



Case Study of Nawarddeken Academy: On Country Learning in West Arnhem Land

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Abstract

In 2023, researchers from the Batchelor Institute worked with staff, students and families from the Nawarddeken Academy in West Arnhem Land, which offers bicultural, community-driven education. Together, they engaged in a series of yarning circles as interviews with staff, students and families. The focus of the study was on retention, attendance and impacts from major events such as COVID-19. Nawarddeken Academy has a long history of fighting for educational rights for their children to learn *on country*, through an Aboriginal-led, controlled and managed model. This fight has spanned 20 years and today Bininj (Aboriginal) people are proud to provide education to their children on their land through *Learning on Country* programs that embed both-ways Bininj and Balanda (Aboriginal and non-Indigenous) knowledge/s into the school's core curriculum. This article tells the story of Nawarddeken Academy and the case study research that was conducted with the school.

Keywords: *On Country learning, First Nations research, remote education, community-based research, student engagement, retention*

The Nawarddeken Story

The Nawarddeken Academy story began in 2002 when Professor Bardayal Lofty Nadjamerrek OAM established the Manwurrk Rangers at Kabulwarnamy, a forerunner of the company today known as Warddeken Land Management Limited. This ranger program pioneered Australia's first carbon abatement project, allowing Traditional Owners to live and work on their Country.

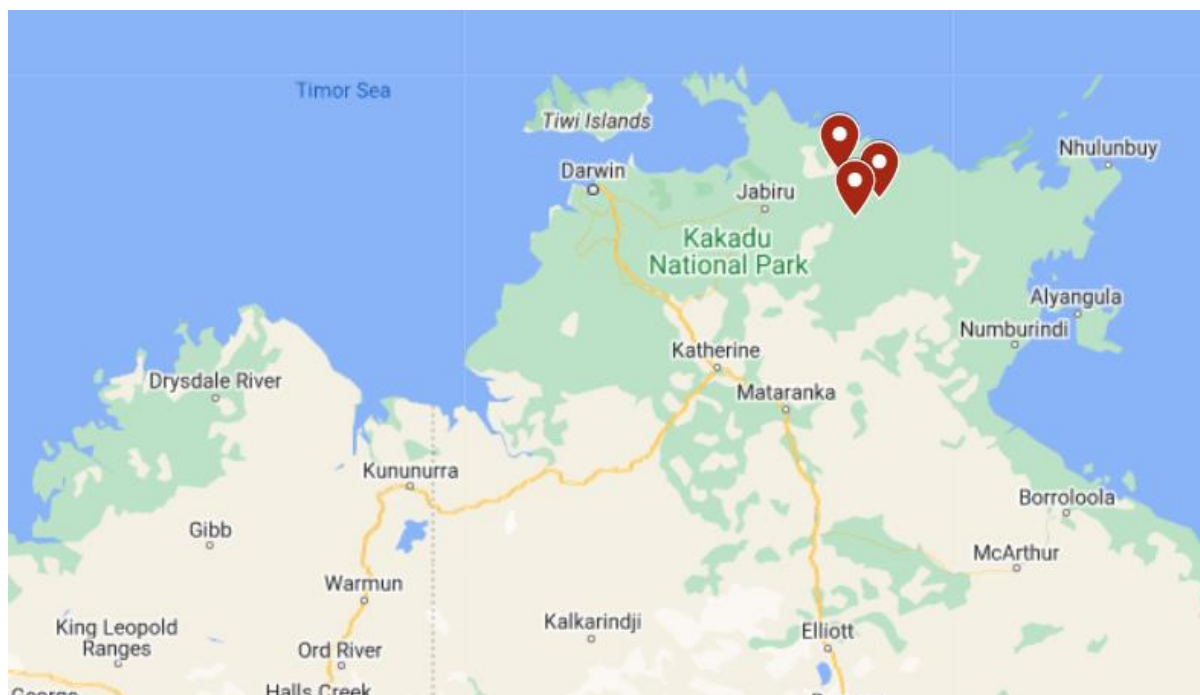
In August 2015, the Nawarddeken Academy was established at the request of Elders from Kabulwarnamy in West Arnhem Land. The Academy is committed to working towards being a bicultural and bilingual Indigenous school, so that young people can be strong and confident in both worlds (local Aboriginal people: Bininj, and non-Indigenous: Balanda), and ambassadors for Nawarddeken (People of the Stone Country).

At first, the school operated under a Memorandum of Understanding with Gunbalanya School, pending registration as an independent school. Registration was achieved in January 2019. A board oversees the Academy and includes representatives from the three homelands: Kabulwarnamy, Mamadawerre and Manmoyi (see Figure 1). The combined population of the three sites is about 200 on average, and it varies depending on seasons, ranger activity, cultural events and funerals.

Until 2021, schooling at Mamadawerre and Manmoyi was managed by Gunbalanya School, which offered up to two days per week of schooling using a fly-in, fly-out teacher. From Term 4, 2021, all schools were operating on a five-day-a-week basis. The Academy has had the financial and

logistical support of Warddeken Land Management Limited and a philanthropic organisation, the Karrkad-Kanjaji Trust.

