
Some Aboriginal Perspectives on Gifted and Talented Children and Their Schooling

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Australian Aboriginal elders in very remote places seldom have the chance these days to collaborate with teachers and curriculum developers thinking through and planning for formal education for the new generation. Even more uncommon is collaborative work over how we should understand and provide for those children who are deemed gifted within the different worlds they inhabit. Over the many years I worked in remote Arnhemland Aboriginal schools as a teacher linguist, I became conscious of the ways in which young men and women were growing up to reveal themselves as leaders, and to be selected by their elders for particular responsibilities. It was often the case that the school attendance and participation of these emerging leaders had been at best spasmodic. Their participation in school was often watchful and stand-offish. They were not the bouncy students full of energy and questions. They carried themselves differently. I was often told that asking questions of an elder was unwise and impolite, and it concerned me that these young people were becoming leaders in spite of, rather than because of the pedagogical practices of the schools where I worked.

I came to see this issue of the dislocation between Yolŋu and Balanda (western, white Australian) knowledge practices as an epistemological problem. The ways Balanda conduct schooling reveal particular commitments to understandings of knowledge and of truth, which are quite different from the commitments of Yolŋu. I was keen to discover more about the theory of knowledge which produces such a different pedagogy, and such different indicators of a good education.

After working at Charles Darwin University (CDU) on issues of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy for about 12 years, I found the opportunity to come together with some consultants from the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative (YACI) to talk quite specifically about what giftedness means in traditional Yolŋu society, and what schools and departments of education might do to support the work of growing up young leaders for the next generation. Yolŋu (north east Arnhem land Aboriginal) elders have a long history of working collaboratively with western educationalists dating back to the mission era, to the days of bilingual education (sadly over, at least for the time being), and in the Yolŋu studies program at Charles Darwin University (CDU).

Eight Yolŋu elders from remote communities who form part of the YACI team, came together at the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems at CDU for a two-day workshop. As is the case in many other of the consultancies this group has

worked on, they discussed some key questions among themselves for two days in their own languages, and then recorded their findings on video. (Details of other collaborative consultancy work and the transcriptions and translations of the videos, and excerpts from the videos for this project can be found at www.cdu.edu.au/yaci). What follows is a summary of the key ideas with a few referenced quotes from other Yolŋu philosophical work. Much of it has to do with metaphors from the land and the body, which help us understand knowledge and identity (Christie 2006). Statements in quotations are direct from the original transcriptions and translations¹.

Giftedness and leadership

Giftedness, first of all, is associated with leadership. The gift is not there for the child. 'It belongs to everybody'. How do we tell when a child is gifted? Dhāngal began her video recording with a rather strange story: "In days gone by, when many boys go through initiation ceremony, they get painted on their chest. The painting that they put on the boys are their own traditional paintings, the land where they belong to, or what creatures their totem is. That is painted on the chest of every boy." At some stage before the ceremony begins, "the boys stand up, and they stood in a line, and the elders used to observe them then. If a painting peeled off the boy's body, that boy was never chosen to be a leader, because the painting really told the elders how the boy was going to grow up and do other things rather than being a leader. And to the boy whose body painting wasn't peeled, that was the leader for the future. And during the time they used to know who those leaders were going to be."

This story requires explanation. First of all, the paintings are sacred images, they must be executed perfectly. The clan elders make sure they are done carefully, and certain members of a completely different clan group (who call the boy's clan 'mother'), have complete supervisory power. The 'managers' must be completely satisfied before the ceremony can go ahead. Ceremonial preparations take several days during which time the boys are made into ceremonial objects through the painting and singing processes. In a very real sense they *become* their totems, ready to be made into men. Some boys manage to sit quietly, thoughtfully, respectfully for days on end, to sleep quietly straight on their backs while the ceremonial singing goes on all day and all night, and to protect the paint work which makes them who they are. These are the boys of the story whose leadership potential is demonstrated in their calmness, their respectfulness, their patience, and their dedication to the religious practices of their elders. The boys who wriggle around, who lose concentration, who are not taken up by the totemic power of the ancestral songs, images and objects, whose paintings get messy are those who will "grow up to do other things rather than being a leader".

The conditions under which someone *attains* an ancestral reality is much theorised in Yolŋu philosophy. One instrument of this metaphysics is the notion of *gakal*. When a person behaves properly — sings or dances appropriately in a ceremonial context for example — they become one with their ancestors and their land. There is no

¹ Complete transcriptions and translations from which the quotes are taken can be found at <http://www.cdu.edu.au/centres/yaci/gt/whatemerged.html>

separation between man and country, or time and space. *Gakal* is wonderful to see, and much celebrated — often at a public ceremonial performance, but also out in the environment. Any Yolŋu hunter, male or female, will often find themselves in places which are actually mentioned in their ancestral song cycles, at the same tide, at the same time of day, seeing the same glimmering in the water or the colours of sunset specified in their songs, collecting the food which their ancestors collected in the same place, and in the same manner (Garnngulkpuy, 2002). That also is their *gakal*.

