West Arnhem College – Gunbalanya School, West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory: case study – co-principalship, a model for Indigenous leadership and governance.

Kathryn Moyle, Charles Darwin University
Kevin P Gillan, Charles Darwin University
More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers’ Initiative

West Arnhem College - Gunbalanya School
West Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

Case Study: Co-principalship - a model for Indigenous leadership and governance

Prepared by Professor Kathryn Moyle and Professor Kevin Gillan

October 2013
Funded by the Australian Government through the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers’ Initiative (MATSITI) at the University of South Australia

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The authors wish to acknowledge the school principals and community at West Arnhem College - Gunbalanya School who assisted in the production of this case study during 2012 and 2013.

ISBN 978-1-921576-89-8
Co-principalship: a model for Indigenous leadership and governance

West Arnhem College - Gunbalanya School

This case study has been developed from a review of documents prepared by the School including the Annual Operational Plan, a review of literature, and structured conversations held with the two principals of the School and the Director of School Performance.

Gunbalanya School provides a focus for education in the local community. The School provides education from preschool to the senior years. There is a crèche and pre-school, and the program Family As First Teachers (FAFT) is run to support early childhood development. The School also has an emphasis on students completing a full secondary education, and has a specific Secondary Education Strategic Plan.

In addition, Gunbalanya School provides education services to two Homeland Learning Centres. The Homeland Centres are of varying distances to the east of the School, with mixed levels of accessibility, especially in the wet season when road and sometimes air travel can be problematic due to flooding.

The School, including the Homeland Learning Centres, have enrolments of 275. Over 98% of students who attend the School and Centres, are Indigenous. The average student attendance rate in 2012 was 53%, during which time Gunbalanya School had 26.8 full time equivalent teaching staff and 13 full time non-teaching staff.

The school leadership at Gunbalanya School is focused on ensuring the programs offered are effective and engaging as well culturally responsive. They want to challenge and extend the students’ knowledge, skills and understandings in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of learning. Strong community engagement in the School is a central consideration that underpins the work of the School.
Gunbalanya School has introduced several initiatives that are aimed at ensuring the School works in concert with the community. A flexible school year has been introduced seeing classes begin three weeks earlier than other schools in the Northern Territory; ie in mid January, rather than late January or early February. This change has enabled students to take a longer break at the end of semester one, when the weather is dry, and the timing coincides with traditional community activities. This change to the school year has assisted with the improvement of students’ attendance at school. The School principals have also negotiated with the community to defer the conduct of funerals until the students are on holidays, rather than immediately when people die, in order to reduce the impact of traditional ceremonies on the students’ attendance at school.

Recognising the importance between health and education, recently, a Learning Games resource was introduced into the School that focuses on the interactions between children and parents. The resource is aimed at improving children’s cognitive and communication skills, social and emotional behaviour and pre-school readiness for children under four years old. The resource provides a suite of culturally appropriate and stimulating games that educators, Indigenous staff and families can use to promote healthy early childhood development. It aims to support innovative teaching strategies that shape early childhood education in remote Indigenous communities across the Territory. This initiative is a reflection of the importance the school leadership places on interacting meaningfully with parents and the community about students’ health, wellbeing and education.

Community demographics
Gunbalanya School is located 320 kilometres east of Darwin on the eastern border of Kakadu National Park, in the Northern Territory. The School serves the Kunbarllanjnja community, also known as Oenpelli. Kunbarllanjnja has a population of approximately 1500 residents, although this number varies according to the season. The traditional owners of the land are the Mandjurlungunj Clan. There are 25 Clan groups in the immediate region. Road access to the community is only possible with four wheel drive during the dry season, but has an all weather air strip.

Language and culture
The main community language is Kunwinjku. About 95% of students speak a language other than English as their first language.
**School leadership and governance**

Gunbalanya School uses a co-principal model, which means an Indigenous school principal works collaboratively with a non-Indigenous school principal. The co-principalship model operates on the basis of equal and reciprocal relationships between the two principals.

The Indigenous school principal comes from the local community, being a long term employee of the School. Both School principals have been employed at the School for over four years, and both have principal appointments for four years. This continuity has given the School a sense of stability and sustainability. As a result, there is trust in the leadership of the School from both the Indigenous community and from the government bureaucracy.

The relationship between the two principals is critically important for this style of leadership to work successfully. The two principals hold meetings on a wide range of issues, both large and small, to ensure a team approach to their work. They share mutual respect, and recognise that some days they will be grumpy with each other and other days will be terrific. Not harbouring grudges is fundamental to such an effective, working relationship.

The principals have developed an approach of working together that involves developing a shared understanding about a particular issue, and both making decisions together. The principals believe that it has also been important that all staff and the community know about this process of joint decision-making, and see it working. That is, the shared approach to decision-making has been critical to making the School operate well.

