

# **Education in Wadeye and the Thamarrurr Region: Challenges & Responsibilities across the Generations**

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## Introduction

Over the course of the last one hundred years or so, education in what has come to be known as ‘the Thamarrurr Region’ has taken various forms. While there were intermittent incursions by miners, pastoralists, seafaring Malays and others, non-Indigenous contact only became a reality with the arrival of the Catholic missionaries in 1935. There had until this time been an unbroken continuum of traditional, Indigenous education with respect to all aspects of life in this region that stretched back many thousands of years.

“Education” took place on a daily basis; it was lived, breathed and passed on through the varying elements required to survive a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Education was necessary, because without it, survival was impossible. While numeracy and literacy were not present, teaching took place via activities necessary to sustain life on a daily basis – the making of implements, construction of shelter, being aware of the seasons, identifying and tracking a varied array of foodstuffs and animals, gathering those foods, hunting larger game, and knowing one’s whereabouts and how to return home.

Higher education was also available. It took place in the ceremonial universities of the senior men and women, with boys and girls of appropriate maturity joining them when invited to experience the more solemn and religious aspects of their society. This is how boys were made men, and girls, women. This is where they learnt the law, the song cycles, their responsibilities and the higher level social requirements of their sex, their clan and their ceremonial group.

Then the missionaries came.

In 1935 Fr Richard Docherty landed at Werntek Nganaiyi in the ship, St Francis, with a second, the Arioki, close behind. With his coming, and that of other members of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (“MSC”), continuous contact with Western culture began. While they brought many things with them – religion, tobacco, rations, a Model T Ford – one of the most revolutionary new aspects brought by the missionaries, and in particular the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (“OLSH”), was a Western culture education. This education was very different to what had been experienced to date. It was based on another language, included the ability to write that language and also to express oneself mathematically, again in written form.

What has been the impact of this clash of educational philosophies? How have the people of the Thamarrurr Region reacted to its implementation? Has it been successful, or has it failed dismally? Or is it somewhere in between, trying to work through in a bi-cultural context?

In this discussion we examine where education stands in this Region and, in particular, in the township of Wadeye, in 2009. We have attempted to do this by way of an historical examination of the development of the township, the subsequent commencement of education in a formal Western culture context and the longer-term process of education delivery in a growing Indigenous township. In particular, we examine the current educational context and the way in which the social dynamic of ‘Wadeye town’ and its residents impacts upon the school and, therefore, the delivery of education.

## Contact: The Thamarrurr Region and Wadeye

Consistent contact with non-Indigenous people came to the lands and peoples of the Thamarrurr Region in 1935 when Fr Richard Docherty (MSC) founded the mission station of Port Keats on coastal sands belonging to the Kardu Rak Kirnmu clan at a place called Werntek Nganaiyi.<sup>1</sup> Fr Docherty was accompanied by a group of local Aboriginals he had located in Darwin to act as interpreters – Harry Luke Kolumboort and his wife Ruby, Albert Muta Pultchen, Billy Majindi and Jackie Marlin. He was also joined by Stephen Sugobie (who piloted the Arioki), Pat Ritchie, John Johnson, (then) Dr. Stanner, an observer and anthropologist from Canberra, and Br. Smith, the skipper of the St. Francis.<sup>2</sup>

As was later recorded, Fr Docherty stated that at the time, “[t]here were about 150 aborigines there, a mixture of 5 or 6 tribes, all speaking different languages ... There was not much hope for the survival of these people when I first went there”. Yet, in less than 40 years there would be a population of nearly 1,000.<sup>3</sup> The reason for the presence of Fr Docherty was recognized by (now) Professor Stanner who, in a 1952 article written for the *Sydney Morning Herald* under the headline, “Port Keats Mission Has Saved Tribe From ‘Dying’”, wrote:-

“Less than 20 years ago, the Murinbata, a ‘saltwater’ tribe living between the Daly and Fitzmaurice Rivers on the western coast of the Northern Territory, appeared to be dying out, much as hundreds of other Australian aboriginal tribes had done.

Today, they have at least doubled their numbers and seem likely to increase still further if no setbacks occur. The tribe gives an observer the impression of high vitality, pride and interest in the future.

Such conditions are extremely unusual among the aborigines in modern times. The reasons for so astonishing a transformation are worth close inquiry. The credit is due almost entirely to the work of the Sacred Heart Mission, which was founded at Port Keats in 1935.

The mission party lived through many tense moments until the life of the Murinbata quietened and stabilized around the mission. When we arrived they were almost complete myalls, as wild as hawks. There were very few children to be seen. Many adult men had been killed in fights with neighbouring tribes ... and women had been stolen. A number of young men were in gaol, and others had drifted away to the Daly River, Darwin, Katherine, and the Victoria River cattle stations.