People refer to other people's *gakal* approvingly, indicating it as the appropriate way for them (as members of this or that descent group) to behave in particular circumstances. *Gakal* is not confined to traditional practices. It can be manifest through a boat or a gun or a rock'n'roll band. A wise community leader brokering between the government and clan elders, will be said to have *gakal* if she negotiates according to accepted protocols which preserve the separations as well as the unities and keeps everyone together in good faith.

The origins of the gift

So in a sense, *gakal* understood as a process, could be translated as 'self-actualisation'. But we would need to be very careful about how we understand the nature of the self. The self of a western educational philosophy and practice is entirely different from the Yolŋu self. Yolŋu reject out of hand the notion of *tabula rasa* — the 'blank slate' — that babies are born without any built-in mental content and that all knowledge comes from experience and perception. This *tabula rasa* theory of the child's mind is at least as old as Aristotle who wrote of it in his philosophy text 'On the Soul'. The notion remained mostly unchallenged by western theorists for two millennia, the only real challenges coming from those who rejected the doctrine of *tabula rasa* on the grounds that children are born inherently evil, or selfish or at least in need of strict and careful discipline. More on discipline later.

Our western understanding of the blank and innocent child powerfully informs the ways in which we understand and organise formal education, including our identification, understanding and provision for the gifted. Yolŋu reject the notion of *tabula rasa*: "We have our own theory of learning." "In the Yolŋu culture, within each clan group, each tribe, we know that when a child is brought into this world, it's already got its role, that child already has a role to play." Young babies are born with water in their heads, which comes from the sacred wells of their ancestral land. Different clan groups have different sacred water sites, and thus different identities. There are special words for the water in one's brain which links the identity of a person to their particular ancestral connections with land, sea, totems, and other people and groups. It may be sacred images of those waters which are painted on the boys' chests before their ceremonies. Whatever it is, it is a sign of that child's identity being already formed, *in potentia*, at the moment of birth, and before.

Two descriptions from two sides of the Yolŋu world. First, the Dhuwa moiety. Many Dhuwa clan groups have waters left in place by the Djan'kawu sisters. Raymattja told the story of her clan water called *milŋurr*, already inside the newborn's head:

This water is *milnjurr*....The two sisters created the fresh water as they travelled. Fresh water...left behind the foundations for the clans and tribes....This place, this land is our bone place, containing foundations, customs and laws. (She points to the top of her head.) We can feel this with a newborn baby when it is young, a very young baby. On a child we will feel that soft...area. And when we grow, our head is used for thinking. Growing up we develop this, our cognitive development. This *milnjurr* water determines how we will develop our mind for work and for living. That *milnjurr* also determines our feelings, how we feel...for our thoughts and our spirit. And also it will explain knowledge, this water....Our bodies are like this. Our thoughts and ideas...develop like this. Growing up so that we can hold on to our proper ancestral ways. This is how our heads become clear thinking and productive. Yes and also, if we are having to learn new ways of doing things, difficult things to learn, they will be held in the head through that *milnjurr* water².

Then some years later and hundreds of kilometres to the west, Garngulkpuy told a story of her clan water from the Yirritja moiety.

We Wangurri clan Yolŋu, we call our minds our 'Gayilinydjil'. If we got into a fight, and someone hits us on the head, then people will say of us: "They have seen her Gayilinydjil." By speaking that way, a Yolŋu can work towards a peaceful solution which keeps everyone united, tied together by good faith, trust and confidence. They are not going to say: "She got bashed in the head." That would be asking for trouble. People could get really angry. This principle applies to all Yolŋu groups. To make our law work, we have to bring our heads back to thinking about our ancestral land, using those sacred ancestral names which take us back each to our own place³.

Garngulkpuy's husband told the story of the baby's bones, and how from the moment of birth until the moment of burial, they are sacred objects because of the connections they perform and produce:

When a child is born she already has sacred names for her bones...a sacred 'knee' name, and a sacred 'elbow' name, all related to her bones, her head, her back, her eyes, her hair, all of her. Any adult we see, when she was small and newborn, and when she was crawling around, she always had those connections, and now she is old. And later when she dies, she still has all those connections....Ever since a baby, she has connections, it doesn't matter how old she is when she dies, middle aged or old, she is still connected. Born connected, dies connected. That's why when funerals are made, everyone will gather and join together to do the right thing for finishing that sacred bone connection properly.

Much of the way that Yolŋu children and their parents live out their daily lives exemplifies this philosophy of identity. The land itself plays a key role in growing up

² http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/communication_research.htm

³ <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/docs/garngulkpuy.pdf>

young children. It is not the inert background against which human beings play out their lives. “Most of all Yolŋu children learn from what the landforms hold, from hunting, turtle, whatever they go for, shellfish. That’s where the children do their first learning.”

