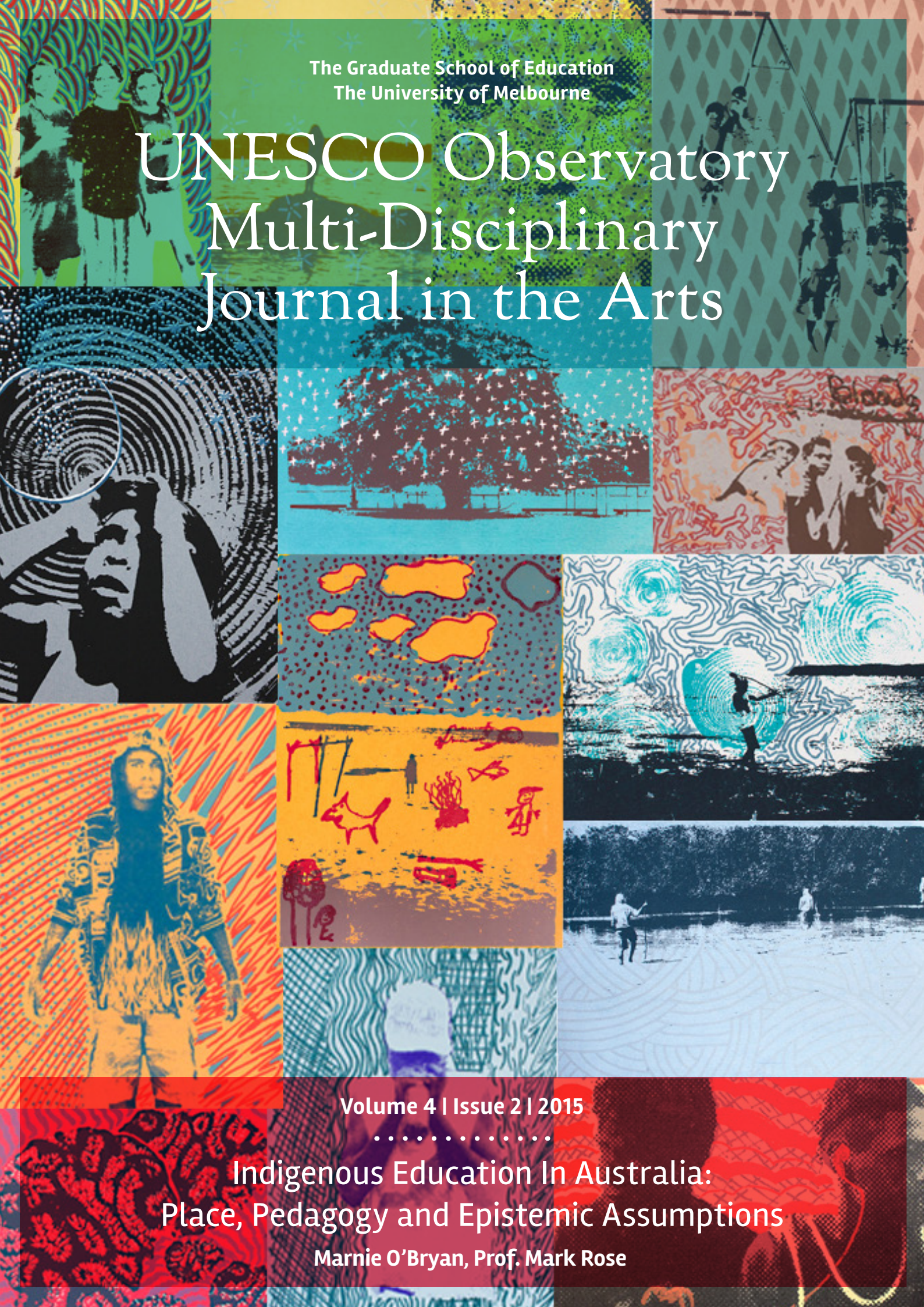


The Graduate School of Education
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UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



Volume 4 | Issue 2 | 2015

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Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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Volume 4, Issue 2

Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

Guest Editors

Marnie O'Bryan

Prof. Mark Rose

THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

COVER ART

Yirrkala Collage

Various Artists,

Yirrkala Art Centre

*Courtesy of the artists
and Yirrkala Art Centre*

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan

Guest Editors

Land, Learning and Identity: toward a deeper understanding of Indigenous Learning on Country¹