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<sup>1</sup> See map at **Annexure A**. This area is often referred to as ‘Old Mission’ due to the fact that it was the site for development of the first mission station;

<sup>2</sup> Pye, J. (M.S.C.), “*The Port Keats Story*”, 1973, at p. 22;

<sup>3</sup> “*Fr Docherty Looks Back*”, An interview with Fr Docherty MSC by the *NT News*, 21 October 1973;

It was very clear to me that the chain of effects was starting which would, over a very short period, have emptied the countryside. Had Father Docherty arrived a few years later, it would probably have been just too late”.<sup>4</sup>

For reasons of better water supply and higher, firmer ground to build an airstrip, the mission station re-located to the present site of Wadeye over the course of 1938-39.<sup>5</sup> This area of land belonged and continues to belong to the people of the Kardu Yek Diminin clan, whose elders invited the missionaries to re-establish Port Keats Mission on this better land. Along with the missionaries came members of the other clan groups – over time, more than twenty in all – and they were each allocated an area where they were able to stay by the Diminin elders. These areas, as much as possible, were located in a similar position to the lands that each had come from – for example, those from the coast were able to camp on the western side of the growing mission station, and those from inland on the eastern side. As a result, Wadeye – even today – reflects the position of clan lands throughout the wider Thamarrurr Region.

In this manner, the era of the missionaries began. Historically, we consider it is possible to identify this and other eras that have and are now impacting upon the Thamarrurr Region, and Wadeye in particular<sup>6</sup>:-

1. The Dreamtime-1935 – The Aboriginal Era;
2. 1935-1967 – The Mission Era;
3. 1967-2003 – The Self-Determination Era; and
4. 2003-present – The Intervention Era.

Within each of these there are also sub-eras and we now turn to explore these eras and sub-eras.

#### 1) The Dreamtime-1935 – The Aboriginal Era

We do not propose to attempt a review of the culture of the peoples who lived in the Thamarrurr Region at this time. Others who were far closer to the time, travelled through the region, conducted interviews and made studies have written volumes on the life that was, and life as they saw it then.<sup>7</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the people of this area were strong and resourceful. They were, like other Aboriginal people, hunter-gatherers. Their lives were centred upon

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<sup>4</sup> Stanner, W.E.H. (Prof), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1952, as quoted by Hearn, P. (MSC), “*A Theology of Mission: An Analysis of the Theology of Mission of the Catholic Diocese of Darwin in its Ministry to Aboriginal People during the Episcopacy of JOHN O’LOUGHLIN MSC (1949-85)*”, Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2003, at p. 98-99 (hereafter *A Theology of Mission*);

<sup>5</sup> Pye, J. (M.S.C.), “*The Port Keats Story*”, op cit, at p. 29;

<sup>6</sup> See also McCormack, D., “*Remote Economic Rationalism: A Contradiction in Terms*”, A Presentation for Semester II to students of SWK 440A, “Rural & Remote Social Work Practice”, Charles Darwin University, 5 June 2006, p. 8, <http://www.bowden-mccormack.com.au/uploads/articles-papers/remote-economic-rationalism.pdf>;

<sup>7</sup> See Stanner, W.E.H. (Prof), “*White Man Got No Dreaming – Essays 1938-1973*”, Australian National University Press, 1979, and Falkenberg, J., “*Kin and Totem – Group Relations of Australian Aborigines in the Port Keats District*”, July 1959, Oslo University Press (hereafter *Kin and Totem*);

their particular clan estate and the relationships forged with others through birth, marriage or the occurrence of special events. A number of unique and distinct languages – not merely dialects – were spoken, with knowledge passed on in oral form. Spiritual, religious and ceremonial life was strong. Male authority was to the fore, and structure, discipline and respect were rigorously enforced.

Education and learning were the keys to survival and people were supported and nurtured by a societal structure and discipline throughout their lives. Those of this area were also recognised as people who constantly sought to improve the manner in which they lived. This last aspect in particular is demonstrated by efforts understood to have been made (in approximately the late 1800's) to overlay their method of relating to one another, or kinship system, with the sub-section system gained from Western and/or Central Australia (whereupon the society is divided into set groups of fours and eights)<sup>8</sup>. Such experiments of a religious and social nature were ongoing, part of the never-ending search for an improved, easier and more fulfilled life.

