



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## A Homeland Education Journey

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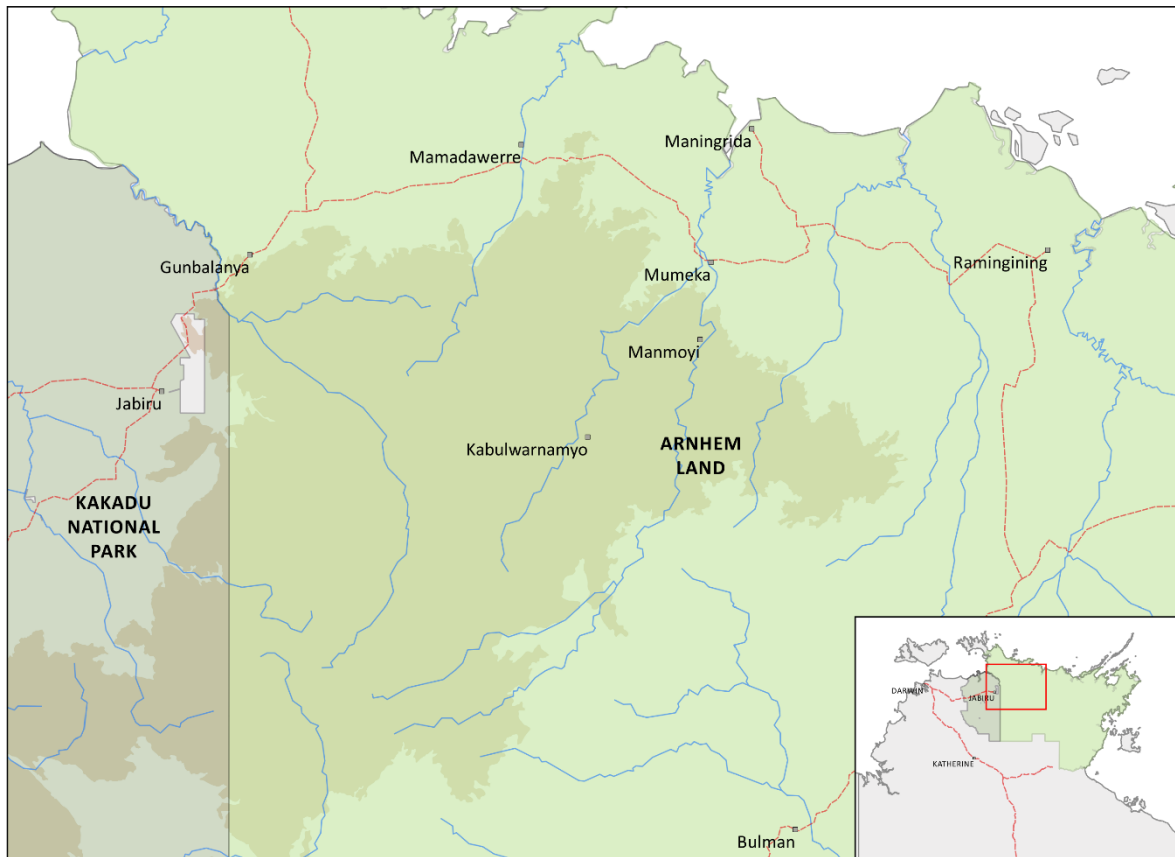
### Abstract

In this article, Michelle Bangarr shares the story of her educational journey. Michelle is the custodian for Country at Manmoyi, a homeland in West Arnhem Land. She shares her passion for homeland education and her aspirations for the future.

### Background

Over recent years a lot of attention has been given to education for First Nations students living in remote communities. The quest for improved outcomes, better attendance, retention and year 12 completions disguises other perhaps more important issues. During the 1970s and 1980s the homeland movement—‘return to Country’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1987)—created opportunities for many First Nations people to achieve a degree of self-determination. But schooling for homelands was treated differently to schooling in communities. People had to put a request to the Department of Education for a school in their homelands, and mostly homelands were offered a visiting teacher for two to three days per week. Local First Nations staff, as untrained ‘assistant teachers’ were expected to ensure that students completed their work in the teacher’s absence. Some training was offered through the Remote Area Teacher Education program. In 1990 there were 271 people enrolled in Diploma of Teaching courses, with the majority in Stage 1 (Batchelor College, 1991). Homeland learning centre programs were prioritised (First Year Students in the Batchelor College Remote Area Teacher Education Program, 1990). By 1992 the concept and language of RATE had all but disappeared in the discourse of Batchelor College documents, replaced with a greater emphasis on more mainstream higher education programs. While there is strong agreement that homeland centres need local teachers, achieving that goal is not so easy. Journal Editor, John Guenther talked with Michelle Bangarr at Manmoyi in late 2021 about her experiences of education. Michelle tells the story of her journey in education, from her homeland perspective.

