehicle to learning skills and knowledge that are transportable to a host of other employment, educational and livelihood pathways. And they are doing it well. Some of these programs are exhibiting great success in increasing school attendance, as well as being instrumental in the retention of students through to year 12, gaining university entrance and into employment. For example, a recent school science "junior ranger" program in Maningrida, based on large portions of field work outside the school with Aboriginal land owners and the Djelk Rangers (see Chapter 10), was integral in helping students achieve their year 12 certificates, as well as demonstrating marked improvement in school attendance on days when the program was running. This is no small achievement in an educational landscape dominated by program and policy failure.

One of the real strengths of learning on country models is that they are decidedly ‘bottom up’ in their development. Consequently, each program is different. Some of the factors that determine these programs include the nature of the physical environment, the resources and capacity available in the local context and the educational or development aspirations of the local Aboriginal people involved. This in turn has created a number of different models of these programs. For example, Tangentyere’s Land & Learning project is an environmental education program for Indigenous

students in schools in Alice Springs and Indigenous communities of the southern desert regions of the Northern Territory. The program began as a nursery in 1984 and during the 1990s began developing community-based education programs. In 2001, the program employed two biologists, who worked with remote community schools at Nyirrpi, Papunya and M’Bungara. Since then, the program has expanded and over work has been conducted with Mutitjulu, Tiwakala, Lyentye Apurrurrti (Santa Teresa), Areyonga, Yuendumu and Yarrenty-Arther Learning Centre. The Land & Learning program teaches traditional Indigenous knowledge and western science. Topics for study broadly include animals, plants and fire management and links to the required educational outcomes of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework that all students must study. Some other examples of programs in the Northern Territory can be found at Groote Eylandt, Yirrkala and Mainingrida, while similar developments are occurring in both Cape York and the Kimberley.16

The ‘bottom up’ approach of learning on country models may also, however, prove a weakness. A difficulty facing this type of education is that, at a time when blinkered educational approaches are in the ascendency, education that is so bold as to move beyond the confines of a classroom struggles to attract funding. Learning through country programs are consequently disparate, are highly dependent on having the right people on the ground and suffer basic material capacity constraints. They also have no overarching policy or pedagogical frameworks to guide them. In policy terms, one of the principal difficulties is that responsibility for learning through country programs can cut across several State and federal government agencies incorporating education, employment, environment and remote servicing provision. For example at the government level the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as well as the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training each have a role to play in supporting the programs. With such a broad range of stakeholders it is very easy for these programs not to be supported, while cost shifting between departments quickly becomes an issue. Equally, with so many players involved, there is little incentive for departments to take the lead role and thus incur the bulk of the cost. Similarly, these departments can, and often do, have competing agendas which leads to conflict within the bureaucratic field, particularly between the desire for social outcomes and the desire for market driven productivity and economic rigidity.17

Excitingly, though, work is currently underway to implement a small number of targeted and funded Learning on Country pilots in the Northern Territory. This will be a chance to allow for independent monitoring and evaluation of their progress, as well as to continue working towards overarching educational models that can be used for cutting edge curriculum. It will also provide an opportunity to create solid training and employment pathways for at least a few lucky places. Similarly, the Australian Government recently made a 2011–2012 budget commitment to $4 million over three years to Indigenous Ranger Cadetships. These are to be trialled at six schools in 2012 and a further six in 2013 – with an investment of about $140,000 per annum per school. While belated, this government support is a vital boost in the area of educational development for remote communities. It is important, however, that in implementing programs for the future, the successes derived from the ‘bottom up’ development of learning through country programs do not become subservient to the state’s propensity for poorly construed, ‘top down’ policy interventions.

Finally, it seems obvious that the nation should invest a significant effort in the idea and development of learning through country if we are to build the capacity of people to carry on important environmental work in Australia’s north. The other chapters in this book are testament to the importance of this work for Aboriginal people in remote areas and to the nation as a whole. Hand in hand with this development, though, we would be wise to tailor our educational approaches to the wants and needs of people on country. In learning from their lead we may just make some significant inroads into the vexing challenge of providing remote Aboriginal youth with a better education, as well as securing a sustainable environment for our collective future.

16 See Fogarty and Schwab, Indigenous education.