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ABSTRACT

As Indigenous land and sea Ranger programs blossomed across Australia in recent years, it became obvious to both educators and Rangers that links between Ranger groups and schools might provide a new way to re-engage young people with education. The phrase Learning on Country has recently emerged in the Northern Territory to describe a program that takes students out of the classroom and onto 'country' and involves Rangers, teachers and community members in a collaborative approach to teaching and learning. The approach has been supported not only by several remote Indigenous communities, but also by a range of local, Territory and national government departments and agencies. While enthusiasm is high, various stakeholders do not always share perceptions of Learning on Country rationale, aims and outcomes. In this paper we explore these differences and draw on learning theory to suggest a pathway toward a deeper understanding of the enormous potential in Learning on Country.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous Aboriginal Country Learning Rangers Education

1. The research on which this paper is based is informed by many years of work by the two authors in a range of Indigenous communities in North Australia. The paper is also informed by a formative evaluation of the Learning on Country Program funded by the Commonwealth of Australia, initially through the Department of Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and later through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The authors wish to acknowledge the support and advice from government officers from both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments and the patience and assistance provided by the many Indigenous students, families, teachers and Rangers who have participated in the research. In addition, we have benefited greatly from insightful and useful comments from several readers and two anonymous referees. Finally, we would like to thank Frances Morphy for her comments and help with Yolgnu spellings.

LAND, LEARNING AND IDENTITY: TOWARD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENOUS LEARNING ON COUNTRY

This paper involves an exploration of the concept of ‘Learning on Country’ as manifest in a new approach to education in a small number of Indigenous communities in remote parts of the Northern Territory in Australia. In the sections that follow we discuss what that concept entails, where it came from and what it means to the various stakeholders. In our many combined years of working with people in remote regions we have never seen an educational program greeted with such enthusiasm. Yet, while the level of enthusiasm is high, little attention has been paid to what we believe are some fundamental differences among various stakeholders in terms of their perceptions of Learning on Country rationale, aims and outcomes; these perceptions are sometimes quite subtle or even invisible, yet they reflect some important tensions that have the potential to jeopardise what appears to be a very promising model. In this paper we explore these differences and draw on learning theory to suggest a pathway toward a deeper understanding of the enormous potential in Learning on Country.

Figure 1
Learning on Country
Communities,
Schools and Ranger
Groups, 2014



2. A fifth Learning on Country program is now underway on Grootte Eylandt, involving Ngakwurralangawa College and the Anindilyakwa Rangers.

WHAT IS LEARNING ON COUNTRY?

Learning on Country is an education initiative currently being explored in a small number of Northern Territory communities involving Aboriginal land and sea Ranger groups and schools (Figure 1)². The program is aimed primarily at late secondary students though children of younger ages are participating in some of the schools. Funding for the initiative comes from a variety of sources, but primarily from the Australian Commonwealth Government, now through the Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet.

In many ways Learning on Country recreates elements of the original Indigenous classroom, where young people spend time on traditional lands, in the company of Indigenous adults with responsibility for those lands, learning about culture and country, the relationships of various groups to country and one another and the roles and responsibilities in relation to that country they will one day be expected to assume. In many ways, Learning on Country is for those young people all about learning about who they are.

In today's version those adults typically include Indigenous Rangers, knowledgeable senior Traditional Owners and other Indigenous adults with responsibilities for those children and that country. But in addition, teachers from the local school—who in most cases are not Indigenous—play a key role in articulating on-country learning with learning back in the classroom. At its best there is a fluid movement of knowledge and responsibility where Rangers step forward to lead in the facilitation of Learning on Country while teachers step back; when the learning moves back to the classroom teachers assume the lead and Rangers and others move into a supporting role.

As a model for learning in remote Indigenous communities, Learning on Country has had multiple beginnings and has developed through a series of fits and starts, but the thread that runs through it has always been the recognition by all—teachers, parents and students—that the opportunity to learn 'on country', to engage with learning in local contexts that are rich and meaningful outside the confines of a classroom with four walls, invariably engages students and validates them as learners in a way that a classroom alone rarely does. For many years and in many Indigenous communities, parents, teachers and schools have looked for opportunities to take children out of the classroom and into a context where learning connects them with country, with local Indigenous knowledge embedded in first language meanings and where young people build their communicative capacities. Often these programs are loosely structured and opportunistic, but in some places they have been named and built into local curricula as 'land and learning programs', 'junior ranger programs', 'learning through country' and the like. The Learning on Country Program, however, is the first attempt at a formally recognised and cross-community initiative. Still, though it has a foundation and government support, it is a 'bottom-up', locally shaped program that brings together Indigenous Ranger groups, local schools and communities to create and deliver a program that fits the interests, needs and capacities of those local communities.