Figure 1: Location map for Nawarddeken Academy at Kabulwarnamyo, Mamadawerre and Manmoyi



Nawarddeken Academy aims to:

- advance Indigenous education in West Arnhem Land;
- support the social, cultural, emotional and physical wellbeing of every child;
- promote intergenerational education where families and communities share learning experiences to conserve Indigenous knowledge and languages;
- empower young people to be strong and confident in Western and Indigenous knowledge systems;
- preserve Nawarddeken languages and culture through bilingual and bicultural experiential learning;
- develop clear pathways for young Indigenous people of West Arnhem Land that match their aspirations and the aspirations of their families. (Nawarddeken Academy Limited, 2024, p. 10)

According to the 2023 My School data (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2024), there are 64 students enrolled at the school. Attendance rates average about 95% across the three sites (ACARA, 2024). Between 2019 and 2021, Batchelor Institute conducted an evaluation of the school. The findings can be found in the evaluation report (Guenther et al., 2022).

The Research

Methodology: Participants and Data Collection

The research project which is reported here (*Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project*) used a mixed methods research framework. This paper provides a case study of Nawarddeken Academy, one of the schools in the study, and presents only qualitative data. More details about the methodology can be found in the project report (Guenther et al., 2023).

There were three types of participants in the study: students, staff and community members. Two students, 10 staff and 15 community members were interviewed. Data were collected from a workshop held with community-based researchers in April 2023, and site visits to Mamadawerre, Kabulwarnamyo and Manmoyi between 30 August and 1 September, 2023. The data were collected from yarning circles, which is an Indigenous way of coming together, talking and relating. A semi-structured schedule was used to guide these conversations, while prioritising and respecting Indigenous ways of communicating (Walker et al., 2013).

A team of community-based researchers had previously worked with Batchelor Institute on an evaluation of Nawarddeken Academy (see Guenther et al., 2022). Members of the team were invited to a workshop held at Maningrida community in April 2023 (see Figure 2). The purpose of the workshop was to familiarise the team with the questions and refresh skills needed for interviewing community members.

Data were also taken from secondary resources including the *Annual Report* (see e.g., Nawarddeken Academy, 2024) and a video made with the school, both of which include direct quotes from staff, Elders and parents.

Figure 2: Community Researcher Training at Maningrida, April 2023



Note: Photo used with permission from Michelle Bangarr and Robyn Ober

Research Questions

Two research questions guided the project:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)?

2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools of the Northern Territory and Western Australia?

Findings

The themes detailed here are a selection of all the points raised by respondents.

On Country Learning

The strength of Nawarddeken Academy is firstly its position as a place for *Learning on Country*. It is located on the ancestral estates of Bininj, a place of belonging, where Country is described as classroom not constrained by four walls. Learning is intertwined with culture, as one parent suggested:

Culture. We have culture, ceremony, culture days, taking kids out. We give them all this learning, learning traditional, back in all the histories, culture. Song lines and yeah. Looking for bush tucker too, same.

Children and young people see opportunities for rich learning on bush trips and camps, bringing their learning from Country into the school classroom. School is seen as enjoyable, with parents seeing their children happy to be learning alongside other family members and affirming their cultural identity. Importantly too, the distractions that sometimes cause problems and disengagement in community schools are not present. Learning on Country is intrinsically engaging. Coupled with good governance, teaching and leadership, the opportunities for meaning and relevant learning make school an attractive place to be. Attendance is therefore not seen as an issue at Nawarddeken Academy.

Both-Ways Teaching and Learning

An underpinning assumption of Nawarddeken Academy is that it is led by Bininj. Bininj Elders want their children to learn their own knowledge, but they also want them to be strong in Western or Balanda knowledge. These words from an Elder are representative of this aspiration:

And this is the main important thing for us, to teach our kids not only in our Bininj Kunwok (language) but also Balanda (non-Indigenous) education—both. We like to see that so the kids they can move along.

Both-ways teaching and learning draws from the strengths of Bininj and Balanda teachers working together to teach about language, culture, curriculum, literacy, science and mathematics. This approach allows students to relate their on Country learning to what happens in the classroom, making learning relevant, engaging and enriching. It is also a key to community engagement: parents, Elders, and rangers working on Country see how traditional knowledge is applied and connected to Western knowledge.

Connection to Work on Country

Nawarddeken Academy was established because families working on Country wanted a place for their children to learn on Country.

That sense of connection to the Country and work on Country... is pretty powerful and becomes that powerful motivator, when kids see their mum and dad working as rangers. They'll say, I want to be like, I want to be a ranger when I grow up, I want to be a teacher.

This in turn creates an environment where aspirations are based on Country, on role models who work on Country. This feeds into retention, noting that the school currently is registered to provide education to Year 7. Nevertheless, the desire to see the next generation of leaders

emerge has prompted elders to work innovatively towards providing secondary education options.

One parent offered these thoughts about the future:

Well, main focus is kids going to school, to learn. Get better education, graduate here and then they can be our leadership. They're the main focus, our kids. They'll be the leader for us when we die.