## 2) 1935-1967 – The Mission Era

This era was highlighted by first contact, original and current settlement, and a people subject to Catholic theology and policy. Upon their arrival at Wadeye, the Catholic missionaries had “not systematically tried to persuade the Aborigines to abandon their cultural traditions, customs and mores, unless these, from the missionaries’ point of view, [were] in direct opposition to Christianity”.<sup>9</sup> However, due to the circumstances of Aboriginal people right across Australia, it was thought their culture was soon to be extinct due to the massive confrontation with the dominant culture. Missionaries considered this to be an “unavoidable consequence”.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, and working on the theory that children could be influenced most easily, the mission, in 1947, “established a dormitory where boys from the age of 7-8 years live permanently, under supervision from the missionaries. In the same way the young girls some years earlier were collected at a convent where they also reside permanently. At the same time these children go to school until they are 14 years old. ... Among the consequences of the separation of the children from the other members of the tribe is the almost complete discontinuation of the boys’ initiation ceremonies. The gradual admission into the secret life is now replaced by a systematic education in Christianity”.<sup>11</sup>

Polygamy too was contrary to Catholic beliefs and “had to go ... [Fr Docherty] forbade [it] and the people accepted the ruling”.<sup>12</sup> The missionaries set about introducing this belief at Wadeye and it “worked to a certain extent. Some men gave up their wives while others did not. Missionaries also re-allocated women to men who did not have wives in order to build up numbers of tribes they considered to be dying out. The effect this had

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, Mr K. Barber, Anthropologist, 2004-05;

<sup>9</sup> Falkenberg, J., “*Kin and Totem*”, op cit, p. 19;

<sup>10</sup> Ibid;

<sup>11</sup> Ibid;

<sup>12</sup> “*Fr Docherty Looks Back*”, An interview with Fr Docherty MSC by the *NT News*, 21 October 1973;

on family groups was that their base-level food supply mechanism had been removed – as they could no longer gather enough food for the entire family, they were now reliant on rations being provided by the newcomers in order to survive”.<sup>13</sup>

In doing such things, often in collaboration with the people, the missionaries were carrying out two important elements of their work: firstly, helping the Aboriginal people to gain understanding of a new way of life because the loss of theirs was ‘unavoidable’; secondly, assimilating the Aboriginal people through evangelization.<sup>14</sup>

As they set about their daily tasks, a crucial concept was brought to this Aboriginal culture by the missionaries – that of WORK. Prior to their arrival, the people of the Thamarrurr Region lived as hunter-gatherers, where each day had its defined and inescapable tasks required to ensure the survival of self, family and clan. This was LIFE, not WORK. Now, they were encouraged to work to build up the mission station and, for doing so, rations were allocated.

Later, when money became available, a local man “ran the brick making factory. Another group of men with the help of one qualified white carpenter built houses. ... As more goods came into the place any boats and barges were unloaded by men without mechanical help. In those days there was just a handful of [non-local] staff. The bulk of the work was done by the aboriginal people. Money was also at a minimum ... We depended mainly on the generosity of good people in the south”.<sup>15</sup>

Life was in transition. Aboriginal culture was moving from hunter-gather, to work for rations, then to work for money. Fr. Leary, stationed at Wadeye for some 11 years between 1958 and 1980, observed that the “advent of money, of course, had made a difference. I do believe I have witnessed a life-style perverted almost overnight with the introduction of a cash economy. When you have a supermarket and money to hand there is no need to hunt, no need to teach the children to hunt. The skills that made these people the most independent of peoples are not needed in the new situation. It was such a quick passage from independence to dependency”.<sup>16</sup>

What did this mean? For the first time in their history, “families were dependent on another culture for sustenance ... firstly through rations, then by way of the local store. Two positive points remained:- money was not plentiful, and it had to be earned through work”.<sup>17</sup>

Further change then came, only this time it seemed quite positive.

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<sup>13</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, A Presentation to the National Mental Health and Homelessness Advisory Committee of St. Vincent de Paul Society, 20 July 2006, p. 4, <http://www.bowden-mccormack.com.au/uploads/articles-papers/substance-first-men.pdf>;

<sup>14</sup> See Hearn, P. (MSC), “*A Theology of Mission*”, op cit;

<sup>15</sup> Leary, J. (Fr)., “*Port Keats – An Historical Perspective*”, undated notes provided to *NT News* regarding historical background to a special publication on 29 October 1997;

<sup>16</sup> Ibid;

<sup>17</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, op cit, p. 6;

### 3) 1967-2003 – The Self-Determination Era

This era began with a sense of hope, hope that Aboriginal Australia was ready to move forward and take its rightful place in ‘the lucky country’. As Br John Pye expressed it, “[s]elf determination is now the stated policy. It is the desired thing and let us hope it works and does not destroy all previous effort by becoming self extermination”.<sup>18</sup>

The sub-eras, however, reflect a period of continued and ever-quickenening change:-

- a. 1967-present – equal pay, the provision of a ‘training allowance’ and the commencement of social services for the Aboriginal population, including welfare;
- b. 1967-1978 – gradual changeover from Catholic Mission control to an incorporated local council;
- c. 1978-1994 – incorporated local council, Kardu Numida Incorporated (“KNI”), the background work for which was conducted by Br Andy Howley and (now former) Fr Patrick Dodson – a time of Self-Management; and
- d. 1994-2003 – collapse of Kardu Numida Incorporated and the search for another method of governance.