Not surprisingly, much of the learning activity on country arises out of activities involving the traditional responsibilities of Indigenous people to manage their local

3. In Australia, education is a responsibility of the States and Territories. The Commonwealth Government, however, has constitutionally-based responsibilities for Indigenous Australians and provides funding for a range of specific educational programs and services.

country and in many remote communities that work is carried out by Indigenous land and sea Ranger groups. In many cases, in their roles as natural resource managers, Indigenous Rangers are able to complement the teaching curriculum by bringing their land and sea management skills and knowledge into learning settings, at the same time teachers are able to shape the curriculum to take advantage of and build on the activities Rangers undertake on a daily, seasonal and yearly basis. Working together they create learning experiences that incorporate both Indigenous Australian and Western knowledge systems. And while many assume the logical outcome of this is a ready-made program to train Indigenous Rangers, it actually goes beyond that in creating skills for many employment pathways beyond the local community and gives classroom teachers an authentic situated context to develop such skills.

To understand Learning on Country, and the various ways it's perceived by a range of stakeholders, it is important to know where it came from. From our perspective Learning on Country as a program emerged from the confluence of two unrelated Indigenous remote area policy currents: 1) school-based education and the enormous frustrations shared by many about the low engagement and performance of Indigenous students; and 2) the emergence of Indigenous land and sea Ranger programs out of increasing needs for natural resource management in remote parts of Australia.

THE FIRST CURRENT: INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE NT

At the national level, Indigenous education has for decades been a practical and policy quagmire.³ At various times the federal approach has been conservative and prescriptive and at other times progressive and flexible. In recent years the Indigenous education policy carousel has moved 'back to basics'. One reason for this return to a conservative agenda is the seeming intractability of education outcomes. Many Indigenous students, especially in remote areas, have 'voted with their feet' and have been sometimes resistant and sometimes apathetic to engaging with formal schooling. For example, in a recent overview of Indigenous education between 2007-12, the Council of Australian Governments found that in comparison to other Australians:

- Indigenous children are more than twice as likely to start school developmentally vulnerable;
- There has been no improvement in Indigenous school attendance (indeed, in some years attendance has decreased);
- Indigenous students are much less likely to meet minimum standards in reading and numeracy; and
- While Indigenous Year 12 attainment has increased, after leaving school Indigenous young people are much less likely to be fully engaged in work or study.

COAG Reform Council 2014

4. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics there were 391 Indigenous students enrolled full-time in year 12 in the Northern Territory in 2012.

In the Northern Territory, where many students live in remote or very remote locations, and where English is not the first language spoken at home, Indigenous student outcomes are particularly discouraging. In 2012, for example, average Indigenous school attendance in the Northern Territory was about 68 per cent, a drop from 2009 when the attendance was nearly 70 per cent. In comparison, non-Indigenous student attendance in 2009 was about 91 per cent. The attendance in 2012 among Indigenous students in remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory was even lower, with attendance reaching about 78 and 58 percent, respectively. These low levels of attendance have long been seen as a red flag among educators and policy makers. For example, a recent analysis of the relationship between attendance and reading achievement found that achievement at or above national benchmarks correspond with the average number of days a student attends school. When students attend an average of three days a week, few attain the benchmark in reading; when attendance rises to 4 days a week or higher, about 60 percent attain that benchmark (Wilson 2014).

Secondary school completions for Indigenous students across the Northern Territory have stagnated at about 30 percent over the period 2000-2012. In very remote areas, however, gains in the early part of this period have reversed with only about 20 per cent of students completing Year 12 (Wilson 2014:139). It should be noted that these figures are based on very low number and so are quite volatile: 2006 saw the greatest number of Indigenous students completing Year 12 (24 students) and numbers dropping to about 8 in 2012.⁴

With numbers like these, it is not surprising that the federal and territory governments have searched desperately (and without much success) to find an answer. Recent reviews and policy prescriptions have proposed sticks over carrots. For example, the 'Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure' (SEAM), which legislated a conditional linkage between school enrolment and attendance and welfare payments, was instituted in 2013, following a three and a half year trial of the School Attendance and Enrolment Pilot, a component of broader initiatives of welfare reform involving income management. SEAM aims to identify school attendance problems and provide support through Australia's national welfare agency, Centrelink. That support is provided by social workers who will assist families in ensuring children attend school. If that first step fails to get children to school, the program can invoke a suspension of income support payments. Two evaluations of that pilot have been conducted and the results are equivocal. While unauthorised absences declined among both SEAM and non-SEAM students when the pilot was underway, the evaluations indicated the effect was stronger for SEAM students; however, in the two months after the compliance period, absences rose again (DEEWR 2012). According to the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) the program's impact up to now has been impossible to properly assess because performance measures were not fully established. According to the Australian National Audit Office, 'the development of the performance reporting framework was delayed due to the redirection of resources to focus on program implementation' (ANAO 2014, p.16). It appears ideology rather than evidence has shaped this policy approach. Other critics have suggested the results are weak due to a lack of rigor in the evaluation e.g., there was no matched comparison group and no statistical examination to see if SEAM results exceeded those that might have been expected based on pre-existing trends (Weatherburn 2014, p. 131). A full evaluation was to be carried out in 2014 but as of early 2015 that evaluation has not been completed.