The vision and philosophical approach to education at the School is informed by the Indigenous school principal. In 2002, she said that:

> In my view, Gunbalanya people can be metaphorically compared to a turtle shell. The shell is composed of numerous parts and different shapes, as do the students, representing the cultural backgrounds of Binjir people and the divergent knowledge and experiences they bring. The important feature of the turtle shell is that all its parts are intrinsically held together (Djayhgurruna, 2002).

How the turtle shell metaphor has been applied at Gunbalanya School is outlined by the Indigenous school principal in the 2011 YouTube video: Indigenous education: A cultural story http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5p_LuBWwM4

The collaborative `world view` outlined in this video, is shared by the non-Indigenous school principal, and informs their priority of building significant educational and cultural links with the community. Both principals recognise that it is important to have regular community meetings, as this group is seen as the `real` planning body within the School and community, and as such has to be kept strong.
The principals have complementary sets of skills, which benefit the school community:

- The Indigenous principal has recognised power, as she comes from the community, speaks the language of the community, and understands community protocols and processes in relation to events such as funerals, ceremonies, and disputes;

- The non-Indigenous principal has recognised power as this person speaks the English language of government bureaucrats, and understands the requirements and paperwork emanating from government offices.

As such, both principals have legitimacy that complement each other.

The co-principalship approach to governance and leadership assumes a collaborative and consultative approach to decision-making. But such an approach requires time for issues to be sorted out and resolutions agreed upon: an approach that is sometimes counter to the ways in which governments work, where decisions are to be made within set periods of time. Indeed, one of the concerns with the consultative approaches used in the Kunbarlanjinja community is that government officers do not treat their decision-making processes seriously.

Factors that have been critical to making the co-principalship model work though, have included that the two principals respect and listen to each other, they work as a team, and both have a strong connections with community.

**Community leadership**

The Gunbalanya School is part of the community and works within the community leadership and governance structures. Governance at the local level includes through the East Arnhem Shire Council.

**The challenge**

Leadership challenges in the School relate to strengthening and enhancing the relationships with the community; fostering cross-cultural understanding so that they underpin the ways of working in the School; the employment of the Elders in the School; increasing the involvement of community members and staff in the decision-making of the School; and ongoing development of all staff. The place of the School as an employer within the community is recognised by the principals who also aim to develop career paths for school leavers in various roles including as teachers and school leaders.

School leadership is seen as the key to improving the educational outcomes at the School. High bureaucratic and administration loads from central office however, have sometimes been seen to stymie opportunities for capacity building within the community.
A challenge of the co-principal model is that government departments do not necessarily recognise that both principals are equals, and share the responsibilities of leading and managing the School. The Indigenous principal is sometimes treated in a tokenistic manner and the non-Indigenous principal is treated as having single responsibility for the School. The staff also have to learn how to work with two school principals rather than one.

Furthermore, in times of fiscal restraint, it may become difficult for the government to see the value of supporting two school principals at the one school. Addressing these issues requires cultural changes within government and ongoing professional development within the School.

**Intended outcomes**

Gunbalanya School promotes two way education and places an emphasis on role modelling to build the capacity of local community members. The School places a high value on community engagement and adult education that can lead to real jobs within the community. These aims are represented in the operational and strategic plans of the School and are actively promoted and supported by the School principals.

It is the aim of the School to have all staff members undertaking some form of adult learning, in vocational education and training (VET), higher education or professional learning. Indeed, professional learning and staff development are seen as critical to building the capacity of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who work in and with the School.

Associated with the aim to increase the community involvement in the School, is increasing community members’ understanding of budgets and budget processes. One of the roles of the School Council is to approve the School’s budget, and so explicit and well understood processes that underpin the development and implementation of the School budget, informs the approaches to leadership and governance being implemented at the School.

**Building practice**

The leadership team explicitly work to be role models within the School, and to lead ongoing professional learning with the staff. The co-principal approach to school leadership, reflects the two-way approach to both the curriculum taught and the administration adopted at the School. The shared approach to leadership is also carried throughout the School with Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and senior teachers in the School; Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood educators and coaches for the Family As First Teachers program; and as business and administrative officers within the School.
The School uses an evidence-based approach to decision-making. The two School principals work together to ensure the data about students’ attendance and related issues is accurately entered into the Northern Territory Department of Education’s students’ database Student Administration Management System (SAMS). This information is used to inform the policies, leadership and teaching at the School.

Within the School a Learning Together professional development approach is used. This approach involves regular, tri-term meetings with teaching and assistant teaching staff to discuss current education and community issues. The topics covered in these sessions include local culture, bush medicine, student attendance, assessment and reporting of student outcomes. The School has also instigated a process of tracking school leavers, in order to build the pathways from school to work.

Community perceptions of the School are important to the principals. The School uses social media to promote their achievements, and to build wider understanding to their approaches to both ways or two ways education. Examples include the many videos produced by the School, which are available on You Tube. Simply enter ‘Gunbalanya’ into the You Tube search engine, and many of these videos become immediately available.