The historical and resoundingly successful referendum of 1967 amended the Australian Constitution such that the Federal Government could make laws for Aboriginal people as they were now considered, for the first time, to be ‘citizens of Australia’ – as opposed to the previous designation of ‘flora and fauna’. While having its origins in the Wave Hill walk-off, the advent of equal pay was a major introduction following the referendum. Far from being all-positive, however, equal pay meant that the value of the Aboriginal workforce on cattle stations and in other industry – usually compensated for by way of rations and little to no pay – diminished in comparison to non-Aboriginal employees.

The great majority were let go, returning to communities that were not created to cater for great numbers of people living in the immediate vicinity. Catholic policies of the time determined that Wadeye was “intended to serve as a centre for the spiritual, educational and medical services for the aborigines in the area. ... most families were to continue in employment, or to find employment, if the populations began to build again, on farms or cattle stations in the region ...”.<sup>19</sup>

People returned to find a lack of employment opportunity and, slowly but surely, a deficiency in the appropriate provision of adequate services and infrastructure by governments. They had been told to prepare for a new future and move into a new world; they were educated to work in the new world, but now that education didn’t lead to jobs. Through the work schemes of the time, “young men and women, educated to some degree, rode an endless, aimless treadmill, their main occupation gathering up their own garbage. Training Allowance had become no more than a dole out. Removed still

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<sup>18</sup> Pye, J. (M.S.C.), “*The Port Keats Story*”, op cit, at p. 49;

<sup>19</sup> Hearn, P. (MSC), “*A Theology of Mission*”, op cit, p. 103, 105;

further from an active life of hunting, dependence was never so abject”.<sup>20</sup> They were disengaged from both the ‘old ways’ and the ‘new ways’ – so now what?

The alternative that emerged for Aboriginal people in the 1970s due to their new-found status as citizens of Australia was unemployment benefits. With its introduction, a new economy flowered and, over time, took deep root in the life and psyche of its recipients – welfare.<sup>21</sup> Harry Kolumboort, a *Murrinh-patha* man of the Diminin clan who was very perceptive and a thinker, on receiving his first ‘Training Allowance’ package called a public meeting. Waving his wage packet he announced:-

“This is a new way to live. It is not my old way. My old way is living in the bush, teaching my children how to live there. That is me. This new way is not me. What if I leave my old way and join their new way? I will end up ‘makardu’ [non-person; nobody]”.<sup>22</sup>

Fr. Leary, as noted above, wrote that the arrival of money led to “a quick passage from independence to dependency”. The people of this Region moved from a position of complete self-sufficiency and independence to one of ‘planned dependency’ or ‘parasitism’.<sup>23</sup> The move from self-sufficiency occurred in three stages:-

- i) from hunting and gathering to receiving rations for work – this meant that man, in particular, was not required to hunt for his family’s food, but instead to work and be provided with food;
- ii) then from receiving rations to buying food at the store with money earned from work. As hunting was no longer required and food simply purchased, man disengaged further as collection was woman’s work.<sup>24</sup>

The welfare economy then saw the following stage emerge:-

- iii) from work for rations, to work for money and buying food at the store, the population moved to buying food at the store with money received from welfare – a time of ‘money for nothing’.<sup>25</sup>

As the cash economy developed and people had greater access to income in the forms noted, “the nexus between meaningful work and sustenance became more and more difficult to uphold. With these developments, especially unemployment benefits, the

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<sup>20</sup> Fr. Leary to Bishop O’Loughlin, 16 April 1972, DCA B141 (referred to in Hearn, P. (MSC), “*A Theology of Mission*”, op cit, at p. 145);

<sup>21</sup> See also McCormack, D., “*Remote Economic Rationalism: A Contradiction in Terms*”, op cit;

<sup>22</sup> Leary, J. (Fr.), “*Port Keats – An Historical Perspective*”, undated notes provided to NT News regarding historical background to a special publication on 29 October 1997;

<sup>23</sup> See W.E.H. Stanner, ‘*Durmugam: A Nangiomeri (1959)*’, in “*White Man Got No Dreaming*”, Essays 1938-1973, Australian National University Press, 1979, p.74-75;

<sup>24</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, op cit, p. 7;

<sup>25</sup> Ibid;

phenomenon of dependency became an enduring issue in the absence of meaningful work”.<sup>26</sup>

Now, instead of man being the primary provider, woman has assumed this role. In fact, man is now generally not required to provide; his wife receives the bulk of all welfare payments and the provision of food requires but a short walk to the local store. The roles of men and women within society have, therefore, changed markedly – and, as roles change, then so too does society. For one there has been gain; for the other, loss. Such loss can bring extreme emotions, a pattern of which may be “grief immediately associated with that loss; anger; low self-esteem and self-confidence; lack of motivation; a sense of helplessness; and, most importantly, ever-diminishing hope in the future. ... [For the people of Wadeye,] these are thoughts and emotions that now span generations”.<sup>27</sup>