THE SECOND CURRENT: INDIGENOUS LAND MANAGEMENT

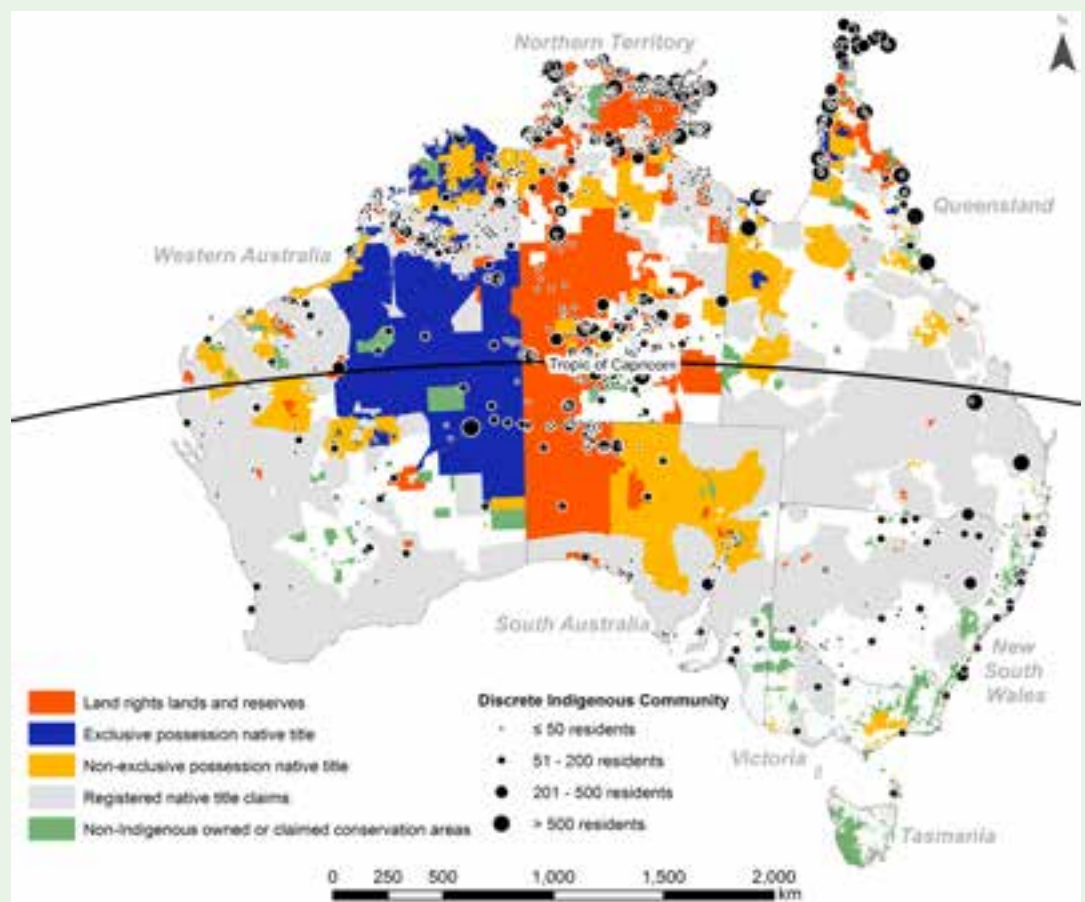
Indigenous Australians own an estimated 1.7 million square kilometres (nearly 23 per cent) of the Australian continent but much more is under non-exclusive possession or registered native title claims; significant parts of these lands are in very remote parts of the country where they remain ecologically intact and of both national and global conservation significance (Altman 2012, pp. 9-10). The effective management of that land is obviously of national importance (Figure 2).

The past two decades have seen the establishment and growth of community-based Indigenous land and sea management programs in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, initially under the banner of 'Caring for Country'. 'Caring for country' and other such programs had their genesis in the establishment of the 'Caring for Country Unit' (CFCU) at the Northern Land Council (NLC) in 1994. The role of the CFCU was to support the Indigenous land owners and groups who came together to mitigate damage to Country from feral animals and weeds and who also wanted a regionally based employment strategy (NLC 2006). Aboriginal people participating in these programs soon began to be called 'Indigenous Rangers', and started to identify their Ranger groups through distinctive uniforms and logos.