**Professional learning strategies used**

The School runs a continuous induction program for staff and the community. The principals use a ‘two ways approach’ to education which has been assisted by the use of the Cultures of Collaboration induction program, designed to build intercultural understandings among new teachers in the School.

To assist with ongoing school improvement, there is a commitment from the two principals, to check-in with and listen to staff using a ‘checking circle approach’ to ensure shared understandings between the staff and the principals.

Priorities for professional learning of the senior staff include capacity building and skill development in instructional leadership. The professional growth for Indigenous staff includes support to complete formal qualifications in partnership with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE). These qualifications include teacher education qualifications for the Assistant Teachers and VET qualifications for the canteen workers and school assistants.

There is a deliberate emphasis within the School to supporting teachers, assistant teachers and school support officers to be actively involved in the relevant professional associations, to support their own going development. The senior staff in the School have undertaken extended professional learning programs offered by the Centre for School Leadership, Learning and Development, which is located at Charles Darwin University (CDU), and has been established under a partnership agreement between the Northern Territory Government and the University.
Key points for Indigenous governance and school leadership

The two principals continually work on their leadership and management styles, and on their personal relationships. Commitment by community members to the School is seen as a big issue for getting people to take responsibility for building the sustainability of local educators working in the School. The following characteristics have been identified as necessary to ensure the sustainability of the co-principalship model to school leadership in Gunbalanya:

- A commitment to building a leadership team with local staff and community members;
- Provision of ongoing professional learning for the general Indigenous staff in school;
- Provision of mentoring to support leadership for Indigenous people in the school; and
- Input by the community into the selection of school principals and other staff members.

Suggestions for assisting with the professional learning of staff at Gunbalanya include having a qualified trainer embedded in the School community, who can assist all staff with their ongoing education and professional development. Dedicating a private area for the conduct of the professional development and study is seen within the School as important, so that neither the Indigenous nor non-Indigenous staff feel embarrassed or intimidated, about learning something new.

Some of the inhibiting factors to the sustainability of the co-principalship model are seen to be the inability of local recruits to obtain government housing. Currently, while the Balanda principal receives a government house free of rent, the local Indigenous principal is not accorded this same right. This policy restriction limits the aspirations of locals to become a teacher or principal, when they see the Balanda teachers arrive from the south and provided with housing the locals could only dream about. Furthermore, there is a tendency within government to not provide permanent employment for the Indigenous staff. The consequence from this practice is that the Assistant Teachers in particular, do not receive payment over the school holidays. To address this issue, the School has instituted a practice of withholding $5 per week of their pay, and providing this money to the Assistant Teachers in the school holiday period, so they have an ongoing income stream.

While the School has instituted measures to address the perceived inequalities arising from government policies, these issues are problematic, especially when compared to the advantages Balanda people can attract, when they are not from the local community.
Conclusions and recommendations

The strength of the co-principal model of school leadership is that both principals have strengths that complement the way each other works. The Indigenous School principal is a ‘local’. She is working with her people. Both School principals have demonstrated a commitment to the School and its’ community. They have both been working at the School for over four years. As such, the government, the staff and the community all have a sense of stability about the directions the School is heading. There is trust in the leadership of the School from both the Indigenous community and from the government.

To make the day-to-day operations of the School work, the principals really have to listen to what the needs and priorities are within the community, and to share each other’s understandings of these issues: if you listen you get a connection with the community.

The School principals share a commitment to the two-way or both ways education offered at the School. This commitment is reflected in the ways they work together, the ways in which they interact with the community, and in the programs offered at the School. They have high expectations for both the staff and the students at the School, and these expectations are resulting in achievements never seen before in this School community.

Additional information

To learn more about the two-way philosophy that operates at Gunbalanya School see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5p_LuBWwM4

Key words and abbreviations

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Balanda</td>
<td>Non-Indigenous person</td>
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<td>BIITE</td>
<td>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</td>
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<td>Bininj people</td>
<td>Indigenous people of West Arnhem Land</td>
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<td>Both ways education</td>
<td>Used inter-changeably with ‘two ways education’.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Refers to learning in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of working</td>
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<td>CDU</td>
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<td>SAMS</td>
<td>Student Administration Management System</td>
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<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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References


More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers’ Initiative
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Bininj World View

Prior-Balandi Contact

• Sharing
• Wisdom
• Spiritual
• WellBeing
• Given
• Respect & Dignity

Gunbalanya World

Prior & Contact Time

• Clear Role
• Growing
• Collective Contribution & Effort
• Interaction

Fragmented Community Present

• Regular Attendance
• Team Building
• Empowerment
• Community Policies
• Staff Development
• Strong Leaders

1997 Billie Djayhgurrnga
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Scenes from Gunbalanya Community

Student artwork at Gunbalanya School

Gunbalanya Township

The iconic turtle