The position of men – the legislators, the enforcers of justice, the hunters, the prosecutors of trade – has been so desecrated by the impact of these eras following contact “that there is little wonder ... [they] are so caught up in social ‘anomie’ (alcohol, unemployment, gaol) or that they are seeking salvation in the self-chosen ‘apartheid’ of homeland movements and restricted-entry communities. To state their expectations more positively it may be said that Aboriginal men are expecting, by pursuance of the goals of autonomy and peace, to find a way of living with dignity within a monied economy and a wider society whose intervention is required as due aid while resented simultaneously as intrusion”.<sup>28</sup>

It can be said that men have been the most impacted by this attempt to forget current circumstances, to erase from the mind their position – as one would say in *Murrinh-patha* – as “*kardu makardu*” – that is, a non-person, a nobody. The abuse of varying forms of substances in the attempt to achieve this erasing has seen not only a loss of self-respect, but the respect of others. The younger male, in particular, after seeing his father, uncle, grandfather and other elders consistently abrogating their responsibilities in time walks past them and takes their place. Now we see what many communities and towns are experiencing – the rise of the child.<sup>29</sup> A now-deceased clan leader expressed this in the following terms:-

“We know we do not control our community. Our young boys who have lost all sense of meaning in their lives rule our community through fear. We sometimes live in fear of our own children”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hearn, P. (MSC), “*A Theology of Mission*”, op cit, p. 148;

<sup>27</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, op cit, p. 8;

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, MJ. (MSC), “*Observed Values in Aboriginal Society*”, Nelen Yubu, No. 15, 1983, pp. 32-33;

<sup>29</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, op cit, p. 9;

<sup>30</sup> Desmarchelier, X., “*A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region*”, Background Presentation prepared by the people of Wadeye on behalf of Thamarrurr Incorporated, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2000, p. 26-27 (hereafter “*A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region*”)

Now the tables have turned 180 degrees, and so too an entire society, for “it is the young boys who now rule, not the old men. It is those with the least experience, the least knowledge [and education, both Aboriginal and Western] and the least fear who rule; those with the most experience and the greatest knowledge [of both Aboriginal and Western ways] are the most fearful – and are therefore ruled. Critically, it must be realized that this is the position in which many men find themselves, not just women”.<sup>31</sup>

By the end of this period of ‘self-determination’ then, society at Wadeye was in a state of social malaise. People generally were ‘lost’ and men, particularly in their darkest moments, viewed themselves as ‘*kardu makardu*’.

#### 4) 2003-present – The Intervention Era

We entered this particular era with the society of those in the Thamarrurr Region in a state that could only be described as ‘lost’. The great majority of persons, and men in particular, were and are caught in a spiral of substance abuse, attempting to erase their positions as ‘nobody’. Questions were and are asked – “why become educated, for there are not enough jobs; should opportunity present, why work, for dependence is easier; why attempt to parent, for they are in fear of youth. Substance abuse, itinerancy, incarceration and health disorders are the norm. [These are men] ... who have experienced a breakdown of their social norms and values, who lack adequate intellectual understanding of the dominant world, and who struggle to communicate with it. They have lost their role, their place, their hope”.<sup>32</sup>

In order to address this social malaise, however, steps began to be taken by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, as evidenced by the sub-eras present:-

- a. 2003-2008 – emergence of the Thamarrurr Community Government Council (“TRC”);
- b. 2003-2006 – the Council of Australian Government’s trial (“COAG”)<sup>33</sup>;
- c. 2007-present – lodging of a Complaint with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (now the Australian Human Rights Commission (“AHRC”)) by Mr Tobias Nganbe;
- d. 2007-present – lifting of the Remote Area Exemption (“RAE”) and legislating for the Northern Territory Emergency Response (“NTER”), in particular income quarantining;
- e. 2008-present – abolition of Thamarrurr Community Government Council and introduction of the Victoria Daly Shire Council (“VDSC”); and

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<sup>31</sup> McCormack, D., “*The Substance of Australia’s First Men*”, op cit, p. 10;

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 19;

<sup>33</sup> See Gray, B. 2006. *Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Trial Evaluation: Wadeye, Northern Territory*, an Independent Evaluation by Bill Gray AM, WJG Associates Pty Ltd, found at [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/evaluation/coag\\_trial\\_site\\_reports/nt\\_coag\\_trial/Documents/COAG\\_NT.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/evaluation/coag_trial_site_reports/nt_coag_trial/Documents/COAG_NT.pdf)

- f. 2008-present – upon the abolition of Thamarrurr Community Government Council, commencement of Thamarrurr Development Corporation Ltd. (“TDC”) and the emergence of Thamarrurr Incorporated (“Thamarrurr Inc.”).