That now ubiquitous phrase, 'caring for country', stems from a culturally rich notion among Australia's Indigenous people related to the mutual responsibility of the land looking after the people and people looking after the land:

Figure 2.
Indigenous and non-Indigenous Lands in Australia, 2014

Map © Jon Altman and Francis Markham



5. From May 2007, the success of the Caring for Country model was more formally recognised by the Australian Government when it created a program called 'Working on Country'. Notably, this program's title emphasises the government's focus on jobs and thus the shift from 'caring' to 'working'. It should be noted, however, that with the arrival of the Abbott Government in Australia, funding for virtually all Indigenous specific programs has been restructured and reduced. There is no guarantee the Working on Country program will continue after June 2015.

...caring for country constitutes something far greater than a person, or group of people, having a job and physically managing a geographic area by dealing with the problems created by weeds or feral animals. Caring for country encompasses being spiritually bound to country through intimate connections with ancestral beings still present in the land and waters. For Aboriginal people, caring for country is first and foremost about looking after these powerful and scared places; protecting their values, ceremonies, songs and stories, as well as associated processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors, food provision and maintaining language, law, knowledge systems and, importantly, kin relations' (Kerins 2012, p. 29).

The benefits of caring on country programs have been many. Not only are there cultural and political benefits that flow to local communities from carrying out spiritual responsibilities and exercising leadership and collaboration, but there are also health benefits that have been shown to flow to communities from these activities (Garnett and Sithole 2007). Economic benefits also accrue through both food obtained through hunting, feral buffalo for example, and fee for service arrangements that contribute to wages for Rangers. There are also significant environmental benefits resulting from sound land and sea management practices, many of which involve customary Indigenous knowledge.

Since its inception, the Caring for Country programs have been remarkably successful if judged by their spread across parts of the Indigenous estate and the increased employment outcomes. From its beginnings in Maningrida and Nhulunbuy/Yirrkala, the CFC program has grown to include about 95 separate Ranger groups employing nearly 700 people, with a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to have 730 Indigenous Rangers funded through the program by June 2015.⁵

THE CONFLUENCE OF TWO STREAMS: LEARNING ON COUNTRY

The need for increased educational engagement in remote Indigenous communities and the creation of Indigenous land and sea Ranger groups may not have an obvious connection, but over the course of many years we recognised the enormous potential of 'country' as a 'space' for learning with a payoff in the classroom (see too Kral and Schwab 2012, Fogarty and Schwab 2013). 'On country', we have observed, students were interested, the curriculum meaningful and the lessons engaging. Young people seemed to light up and reconnect when taken out of the classroom and engaged with learning resonant with their country and culture; opportunities to work and learn alongside Indigenous Rangers were invariably exciting to students. The Rangers - often their fathers, mothers, sisters, and/or brothers - held jobs that were highly respected and meaningful and to which young people aspired. Obviously, we were not the only ones who noticed this. For a long time many teachers, Rangers, traditional owners and even some policy officers recognized there was something important in this approach. But it was very difficult to get it off the ground. Rangers were too busy with their own work and felt they didn't have the tools or experience to 'teach'; teachers were unsure about how to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the classroom and were uncomfortable with the idea of taking Indigenous students out onto Indigenous land. However, in 2012 a group of four Indigenous communities

in the Northern Territory came together and built a model and secured government funding to support a two year project that enabled a governance body and local Learning on Country coordinators to bridge the divide and facilitate collaboration between local schools and Ranger groups.

The Learning on Country Program was funded through a combination of sources. Core funding came from the Indigenous Ranger Cadet Pilot Program (IRCPP) initiative, originally within the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Additional funding was provided by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Northern Territory Department of Education. The program officially began in July 2013 and will finish at the end of the 2014 school year.

The Learning on Country Program objectives, as defined by FaHCSIA, were to:

- Increase school attendance, course completion and retention to Year 12 or equivalent of Indigenous students enrolled in LoCP based curricula;
- Increase transition rates to further education, training and employment for Indigenous students completing LoCP based curricula;
- Increase inter-generational transmission of Indigenous knowledge and customary practice among Indigenous students enrolled in LoCP based curricula; and
- Develop a strong partnership between Ranger groups, schools and local community to deliver a culturally responsive, secondary school curriculum that integrates Indigenous knowledge and western knowledge systems, with particular reference to natural resource and cultural management.

(FaHCSIA 2013)

WHAT DOES LOC LOOK LIKE ON THE GROUND?

