



**More Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Teachers Initiative**

***Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers:
rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country***

**Key Messages and
Yolŋu responses**

Acknowledgements

Academic writing conventions can recycle the view that an author is one who writes, indeed the only one who writes. Writing comes in many forms and these key messages, and the report from which they were extracted, have been shaped by multiple knowledge conventions. Neither would have been written without the co-contributions of Yolŋu involved in the project. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for Aboriginal people in remote communities is, and should always be, a work in progress. As such, the views presented here should be seen as another step in achieving better infrastructure and support for *Yolŋu Teachers* to live and work in communities on or near their ancestral country. This should also include the right to choose to leave their communities for periods of time and, if the matter arises, take up employment elsewhere within the national teaching system.

There is also the challenge of navigating Yolŋu difference publicly via Balanda writing practices. Difference has always been used as a strategy to divide (Dodson, 2000; Huggins, 1998). Therefore, respectfully navigating Yolŋu shared and different perspectives about becoming and being *Yolŋu Teachers* requires careful navigation lest the final text work against what it intends: appropriate pathways for *Yolŋu Teachers* on Yolŋu country.

Shepherdson College promoted the project to *Yolŋu Teachers* working in the College and *Yolŋu Teachers* who had retired but remained vigilant about the need for *Yolŋu Teacher* presence within the College/ community. The Northern Territory department responsible for education changed name and structure a number of times during the project while remaining a constant partner. They supported the project knowing how important *Yolŋu Teachers* are to Yolŋu children's futures. The *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSI)* provided funding for the project. Their appreciation of the project parameters and the challenges associated with metropolitan and remote community scheduling and planning practices was truly appreciated in enabling the project to engage over time with *Yolŋu Teachers*. Finally *Yolŋu Teachers* and their Balanda colleagues tolerated interruptions to their community, professional and personal lives in order to offer their insights about working in the national teaching system. *Yolŋu Teachers* have offered similar insights before. This time they seek some evidence that others have listened and acted on their advice.

Shore, S., Chisholm, P., Bat, M., Harris, B., Kell, P. & Reaburn, S. (Dec 2013). *Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country. Key messages and Yolŋu Responses*. Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

With substantial contributions from many colleagues, community members and Yolŋu teachers including V. Dhaykamalu, V. Bulkunu, J. Gurrudupunbuy, Helen N., J. Gurrudupunbuy, D. Gapany, R. Golun, T. Kersten, M. Lacey, and D. Robbins.



Project Sponsor

This project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) through the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSI).

ISBN 978-1-921576-93-5

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Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country - Key messages provided to *Yolŋu Teachers*

This project was funded by the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSIIT)* and involved partnerships with the School of Education (Charles Darwin University), the Northern Territory Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and people living in a community in Eastern Arnhem Land. The research approach involved conversations over a period of time and careful listening about Yolŋu experiences of becoming and being a school teacher 'on country'. Yolŋu working on this project have been consulted many times about teacher education, but feel governments, universities and teachers have not listened to their main advice. Because of this, the project tried to pay close attention to Yolŋu starting points for teacher education 'on country'. Even with this plan in mind, mistakes and assumptions about Yolŋu experiences of teacher education were still made. This was especially so when trying to begin from Yolŋu experiences rather than from metropolitan and Balanda ideas about becoming a teacher.

Yolŋu Teachers

Yolŋu starting points for understanding teacher education seem to begin from cultural authority and kinship structures, land, family and language. In this project, calling the people involved in the school *Yolŋu Teachers*, seemed like a good way to recognise these ways of knowing. *Yolŋu Teacher* was not the same kind of employment classification covered by the Assistant Teacher (AT) or Class Teacher (CT) role statement. Part of the problem was the *Yolŋu Teacher* had no status within education system employment classifications but the knowledge, relationships, and skills *Yolŋu Teachers* had were all really important for children's learning in the school. So, in this project it seemed like a good idea to use this term to describe the *Yolŋu Teachers* with whom we worked. Some were paid to work in the School. Some were not paid but held important roles in bridging the school and the community or the school and children's learning. Some were paid a little bit but not in ways that fully recognised all of the work they did to bridge the life of the school and the community. The idea of a *Yolŋu Teacher* was an important turning point for the project in understanding how *Yolŋu Teachers* provided the foundation for children's learning into the western school system. It recognised Yolŋu skills, knowledge and expertise.