TRC was born due to the collapse of the former council, KNI, in 1994. While the collapse of KNI was both administrative and financial, the underlying issue centred upon its control by the land-owning clan and its subsequent unrepresentative nature. After years of discussion<sup>34</sup>, TRC emerged as representative of twenty (20) clans resident at Wadeye. The term ‘thamarrurr’ itself was important, as it meant “people coming together to speak with one voice”.<sup>35</sup> The process also devolved some power from the elders to the “middle-management” tier of the local population, particularly with respect to administration and government interaction. In doing so, the people returned to a traditional form of governance, while adapting it to the particular needs at hand. In short, the people began to address the ills of their society by first re-establishing a solid foundation of governance.

On 21 March 2003, through an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments, the Commonwealth (“Cth”) and Northern Territory (“NTG”) governments, along with the newly-formed TRC, entered into an agreement whereby a “new method” of providing government services would be trialed at Wadeye. It was among seven (7) other sites around Australia and the trial became known as the COAG trial.

Through the COAG trial, a report – “*Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance: Insights from the Thamarrurr Region, Northern Territory*”<sup>36</sup> – was published in 2004 by Professor John Taylor of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. The report came to be known simply as, “*The Taylor Report*”.

Following on from the valuable data that was collated within, and the knowledge gained from, *The Taylor Report*, Professor Taylor was asked to prepare a further document detailing opportunity costs, again specifically concentrating on the Thamarrurr Region. In 2005, and in conjunction with Professor Owen Stanley, a second report – “*The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region*”<sup>37</sup> – was published. This became known as, “*The Opportunity Costs Study*”.

With respect to education, it was found that “for every dollar spent on the average child of compulsory school age in the Northern Territory, only 47 cents is spent by all governments on the average Thamarrurr child of compulsory school age”<sup>38</sup>. While it was noted that

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<sup>34</sup> Desmarchelier, X., “A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region”, op cit;

<sup>35</sup> See Annexure “B”;

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, J., “*Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance: Insights from the Thamarrurr Region, Northern Territory*”, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra. Research Monograph No. 24, 2004. Published by ANU E Press.  
[http://epress.anu.edu.au/caepr\\_series/no\\_24/frames.php](http://epress.anu.edu.au/caepr_series/no_24/frames.php);

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, J., & Stanley, O., “*The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarrurr Region*”, WORKING PAPER No. 28/2005, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra. <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/Publications/WP/CAEPRWP28.pdf>;

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 45;

“funding for those attending school is marginally higher than the Territory average”, it was still highlighted that “the low attendance rate means that for every education dollar spent by governments on the average child of compulsory school age in the Northern Territory, at present \$0.47 is spent on the Thamarrurr equivalent”<sup>39</sup>.

Further, it was also found that a “similar gap between Thamarrurr and the Northern Territory as a whole emerges in relation to per capita spending on training programs. The relevant populations here are drawn from those aged 15 years and over. At Thamarrurr, average annual per capita spending on DEET Training programs is \$106, which is just over 40 per cent of the \$256 spent per capita on adults in the Northern Territory as a whole”<sup>40</sup>.

One of the key themes that emerged during the COAG trial was:-

### GIVE EVERY KID A CHANCE

This theme, along with the information provided by both *The Taylor Report* and *The Opportunity Costs Study*, provided real focus to TRC and the middle-management group. They could see the issues arising in the cohorts following in their footsteps (see further below) and wished to address them before time ran out. Central to this action were:-

- The provision of adequate educational infrastructure and resources, including teachers and professional development;
- Community attitudes to education generally;
- Attendance at school;
- Another key theme – LOCAL JOBS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE; and
- The social and mental impact of welfare.

TRC, in conjunction with the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic School (“OLSH Thamarrurr”) also made strong representations to the NTG for enforcement of the truancy provisions within the *Education Act 2007* (NT)<sup>41</sup> which, although in force since 2 July 1979, had never been used at Wadeye. Such requests were dismissed as being politically unpalatable if required to be enforced throughout the wider population.