Cultural Expectations

The centrality of culture in learning is a strong driver for educational participation and engagement at Nawarddeken Academy. Culture is in the curriculum through going on bush trips, local teachers telling stories, songs taught at school, and language embedded in learning. An Elder offered the following passionate argument for culture:

Like as I said before, in [community], they don't learn much because of teasing, too many violence, not enough song lines there, not enough stories to tell. In here, we can tell so many stories. When we do a big survey, there's a lot of stories on that painting. That's why we want the kids to go to school. You said, why do they want to go to school? Well, they want to learn stories, dreamtime stories.

The focus on culture sets up a learning environment that is entrenched in Bininj values, knowledge and pedagogy, creating an enriching environment where children love to be. Culture and Country are built into the cyclical seasonal curriculum calendar, Kuwarddewardde Malkno (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Nawarddeken Academy's Seasonal Curriculum Calendar: Kuwarddewardde Malkno



Source: Nawarddeken Academy Limited (2022, pp. 38–39)

Enjoyment of Learning

For parents, teachers and students, there is a strong feeling that learning is fun and intrinsically rewarding. It is building young people's confidence and pride, supporting them to safely take risks without fear or shame. One Balanda teacher described these responses to learning:

Now we're getting kids who come to school early, before school starts, so that they can play games where they'll get like a mini whiteboard, they'll sit there and they just want us to call out words and they try and write these words ... and that's because they're enjoying it. Then it became this thing: I want to show myself that I can do this, and I want to improve and I don't feel intimidated.

Others suggested that attendance is not a problem because children want to learn, they want to be with their friends and family, and it is much better than staying home. A series of factors underpin these benefits. Firstly, the school is well resourced and pursues funding for additional projects from philanthropic sources. Secondly, it has a strong governance structure that ensures decisions are made by Bininj, who provide vision and strategic direction. Thirdly, it is about having the right staff: Balanda who are willing to learn and listen, and Bininj who teach from a cultural standpoint, and who are the role models for future generations.

Impact of COVID-19

Several people described the COVID-19 experience as scary. There was some fear about the uncertainties of the disease and what it might cause. However, the school implemented strict rules that, in the most part, meant that the school was able to operate normally for most of the COVID-19 period. Movement restrictions in and out of the bio-security zones did cause some problems, but the bio-security zones also provided a degree of safety and insulation from COVID-19, particularly prior to vaccines becoming available. Vaccine mandates also meant that some staff who did not want to be vaccinated could no longer be employed. Overall, though, COVID-19 had a relatively minimal impact on the school in the three communities.

Strategic Directions

The current strategic directions taken by Nawarddeken Academy to achieve its objectives affirm that there is strong community and staff support for activities that build on aspirations for learning on Country. Local decision making, governance and leadership will continue to be a priority to ensure strong levels of student and parent engagement. The current both-ways educational approach draws students into rich classrooms and on Country learning experiences, creating a safe place, where parents and staff can provide culturally relevant and meaningful opportunities to learn both-ways.

There is also recognition that more needs to be done to offer learning pathways that will ultimately lead to the aspiration of young people graduating on Country. Those pathways will include post-school learning pathways, if Bininj aspirations for qualified Bininj teachers is to be achieved. There is also a need for continued investment in infrastructure and learning resources to support middle and senior years' students. The research also supports the need for an ongoing focus on student wellbeing, and a recognition that differentiated approaches to teaching students of varying academic abilities will need to continue. This should engender feelings of success and pride in achievement. Finally, the current focus on youth leadership will also likely produce outcomes that the whole community can be proud of.

Summary of Implications

1. The school's focus is on creating a positive learning environment where children and young people want to be, to learn and to be happy. This is what produces good attendance.
2. Continued investment in secondary education will create an environment that allows for retention towards graduating on Country and working on Country.

3. Elder, community, and parent involvement in governance, school activities and teaching will continue to support strong student engagement.
4. Post-secondary learning pathways for Bininj staff who want training to be assistant teachers and qualified classroom teachers remain as high priorities.
5. The focus on language, culture and Country, together with culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogies will ensure high levels of community satisfaction, and ultimately learning outcomes that enable students to be proud of their achievements.

Conclusion

The *Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal Students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas Project* aimed to understand the impact of unexpected events (including COVID-19) on educational outcomes for students, provide support for disengaged students to improve educational outcomes, provide support for school attendance and completion, and investigate targeted educational support for students. As it turned out, despite the initial fear of COVID-19, the pandemic had relatively little negative impact on Nawarddeken Academy's operations.

Nawarddeken Academy is a unique school with a particular history, and a context framed by land management work in the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area. Generalising the findings of this one case to other remote schools is problematic for this reason. However, there are some key principles that we can deduce from the learnings of this case study, and these should act as positive enablers:

- Strong local governance, Elder vision and leadership support and drive community engagement and enhance the relevance of the school's learning programs for young people.
- A well-resourced school creates choices and opportunities that would not be otherwise possible. This school has demonstrated how important it is to access resources to match the aspirations and needs of students and staff.
- Language, culture and Learning on Country, coupled with visible pathways to working on Country, are primary drivers for student engagement.
- Being a small school can be an advantage, making it easier to connect with community.

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