Metropolitan and Balanda interventions

This project tried to describe how a combination of Balanda and metropolitan assumptions control teacher education. One way this happens is when the word 'remote' is used to describe a place. It makes many people in education – university researchers, managers, teachers and administrators – think it is okay to make changes so that Yolŋu lives 'will be better'. These decisions are believed to be genuine and helpful actions, but they are 'interventions' into Yolŋu lives. They are based on assumptions that come from living in places where there are high concentrations of public transport, public services, public conveniences and public schools where the public language is English. These 'metropolitan' places do not always understand the role of *Yolŋu Teachers* in classrooms, schools and communities in community-based schools. This project used the term 'on country' to acknowledge ancestral connection to country and this included different forms of relationship to country: people on their ancestral land; people close to their ancestral homelands; people there by agreement with traditional landowners. Thinking about teacher education through these ideas meant thinking about the children being educated and for what kind of future they were being prepared. This would then involve changes that *recognised* the specific expertise associated with *Yolŋu Teachers'* work, *respected* that expertise, *affirmed* commitments to live on country as well as commitments to mobility between communities as life required, and *enabled* 'collaborative teaching' as a shared exercise in learning to know together.

Becoming a teacher

'Choosing to be a teacher' is a Balanda and metropolitan way of thinking about becoming a teacher. The cultural authority structures of a particular community have much to do with who becomes a teacher, how they become a teacher and who is known as a *Yolŋu Teacher*. When living on country, being and becoming a teacher involves being recognized as a teacher by elders and community members and acquiring *Yolŋu Teacher* status (i.e.: cultural and professional knowledge and responsibility) quite a long time before any national teaching qualification has been awarded. Metropolitan and Balanda ideas about 'career choice' and linear pathways to becoming a teacher do not correspond with the ways in which community cultural authority structures recognise teaching ability and teaching pathways.

Pathways

The concept of a pathway encourages the idea that people move between programs and sectors, that this movement is determined by what one learns rather than who one is and how they are positioned in a community. When living on country there are limited employment opportunities to support Yolŋu to remain on country and become registered teachers. Some of these options include: employment in the wider community; government scholarships; paraprofessional and support positions within schools. These experiences provide some financial support for families. It might be that people who spend time employed in a range of jobs within the community – register operator at the supermarket, carer at the pre-school, admin worker in the resource centre – 'arrive' at the school with very rich *Yolŋu Teacher* knowledge of community relationships and children's learning. However, an Assistant Teacher (AT) appointment generally provides limited recognition of the broader *Yolŋu Teacher* expertise. AT expertise is often defined in terms of what the AT lacks in western curriculum and pedagogical knowledge.

Employment

While there is a high turnover of Balanda staff in schools the turnover of *Yolŋu Teachers* in this community was relatively low, with some *Yolŋu* having worked at or with the school for between 10-30 years. Employment conditions, salaries and benefits did not reflect this. A range of apparently minor issues such as correct spelling of names, timely activation of contracts and offers of ongoing contracts as well as the continual changes in human resource staffing often experienced in the Northern Territory, meant *Yolŋu Teachers* had many bad experiences included late salary payments and gaps between contracts even though many continued to work at the School during these periods. As low paid workers their financial security was always uncertain. Pathways and employment benefits for *Yolŋu Teachers* working on country were also limited because as *Local Teachers* they had less access to housing, relocation and district allowances and flight reimbursements associated with 'remote' living.

Gaps and challenges from past research

Much has been written about *Yolŋu Teacher* experiences of teacher education. However, this writing often focuses on pedagogies and experiences that support *Yolŋu* children. The focus on *Yolŋu* children and *their* futures in research and policy tends to dominate many educational discussions yet less attention is paid to the training required by *Yolŋu Teachers*. Discussion about access to online and broadband communications access hide the need for research on how *Yolŋu* experience broadband access and use in a range of on country communities. There is limited recognition in the wider education community of the unequal access to industrial benefits for *Yolŋu Teachers* who are classified as local residents teaching on country. The focus on discussion about national registration of teachers and quality assurance of teacher education programs dominates many discussions at the expense of discussion about embedding Indigenous knowledges in teacher education and promoting community and place based teacher education.

Supporting *Yolŋu Teachers* to teach on country is everybody's business.

How and in what ways Yolŋu move towards ITE pathways and teacher registration status will be shaped by personal and family circumstances, the capacity of initial teacher education programs to respond to their academic needs, their decisions to remain in a community or move between communities and how cultural authority structures within their communities support them.