OLSH Thamarrurr, again with the support of TRC, highlighted the issues raised by both *The Taylor Report* and *The Opportunity Costs Study* in the national media. A Complaint was lodged with AHRC (see below for further detail). More than ever, the spotlight was firmly on education in Wadeye. Changes began to occur – money flowed, infrastructure was built and more teachers came. Enrolment and attendance numbers increased. The Mission Agreement, the central aspect upon which the Complaint was based, was effectively torn up, replaced instead by OLSH Thamarrurr agreeing to be a Catholic systemic school as at 1 July 2007.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 63;

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 45;

<sup>41</sup> See section 31(3)(a) & (b) *Education Act 2007* (NT);

During this time, the Federal Government was also looking more closely at underlying issues. The most obvious was the receipt of ‘money for nothing’. A policy which had been present for some time, that of the unemployed being exempted from searching for work due to living in a remote area – the RAE – was to be removed. The addressing of causes at a social and mental level – at the roots – was beginning. This Federal action was taken to another level when, in June 2007, the Federal Government’s NTER was announced. For Wadeye, which had already undergone its ‘intervention’ through the COAG trial, the NTER brought with it income quarantining and a focus on ‘real’ jobs (as opposed to those secured through the Community Development and Employment Program (“CDEP”)).

To the dismay and anger of councilors, TRC itself was then ‘torn up’ when, on 1 July 2008, it was replaced by the incoming Local Government system of shires pursuant to the new *Local Government Act 2007* (NT). Three entities replaced its core functions:-

- 1) VDSC – a wide-spread local government body;
- 2) TDC – a not-for-profit with a commercial focus; and
- 3) Thamarrurr Inc. – a body to focus on social and political issues.

Through the agency of the latter two organizations, the middle-management group is continuing to strive for the improvement of life in the Thamarrurr Region, with a focus firmly on the aspect of education.

## **A History of Education**

From this general overview of impacts upon a culture and society from the time of first contact, we now turn to the specific area of education and its development over this period.

As touched on earlier, there had until the arrival of Fr Docherty been an unbroken continuum of traditional, Indigenous education in this region that stretched back thousands of years. It took place on a daily basis; it was lived, breathed and passed on through the varying elements required to survive a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Learning occurred through observation, imitation and participation, via the numerous activities of daily life. Roles were clear – prior to puberty, girls and boys were cared for and ‘educated’ by their mothers and the women generally; post-puberty separation was the norm, with boys now under the tutelage of the men, and the girls following in the footsteps of the women. It was at this time that the induction into a broader life also began through higher education.

This approach changed with the arrival of missionaries from both the MSC and OLSH orders – the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters. Sr. Mary McGowan, present at Wadeye over two periods in the 1960s and 1970s expressed her general understanding in this way:-

“1) As far as I can ascertain, education in pre-contact times was carried out by watching their elders and then imitating. Their tradition was passed on orally, over and over again. Their stories, the same, except they could initiate poetic licence, as stories were often embellished. And the wonderful thing was, the children never became tired of the stories;

2) When Welfare Schools were established, education was very white-oriented and fixated. Only English was used in schools. There was little cultural awareness. The whole aim in that period was assimilation into mainstream education. The children understood spoken English, but very few, if any, could or wished to express themselves in the English language, as they resorted to their own language at every opportunity”.<sup>42</sup>

Although the MSC missionaries arrived in 1935, education from a Western culture perspective did not commence for a further six years. In late March 1941, the arrival of the first Sisters – Dionysius, Magdalen and Xavier – from the religious order known as the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart heralded the commencement of formal education amongst the children of the various clans now beginning to populate the mission station. As described by Fr Docherty:-

“... the Sisters are the soul of the mission. You can’t succeed until they come – with their influence, their teaching – you can’t succeed on any mission. So as soon as possible, I did what they asked: got the house ready for them. When I reported that it was built and ready for their occupation, they very quickly came”.<sup>43</sup>

And further:-

“They were here for a year, and in that time we were able to do quite a bit of useful work, and the liberation of the young girls began at that time”.<sup>44</sup>

Br. John Pye also noted the approach of the Sisters:-

“The Sisters collected the little girls and took them to live in the convent with them. Cleaned them up. Put them to school. Fed and cared for them, giving them a kindness not known before. The black world was not then a woman or girl’s world”.<sup>45</sup>

School commenced initially with female students only, then included males in 1947. The school was located in what is now the historical precinct of Wadeye after the community was provided with left-over pre-fabricated buildings – known as Sydney Williams huts – by the Australian Defence Forces. It is recorded that in “1943 there were 28 pupils in the school, 32 children on the mission and [in 1973 there were] 400 school pupils and 450 under the age of 16 years in a community of 900 people”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Letter from Mary McGowan (Sister.) to D. McCormack, 20 July 2005, found in “*Thamarrurr Education Workshops – OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic School, Wadeye: Interim Report – Workshop 1, 8-9 September 2005*”, produced by Dominic McCormack, Director, MARLUK Link-Up, 17 October 2005, p. 70-71 (hereafter *Education Workshop Report*). See <http://www.bowden-mccormack.com.au/index.php?page=tools-articles-and-papers>;

<sup>43</sup> Transcript of Interview with Father Docherty recorded in 1974 by Brother John Pye, Northern Territory Archives Service – Oral History Unit;

<sup>44</sup> Ibid;

<sup>45</sup> Pye, J., (M.S.C.), “*The Port Keats Story*”, op cit, at p. 31;

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, at p. 46;

The school then shifted to its present location in the early 1970's where, after a school able to cater for the school-age population of the time was built, infrastructure was not added to significantly until 2007.