The Learning on Country Program has taken on a different shape in each of the four sites, shifting and changing to fit the seasonal activities of the Rangers and the curriculum framework as manifest in the classroom. In one community the program involved senior secondary students in using a tool Rangers use called an I-Tracker. The I-Tracker is a programmable handheld device that combines the features of a GPS, a camera, voice recorder and field notebook. A few days after a hands-on session in the classroom and on the school grounds, students attended an 'on country' camp where, working with Rangers, traditional owners and teachers, the students undertook a wildlife survey. They set and retrieved motion activated cameras and recorded data on animal movements and population density. The students later returned to the classroom to analyse and chart their findings. The activity combined technical skills, traditional Indigenous knowledge and literacy/numeracy activities.

In another site a middle school teacher devised a 'Friday Learning on Country' activity wherein students walk outside the back gate of the school and into the bush for a 'lesson' from community elders on some aspect of Indigenous culture.

One session was focused on spear making, an activity few of the children had ever observed, let alone participated in. As in the earlier example, this activity included some classroom work prior to the excursion, engagement with community members once outside the school and more learning activities once the students had returned to the classroom. The Friday Learning on Country activity had a significant and continuing impact on classroom attendance.

A third example involved a Primary school excursion to 'country', a day trip to a local beach. The aim of the trip was to learn about how people impact the environment. Students did a beach survey and collected washed up fishing nets, bottles, fishing line, and other materials. Traditional owners of the area and Rangers talked about the impact of these materials on marine life (e.g. turtles and dolphins). They also took the opportunity to teach the children about the Indigenous seasons, hunting, local plants and animal tracks. Later, back in the classroom, students analysed their findings, counted, charted, wrote and drew images about what they saw and learned.

LEARNING ON COUNTRY: DIFFERING AIMS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

While virtually everyone is enthusiastic about Learning on Country, not everyone shares the same view of its aims. We see three quite different aims. While we portray them as discrete, there is some sharing of the three aims by some stakeholders:

1. Increased school attendance, completion, qualifications, employment pathways and jobs

This is clearly the primary aim as viewed by government and by participating schools. In this sense Learning on Country is another in a series of attempts to engage students with school, to boost their attendance, improve school outcomes and ultimately to increase the number of community members with qualifications. 'Country' is a 'hook' that attracts and keeps Indigenous students interested in school. Ultimately the aim is to create both skills and a pathway to employment. Clearly, this view has resonance with Indigenous community members who see employment as a valid and significant aim, but not always the primary one.

2. The intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge

This is a significant aim of Indigenous community members and some teachers. Most commonly this is framed in terms of ensuring that school education incorporates Indigenous culture, supports the retention of language and Indigenous knowledge referring, for example, to sacred places, plants, animals, seasons, and the like.

Through the incorporation and transfer of Indigenous knowledge, the school experience is made more relevant and more amenable through 'on country' excursions and field trips and through participation in the classroom of authorities in Indigenous knowledge. In many ways the aim is to validate the importance of Indigenous culture in the context of Western education. This aim is linked to the first in the hope that by making curriculum culturally relevant,

6. While there is not space to explore this here, Learning on Country also speaks to the loss of Aboriginal languages. Country is inseparable from language and continual undermining of bilingual education programs has taken its toll on Aboriginal communities across the top of Australia. Similarly, the two way learning approaches that once underpinned education in this region remain under siege. Learning on Country is unusual in that its foundation is based on the mutual recognition of the validity and power of both Indigenous and Western knowledge.

students will attend more regularly, increase western language and literacy skills and gain an education that will increase their chances of employment. Obviously this is a significant aim, one that most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (and Government) agree is important.

But from the Aboriginal side, there is a third and often incompletely acknowledged and sometimes misunderstood aim that is very different. Our insight into this aim comes from quiet, sometimes private conversations in which Aboriginal elders and traditional owners have spoken to us about what they see to be the most important aim of Learning on Country. While it has some resonance with the second, the intergeneration transfer of knowledge, it is more philosophical than technical and refers directly to moral, ethical and spiritual concerns.

3. **(Among the Yolngu) Rom: the law, the Yolngu way of being.**

This aim refers to the need for young people to gain knowledge of the rules of culture and country to understand and uphold 'the law'. In the context of Eastern Arnhem Land, this is referred to as Rom, or 'the Yolngu way of being'. Other Aboriginal groups have different terms for this concept, but they all share the core meaning. Among the Yanyuwa people it is known as *kujika*, or the *Yanyuwa* way of knowing. When sung it 'lifts and holds and animates both country and kin (Bradley 2010, p. xiii). The Pitjantjatjara people of the Western desert use the word *tjukurrpa*. The term describes certain 'dreamings' and ancestral laws for country (Keen 2004, p.251). These all refer to deeper and more culturally meaningful knowledge than that which can be conveyed through the incorporation of Indigenous words, or depictions of Indigenous months and seasons into the classroom or curriculum. It goes beyond recognition and validation of the value of Indigenous land and sea management practices.⁶