Yolŋu have said once again in this project: cultural authority structures, kinship connections, language, land and knowledge practices are not bargaining chips to be traded in their quest to become registered teachers.

People working in university teacher education, commonwealth government departments and the Northern Territory education system need to listen properly and meet the challenge *Yolŋu Teachers* have presented to us in this project. We need to understand how our metropolitan and Balanda ways of thinking have limited the opportunities for Yolŋu to become teachers, and in so doing we have reduced the extent to which Australian schools can provide the kind of education Yolŋu children need to navigate western and non-western knowledges for their futures.

Yolŋu Teachers' response to Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country- Key messages provided to *Yolŋu Teachers*¹

Yolŋu Teachers were provided with a copy of the project report and a summary of key messages. A request was received to revise the language of the key messages document to assist *Yolŋu Teachers* to read and review it and provide the research team with a response. Given time constraints at the end of the 2013 school year, not all *Yolŋu Teachers* were able to participate. Beth Harris had been involved in the project since its beginning and agreed to facilitate a workshop and individual conversations with *Yolŋu Teachers* at Galiwin'ku to develop a response to the revised **Key Messages** document. That response is provided below as received by the research team. Quotes indicate where wording has been drawn from the original **Key Messages** document.

Workshop 13/12/13

6 Yolŋu Teachers/Assistant Teachers: Duwalatji (2), Helen N., Roberta Dharruyŋa, Yvonne Latati, Caroline Djinnanbuy, Heather Yeparŋa

¹ Duwalatji, Helen N., R. Dharruyŋa, Yvonne Latati, Caroline Djinnanbuy, Heather Yeparŋa Valerie Bulkunu, & J. Gurrudupunbuy. (December 2013) *Yolŋu Teachers' response to the document "Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country. Key Messages provided to Yolŋu educators"*. Facilitated by Beth Harris. Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

Conversations with Valerie Bulkunu and J. Gurrudupunbuy: 18/12/2013; 19/12/2013; and 20/12/13

Yolŋu Teachers started by thinking about what they thought the key messages within the research should be. The first question that the group posed was: Are we talking about Yolŋu Cultural Teachers or Classroom teachers. This tied in with the Key Message about the idea of '*Yolŋu Teachers*' as something different to the classifications of Assistant Teachers and Classroom Teachers. The *Yolŋu Teachers* present clearly identified that they were *Yolŋu Teachers* – teaching children about their own Indigenous Language and Culture including literacy in own language. They also identified that speaking the same language as the children was an important part of being a *Yolŋu Teacher* as well as sharing the same worldview. They agreed that "...*Yolŋu Teachers* provided the foundation for children's learning into the western school system" and that the classification Assistant Teacher (AT) did not recognise their "...skills, knowledge and expertise". While identifying as *Yolŋu Teachers*, the group recognise the pathway to becoming a registered Classroom Teacher, but acknowledge that many *Yolŋu Teachers* will take this pathway to progress their knowledge as a team teacher/*Yolŋu Teacher*.

Following this discussion, the group decided that an important part of developing Classroom Teacher knowledge comes through Team Teaching. The *Yolŋu Teachers* felt strongly that Balanda and Yolŋu teaching teams were the best way to educate students both-ways. They believed that their success depended upon how much time is spent co-mentoring in teaching teams. The concept of Mentoring came up across all conversations. *Yolŋu Teachers* feel that the Balanda teachers should be handing the knowledge over as part of their training. All acknowledged that there was not enough designated time for mentoring and team teaching. An example the group gave was that classroom teachers should sit with *Yolŋu Teachers* and show them the Australian Curriculum and help them to understand how curriculum documents are used. The group said that this kind of mentoring process was crucial to their development as *Yolŋu Teachers* and Classroom Teachers.

The group also identified that having Lecturers who live in the community is important and that while workshops away provide time for meeting other students and a focused time for study that is precious and sometimes hard to find when looking after family, that more than two weeks away can become too tiresome.

The group recognised the idea of 'Metropolitan' interventions, and agreed with the idea that thinking about teacher education "...required thinking about the children being educated and for what kind of future they were being prepared". They agreed that changes that recognised "...specific expertise associated with *Yolŋu Teachers'* work, respected that expertise, affirmed commitments to live on country as well as commitments to mobility between communities as life required, and enabled 'collaborative teaching' as a shared exercise in knowing together" would be beneficial.