**Figure 1. Map of the West Arnhem Region Showing Location of Mamadawerre, Kabulwarnamyo and Manmoyi**



Source: Nawarddeken Academy Limited, courtesy of Felicity Watt

### **Michelle's Story**

[John Guenther (JG)] Tell us who you are.

My name is Michelle Bangarr, I'm the djungkay for this Country, (custodian) and I would like to talk about my education journey. Where I got my education. I remember when I was really young I was growing up [out] bush; I grew up here at Manmoyi (see Figure 1) and at that time we didn't have many teachers coming in to Manmoyi, [we had a] teacher to teach us, so sometimes, the teachers had problems... the road condition wasn't really good, and the airstrip wasn't good. So when the teacher used to get here Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday afternoon, we used to go to school maybe two days in a week. The rest, my mother sometimes got involved to help teaching, [and] my uncles [too].

[JG] What inspired you to want to become a teacher?

I didn't have enough education at Manmoyi. Because I saw a lot of Indigenous kids were struggling and I saw like especially community schools like Gunbalanya (see Figure 1) for example, I [had] seen new teachers come into community, sometimes they don't really understand the kids, they don't know their background. When they try to teach them, the kids don't sort of concentrate because some kids have a middle ear infection, they don't sleep sometimes. When they go to school, they feel tired. And sometimes that's what made me want to become a teacher to teach my own family, my own countrymen.

And [in] my journey I didn't go to school much. English was my second language and at home I have learned culture mostly, then the mainstream school curriculum, but my parents were my first teachers, and my parents were really good. We didn't have many books, the only book we had was the children's Bible. We used to read the children's Bible every day and every night and that's why I can read and write--from reading the children's Bible. And up until when I was 13, I was sent away to boarding school, I went to St John's College [in Darwin]. I did [years] 8, 9 and 10 then when my family moved to Darwin my parents enrolled me in Nightcliff High. Now its Nightcliff Middle School.

My younger sister, she was in hospital, she was in a really bad condition, she had a brain abscess, and she was really sick, and I had siblings, from [age] 2 to 8. I was helping my mum, sometimes my dad, because they would swap. My mum used to go to the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney, so my mum was with my sister, and I was helping my dad because we were living in Karama [a suburb of Darwin], and I used to look after them and sometimes it was hard. I didn't want to do homework because I was busy looking after my sister and my brother sometimes. I had to cook them manme (food). Sometimes I was just looking after them because we were really upset and were really worried about my younger sister. It's like a risk factor you know, it's sort of stopped me from studying because I was looking after my siblings, I couldn't study.

You know when I finished Year 11, after school I did a certificate, [an] attainment certificate. So, I completed that. It got me to do further [studies]. I went to university. I was accepted to go to university in 1993, so I did preliminary general studies at Northern Territory University [now Charles Darwin University].

That was when I was 18. I completed general studies. I came back home. That's when I got my job as assistant teacher.

[JG] And which school was that at?

Manmoyi school. When I came back home, I was 19, working at the school, and that's when I got married [at] 21. When I was 22, I had my daughter. Then five years later, I think 2000, that's when I first did my diploma of education, that's when I went away and left my daughter, she was 4 or 5 when I went to Batchelor [Institute] to do my first year.

[JG] That was the first year of a diploma?

Yes.

[JG] Then what followed on from there?

After one year, it was hard for me to study while I was leaving my daughter behind and pregnant with my second child. I used to take her with me some of the time to Batchelor but some units I used to have in Alice Springs, I couldn't take her. I came back after first year. I went back to working at school. I re-enrolled, when I had my son in 2001, I remember when I had my second year, and I re-enrolled in a diploma of education. I was pregnant with my son. I was still studying.