According to many Aboriginal elders and Traditional Owners, Learning on Country, they say, is about:

- 'getting the protocols right'
- 'getting the right people, right permissions'
- 'avoiding the danger of missteps, being in the wrong place'
- 'land, survival, knowledge of country, where they come from'
- 'what's sacred, what's not'
- 'asking the *Djunggayi*'

These statements, taken together, reveal a very specific yet different aim than the other two, one that is of paramount importance to Indigenous elders. These statements refer to a higher level of Indigenous knowledge that Learning on Country can and should provide. It is knowledge beyond an increased understanding of local bush foods, animal names and seasonal cycles. They refer to the role Learning on Country should play in upholding important aspects of Aboriginal Law (Rom). They prescribe the way Learning on Country can be used to support deeper understandings

7. The owner/manager relationship is found in other parts of Australia as well. For example, Warlpiri people in Central Australia use the terms *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*. Meggitt (1962) describes the concept as used by men while Bell (1983) documents its use among women.

8. As Morphy and Morphy point out, 'the inclusion of Yolngu knowledge as a separate component within the school curriculum presupposes its difference yet simultaneously asserts its equivalence' (2013: 181).

among students of their rights and duties related to country, and how it can help them to learn where they come from and who they are. Learning on Country is, from this perspective, about how to live a proper life.

To take a closer look, the last comment, 'asking the *Djunggayi*', encapsulates most of the other statements and refers to the need to know and seek knowledge from a cultural and ceremonial authority. The role of *Djunggayi* is complex and vitally important in the communities where Learning on Country is underway. The word is from the Yolngu language and is translatable as 'custodian of cultural knowledge', 'ritual manager', 'policeman', 'boss'. This person is the cultural affairs manager, the person responsible for keeping right the sites, rituals and ceremonies related to culture and caring for country. The *Djunggayi* is the term applied to people whose mothers come from a clan—they do not themselves comprise a clan grouping, but rather a set of individuals from various clans and who are ritual managers for a particular piece of country. The complementary role, 'owner', is *Wānga-watangu* and is applied to members of the patrilineal clan who own that country.⁷ This is the authority to whom young people must defer and on whom they must rely. In every 'on country' learning activity, permission from such an authority responsible for that country is sought and every student's relationship to that country and the people responsible for it must be made clear. The *Djunggayi* is ultimately responsible for the safety of people on that country; public knowledge of dangers is not always well known and so this role is vitally important even outside of ceremonial visits to country (Biernoff 1978).

It seems to us that for Learning on Country to succeed there must be a coalescence of the three aims and a shared understanding among the various stakeholders. All of these stakeholders must recognise that for any student, 'learning' on 'country' is essentially about learning who you are, how you are connected to country and how you should behave to protect yourself, your countrymen and your country. It's sombre and serious, ritualised and often restricted, but also celebratory in terms of notions of guardianship, rights and social meanings if country is well managed and kinship relationships with it are properly carried out. It is about a deep identity that is not easily translatable into frameworks that Western teachers and curriculum developers take for granted. Consequently, it is difficult for teachers and policy makers to see and hear and understand how country, identity and learning are intertwined. Essentially, Learning on Country involves the learning required for young people to become adults in Aboriginal society in those remote areas, for them to gain capacity to move between worlds.⁸ This learning does not contradict the other two aims, but it underpins them; the ultimate success of the Learning on Country program could well depend on it.

All this is not to suggest, however, that this instruction in the spiritual and moral side of life is seen by elders to be the role of the school. This instruction occurs in many formal and informal ways outside the context of school, but what is significant, we believe, is that elders recognise in a way we have never before observed the power and value a school program like Learning on Country has to confirm, validate and exercise the Indigenous world view. It is a sign of trust, engagement and ownership of an educational program that is rare and exciting to all.

9. Though we have taken some liberties in building on their ideas around learning, our thinking has been greatly stimulated by Thomas and Brown (2009 and 2010).

LEARNING, COUNTRY AND IDENTITY

To gain a deeper understanding of Learning on Country it is useful to look more closely at how learning takes place. It is possible, for example, to think about learning as taking place in three different ways.⁹ While the three ways of learning we will describe have some degree of sequential and ontological relationship to one another, they have porous boundaries and over the course of life they overlap. The most basic form of learning is 'learning about'. This is a foundational type of learning in which a person absorbs information about the world. One could imagine, for example, an infant who takes in sound, colour, words and the like and begins to make sense of his or her world. In school that type of learning involves some scaffolding by teachers who assist the learners in understanding language, practices and concepts that are part of 'school learning'. The second type of learning can be characterised as 'learning to be'. In a school setting, it might include gaining technical knowledge and skills that can be put to use in a workplace (a welding course, for example, in which a student learns to be a welder). In the context of many remote Indigenous communities, these two types of learning were part of a process of assimilation and enculturation into the Western world. Images of mission or remote area government schools in the last century, come to mind, where Indigenous children, scrubbed and dressed in crisp white uniforms, sit in neat rows of desks where they were taught English, maths, British history and a range of manual skills. The aim of education in that context was to 'civilise' and mould Indigenous students into productive members of the colonial economy.