From our western anthropological point of view, we think of the great freedom children enjoy in Aboriginal Australia. They determine for themselves when they sleep and wake, when they eat, whether they attend school, go off with their mates, or participate in ceremonies. But they also learn very early to observe strict avoidance taboos associated with particular close relatives. They grow into a particular discipline.

“They come to a certain age those young people, where they start to make decisions, where they look at themselves, who they are, where they stand.” We can recognise their behaviour. They use language carefully and correctly. They are very deferential, and respectful, especially around older people. They often prefer to sit with the old people, to “take part as his own future”. They have a certain discipline, called *raypirri*, which means in English something like conformity to proper ancestral ways of seeing and doing things. It’s a discipline which comes not so much from adult supervision or instruction, but from within the child himself, in an always progressing, always developing actualisation of *gakal*. One elder spoke specifically of gifted children as coming up to take the place of the deceased leaders of yesterday. There is also a certain quick-wittedness involved in *raypirri*, called *djambatj* – which can mean a good hunter, an observant bystander, or a clever mind. “When they hold *gakal*, and *rom* (culture, law), when they get them from their kinfolk, and carry it, where they go, through ceremonies, singing, they reveal their thinking, they think, and look and internalise it.”

“All adults need to help, that child, those children, who *already have that gift and gakal*...Bring them into the *gakal* role...first – without fear, and then take them into the mainstream. They lead him or her into their *gakal*.”

The gifted Yolŋu child at school

Most of the consultants we worked with, while elders and knowledge authorities in their different ancestral groups, were also well experienced in western education — particularly in the mission and bilingual schools. They were at pains to point out the grave error — so common in Balanda education — of believing giftedness is something that happens inside a child’s head. Yolŋu have a definite sense of the head (*liya*, or *mulkurr*) as being the centre of intellectual work. That is after all, where we find the waters from the ancestral wells which make each person a sacred object. But there is also an understanding of *birrimbirr*, what we might call *spirit*, as well as a further notion of *ŋayaŋu* — what since mission days has been translated as “the seat of the emotions”. It is through your *ŋayaŋu* that you feel your connectedness to kin and country.

Balanda education may focus too heavily on the head. If the gifted child’s head is not invested in his or her feelings towards connections, “his [her] spirit will become

weak". There is a particular investment here, where we find our *gakal* as we relate to and reflect upon and act within our land, the environment and kin. It is this investment which is the source of empowerment. For an example of a turtle hunter performing *gakal* in a way which elucidates a Yolŋu pedagogy, see Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie (1995).

"We just learn, we just learn as we go, it just appears to us, not going questioning the old people. They will teach us. But the Balanda way says: Ask many questions, and ask in order to learn, children should ask old people. But if they were doing it the Yolŋu way, it's not good for him to ask."

The elders could clearly see a painful dislocation between the assumptions at work in the classroom, and their goals for the new generation. We talked for a long time about schooling and the Yolŋu leaders of tomorrow. Schooling in general seems to be failing Aboriginal people in remote communities these days, but more poignantly, schools seem to be undermining the work of the elders producing new leaders by supporting the sorts of behaviours which lead to young people who are self-interested, who see the new and outside things as more attractive than the difficult work of keeping traditional culture and governance alive in a hostile world.

What is a school to do? The elder-consultants were quite clear that we have two education systems, two philosophies of education and two pedagogies. Kids these days are just as smart as they were in the old days, but these days the education department is 'pretty confused'. The practices make us like babies. Maybe he is quite a clever kid, but the Balanda teaching completely misses the giftedness of the child. How are we to identify the gifted children? You can tell the gifted children said one elder, also an experienced teacher — they are the ones who help the other kids when the teacher is not watching. They are not competitive. They already know that they are people with destiny. They know the authority of their elders (each in a specific and significant kin relationship with them). They also know how to pay attention to significant people, and also places, things and moments.

Their foundations stand strong in who they are, already gaining knowledge from over there, still learning both sides, balancing them, finding a path, like choosing, that's how a true Yolŋu leader will emerge, from a child.

The school and the elders must work together. They must sit down together and talk about all the children. Schools must understand and do the work of kin nurturing the *gakal* first, and use that basis to bring strong, relevant, effective and embedded Balanda education. It is for all the children. They must agree on classroom and community practices, which will recognise the gifts the children were born with. "We need to work to help, that child, those children, who already have that gift and *gakal*... Bring them into the *gakal* role first — without fear, and then take them into the mainstream."

Bilingual education was good, it brought the community into the school, and the Yolŋu teachers played an important part in nurturing the *gakal* of every young child. They know all the children, they are related to all of them, they know the ancestral connections to which each one of them belongs.

Today it's like the old days. The children's languages are forbidden for the first four hours of each school day. "The (Education) Department needs to find the path and join it." Why don't we sit down together and talk about it? We all need help bringing up the new generation of leaders for our people.

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