[JG] That was with Batchelor?

Yes, I re-enrolled, that was 2001. So, I [had] been struggling, I couldn't complete it, because I had kids, I was living in the outstation, I was an external student you know, two weeks here, two weeks home, two weeks Batchelor, [and then] come back. It was overwhelming, it was hard [to] study when you have young kids. I completed a few units from first year, second year, and I went back to work, I don't know what time I can't remember, but I remember that I stopped working in 2005 for 2 years. I wasn't working then I moved to Jabiru (see Figure 1) in 2009. I was there for six months. I was working at the school as an Aboriginal Resource Officer.

Then after eight months that's when I applied for [a job with the] Families as First Teachers program in Gunbalanya. I won the position and moved to Gunbalanya, I stayed there in Gunbalanya working at FAFT as a family liaison officer for 10 years.

So, I was working from 2010 to 2021 at the Families as First Teachers program. I think between 2018, 2019 I did re-enrol in a Bachelor of Education. I was going to do it through online study, but I found it hard for me to study online because [I had] no computer, I used to go to the FAFT office on the weekends, sometimes I also had friends and I could use their computer to do studies, Balanda [non-Indigenous] friends, on weekends I [would] have to go for study. Studying in your second language and online without a tutor was hard for me.

[JG] And where are you up to now with that journey?

I'm halfway through doing a teaching degree. I think I've got a few more units to go. I came back here but it's a bit hard for me to study because there's no internet, so I really want to continue to be a qualified teacher to have a class of my own.

That's my education journey. Now kids, they are free. Some younger kids don't have that connection with family. Sometimes they don't look after their siblings or the little ones, our life was different because we grew up together and I couldn't study. But I managed. My family were really supportive they sort of helped me to push when I went back to university, I was with my parents' friend, she was Christian lady she was Balanda [non-Indigenous woman], I was staying with her for a year. That's when I completed general studies at university.

[JG] So it sounds like a really challenging hard journey that you have been on, but you have persisted all the way through, and you are still involved in educating young people which is amazing.

Yeah, I am really passionate about education. Education is the most important part of my life. I want all Indigenous Australians to get equal education—[the same as] as white Australians.

[JG] What would your advice to other young people be now?

Study hard. If they at school, go to school five days a week. Don't touch drugs. You know backy [smokes], gunja [marijuana], alcohol. We can easily talk about it because people think it's just normal. They just pick it up, so study hard, go to school five days a week, get education, when you finish year 12 maybe go do further studies, because that doesn't stop—an education doesn't stop when you finish year 12. I [have] seen a lot of students when I was in Gunbalanya, they graduated, got some sort of certificate, but no one did further studies, so they sort of stuck working for Balanda. No one is a qualified teacher or registered nurse or doctor or manager. So maybe study hard when you finish year 12.

[JG] So what about your plans now?

I am thinking because I still want to support Nawarddeken Academy because I want to see people getting involved, I want to see people working at school, and maybe I can work at Nawarddeken or maybe I can study. If I can study, I want to study here. Come home. I was thinking if I can study, because it was my goal to be a qualified teacher, but then again because of that COVID I still worry.

[JG] This week you've been working with us as a community researcher, for Nawarddeken Academy. What's your vision for Nawarddeken here at Manmoyi? What would you like to see happen?

I want the school to be successful, I want it to be sustainable and I want to see a lot of kids go to school every day. Every day. And I want parents to understand to support their kids at school and I want school to work with the community. School and the community, and Warddeken Land Management as well 'cause that's where it started, because we are the same people, they are the

same people who work at Warddeken Land Management, they are the parents also for the kids who will attend Nawarddeken Academy. Maybe in the future I want to see Nawarddeken Academy open up some sort of open college or TAFE courses where our young people can do training, because most of our young people didn't complete Year 12. I want to see more young people get equal education. And also, a FAFT program for the young ones, little kids 0–3-year-olds.

### Acknowledgements

Nawarddeken Academy is an independent school located in the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area (see Figure 1). The school was originally established in Kabulwarnamyo, and following a lengthy registration process, obtained registration for sites at Mamadawerre and Manmoyi. John Guenther has been working with Dr Robyn Ober from Batchelor Institute and a team of community-based researchers, on an evaluation of the Academy. The evaluation was funded through the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust.

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