But what is needed for productive participation in life today is the ability to 'learn to learn', to develop the capacity to absorb tacit knowledge, learn by doing and watching and participating in communities of practice. It can be cultivated in a formal educational setting through a curriculum that includes a focus on problem solving and critical thinking and engagement with situated practice, or it might be supported in activities that allow young people to engage deeply through keen listening and observation alongside more experienced adults who hold practical knowledge. This process, through which young people may gain practical and socially valued competence, is sometimes referred to as 'learning via intent participation' and describes well much of what occurs in Learning on Country (Rogoff et al. 2003).

Importantly, this notion of learning is not only about the acquisition of knowledge and skills but of a new role in practice. It involves our third notion of learning, 'learning to become'. This is particularly important in a world where knowledge and skills are not static, where the content of what one has learned and the learning trajectories through which one learns that content are continually replaced and realigned as once constant contexts now continually shift. Learning today and into the future is a socially situated process and practice of becoming over and over again. This notion of learning aligns with the first two aims of Learning on Country: to increase attendance in school and gain skills and understanding of both Western knowledge and literacies and Indigenous knowledge so to gain the facility to become a productive member of the overlapping worlds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

But the phrase 'learning to become' also emphasises the inextricable link between learning and identity and aligns with the final stakeholder aim. Learning on

Country, we argue, in its most fundamental sense is about learning to become and that is easy to miss. On one level a person's identity is defined in relation to others, but also identity is formed and performed in a fundamentally social process of 'self-making' in interaction with others (Bartlett 2007, p. 53). Identity is constantly shaped, negotiated and enacted. In the Indigenous context, identity is anchored in country. As Bartlett and Holland have shown, learning is a richly social activity and to learn is to become a different person (Bartlett and Holland 2002). In other words, and in the context of our research, Learning on Country is not just about acquiring new skills but more importantly it can contribute in important ways to the creation of adults who understand and follow *Rom*, who understand 'the Law' and the dangers, opportunities and responsibilities it entails. Learning on Country can assist young people to acquire the tools and capacities to contribute to both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, becoming strong in their own conceptions and manifestations of identity and self.

CODA

While the aim of this particular paper is not to trace out practical implications of our research for teachers, administrators and policy makers, it is clear that our findings suggest a number of very important considerations we would like to foreshadow here; we will develop these more fully in future writings. First, if we are correct that there are deep and subtle cultural concepts of life in Indigenous communities that are likely to directly influence the engagement and learning outcomes for students, there is obviously a need for a renewed emphasis on preparing teachers to be individuals who will not only teach and live in Indigenous communities but who are able to begin to grasp meanings embedded in the relationships of people to country. This has implications for what is taught and how it is taught in the academies and in particular in schools of education. Recent research into the effective engagement of teachers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures has confirmed what we have long known:

That experience makes a difference, that specialised training in Indigenous education makes a difference, and that heightened levels of local knowledge and everyday engagement with Indigenous peoples are likely to work hand-in-glove with teacher efforts to reform and revise the curriculum to engage with Indigenous cultures, knowledges and histories (Luke et al. 2012, p. 45).

Second, it is clear that learning is most engaging and productive when it is linked to the lives of students and their communities. In many ways this is what 'place-based' learning is all about. Meaningful learning related to place opens a door that enables not just participation but encourages learners to grow, to become. On a curriculum level, this speaks to the need for deep links between what students learn and the realities and challenges of their lives and communities. Robert Hattam refers to this as 'strong connectedness', where teachers focus on issues and generative themes related to local culture and everyday life (Hattam 2006). For teachers working in remote Indigenous communities this is most likely to be possible where teachers have a deep engagement with local culture, concepts, cosmology and the out-of-school life of the community. This is a major but worthy challenge.

Finally, recent research into the assumed links (evidenced in Government policies in Indigenous education and social welfare reform) between increased school attendance by Indigenous students and increased student performance on standardised tests, suggest that policies intended to boost attendance (for example, SEAM) have not and are unlikely to result in improved achievement (Ladwig and Luke 2012). What appears to make a difference is increased support for teachers and schools to provide better educational experiences through school-level reform of curriculum and pedagogy. In the context of Indigenous communities, we would strongly argue that involves a deeper understanding of learning, country and identity and how they are inextricably intertwined.

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