The group discussed the terminology of 'on country' being used to describe where they are teaching. Although most do not identify Galiwin'ku as their country, they agreed with the sentiment that they were working on Yolŋu country where the language and the culture were different to other parts of Australia. They also recognised their ancestral connection to the region. Consequently they felt the terminology was useful for describing them as Teachers 'on country'. The group did discuss that there are also many teachers who teach on country in Arnhem Land, living on homelands and teaching on their country.

The *Yolŋu Teachers* did not have the experience whereby “The cultural authority structures of a particular community have much to do with who becomes a teacher, how they become a teacher and who is known as a *Yolŋu Teacher*”. They were also unsure of the idea of “...being recognised as a teacher by elders and community members and acquiring *Yolŋu Teacher* status (i.e. cultural and professional knowledge) quite a long time before any national teaching qualification had been awarded”. They stated that all Yolŋu adults become teachers for Yolŋu children. All adults take responsibility for the next generation’s learning through *gurrutu* (kinship system) and traditional roles. They said that they felt supported by family and cultural authorities to choose their own pathways, and they had come to the school at their own choosing. They believed they had made their own life choices that had brought them to the school for work and a teacher pathway.

The group agreed that the ‘Balanda pathway’ of moving from school, to university, to work was not their experience. They had families first and often worked in other employment before coming to the school. Their training was part of the position and not something that they had pursued separately; because of this the school is a very important component in shaping this pathway.

Consequently, there was a discussion about the importance of the school consulting with Yolŋu and making Yolŋu training a priority, as the pathway for Yolŋu becoming teachers is an important one, that has such an enormous impact on the whole community and future generations.

The group agreed that because many of the *Yolŋu Teachers* have had children and are often in their 30s, 40s and 50s they do “...’arrive’ at the school with very rich *Yolŋu Teacher* knowledge of community relationships and children’s learning”. Some of the Yolŋu school employees have been identified as leaders within their own clans and hold positions of great respect.

The group agreed that despite being the permanent community members on the school staff they were not given permanency in their positions. Rather, the Balanda teachers, who were continually turning over were often made permanent within a year of teaching at the school. They agreed that employment conditions, salaries and benefits did not reflect their time and experience working at the school. One example was given of the cultural advisor acting as a consultant for the school. The cultural advisor was currently being paid as a tutor with casual employment, but they suggested that if they apply private consultancy fees the position would be worth as much as the knowledge is worth. This person is a leader within the community, holding the equivalent of a Ph.D in traditional knowledge.

The important point was also made that while on contract or casual pay *Yolŋu Teachers* do not accrue any Study Leave. Every year, many Balanda staff accrue and take 6-12 months of study leave. However, most of the Yolŋu staff, despite having worked at the school for enough years to accrue over a year or two of Study Leave are ineligible because they are not permanent staff.

The *Yolŋu Teachers* also agreed that there was too much focus on national education programmes rather than on local education, in particular, the idea of "...embedding Indigenous knowledges in teacher education...". The group believed that all *Yolŋu Teacher* training and Classroom Teacher Training for Yolŋu students should include the development of Yolŋu Pedagogy. By this, they considered it very important for teachers to explore the place of Yolŋu language and culture across the curriculum and in every facet of the school. Bulkunu emphasised the point that while this research is about becoming a school teacher on country, it is inextricably linked to the development of Yolŋu pedagogy and bilingual learning. This is because Yolŋu education connects wholistically to all areas and experiences of life, being underpinned by land, kinship and language.

Further to this, there was an acknowledgement of loss of own language to a degree. *Yolŋu Teachers* notice that there is a language shift away from the use of and knowledge of 'gurrŋay matha' (academic language or higher level language). This was causing much concern because the group recognised an inability to gain 'gurrŋay matha' would also impact on gaining higher-level concepts in English.

Finally, when the group read "... cultural authority structures, kinship connections, language, land and knowledge practices are not bargaining chips to be traded in their quest to become 'fit and proper teachers'" they responded by saying that they were not interested in becoming Balanda teachers. They are Yolŋu, as are the children they teach. They will always be *Yolŋu Teachers*, but with the ability to understand and teach both-ways.

Project documents

(<http://www.cdu.edu.au/education/research-projects/pathways-remote>):

Shore, S., Chisholm, P., Bat, M., Harris, B., Kell, P. & Reaburn, S. (2014). *Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country*. Darwin, NT: School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

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