As noted by Fr. Docherty, however, due to World War II the Sisters were initially only present at Wadeye for a year, then returned to Darwin on 17 February 1942. The missionary influence, particularly from a religious perspective, only began seriously after the end of World War II. Prior to this period, the early years of the fledgling mission station were devoted to its establishment – building a church and other dwellings, gathering a herd, sowing plantations and farming, and ensuring the presence of a storehouse. Once these foundations were in place, the focus then turned to the conversion of the natives to Christianity. In order to achieve this, education was a key tool.

From this period in the mid-1940's through to 1975, the developing school system at Wadeye was led by members of both the MSC and OLSH orders<sup>47</sup>. This was required particularly with the advent of education for boys in 1947 which led to the creation of separate Boy's and Girl's Schools. In 1975, the first non-MSO / OLSH Principal was appointed. Even then, the new Principal had come to Wadeye as a lay-missionary and so had a close relationship with the work of the missionaries, their staff and their ethos. The first Principal to be appointed from outside this domain was not, in fact, appointed until 2001.

With the advent (or re-emergence) of TRC – which was seen to be an inclusive, rather than exclusive organisation – the school itself was renamed in 2005 to reflect this element of inter-connectedness. It went from being *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Catholic School* to *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart **Thamarrurr** Catholic School*. Another major step was taken when Tobias Nganbe, the person nominated by the leaders of the community to take charge of education, became a Co-Principal of OLSH Thamarrurr in 2004.

While not perfect, this was certainly a time of 'thamarrurr' – people coming together to speak with one voice – a time when the local leadership began to take real responsibility for the challenges of their era. Part of this was self-examination and, as with the re-emergence of Thamarrurr, questions were being asked on the education front – what was our history; what had happened in the past to form our present; what do we need to do now to have a better future?

To assist this process, in the early stages of 2005 various discussions were held between members of the Office of Indigenous Policy Co-Ordination ("OIPC"), the Department of Education, Science and Training (Cth) ("DEST"), TRC and OLSH Thamarrurr with respect to conducting workshops which were to focus on the future of education in Wadeye.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Annexure "C";

<sup>48</sup> *Education Workshop Report*, op cit, p. 4;

It was intended that from the planned series of workshops would come information regarding:-

- a) the type of education desired by the people of the area;
- b) an appropriate model for the delivery of that education; and
- c) a governance model for the School which allowed for increased involvement by local people with respect to the direction of education.

A Shared Responsibility Agreement (“the SRA”) was signed with respect to Education Governance, noting that the ‘Community Priority’ was:-

*“Establishment of School Board / Council to guide community planning for the future of education in the community”.*

Only one workshop in fact took place, however this was a very important step which ultimately led to the re-establishment<sup>49</sup> of the School Board in 2009, thus achieving the overall goal of the SRA. The focus of the single workshop, which took place on 8-9 September 2005, was:-

“... looking to the past and learning from the area’s education history in order to gain an understanding of what worked well and what did not. From this, decisions could be made as to what form education in the future should take”.<sup>50</sup>

At the completion of the workshop, a report was produced entitled, *“Thamarrurr Education Workshops – OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic School, Wadeye: Interim Report – Workshop 1, 8-9 September 2005”* (“the Report”).

In a section of the Report entitled, *“Observations on Common Themes”*, it is observed that “[a]cross the sixty (60) year period of 1945 through to 2005 as represented by the participants at this Workshop, there have been a number of key themes and other important aspects arise through the discussion”.<sup>51</sup> These were outlined, utilising as headings the base propositions via which the discussions were initially commenced. For the purposes of this analysis, we believe it is important to reproduce these in full, and we do so below:-

#### A) What was Bad / DID NOT Work Well

- a. Attendance – gaining and then maintaining enrolment through consistent attendance is a major issue and one which persists today. All acknowledged that it needs to be better. In order to achieve this however, a culture of education has to be a part of the parent’s and family’s attitude, with positive role models being available for the students. It is also recognised that the student’s attitude at School reflected wider community problems;

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<sup>49</sup> A School Board was in operation at OLSH School in approximately 1986. Personal communication, Mr Gerry McCormack, 2009;

<sup>50</sup> *Education Workshop Report*, op cit, p. 4;

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24;

- b. Break-ins, vandalism and graffiti etc – these caused a great deal of damage to the School. They seemed to reflect a lack of positive activities for young people, in particular the young boys / men. Again, there is a need for positive role models (particularly male), but also behaviour management guidelines with clear consequences for breaching them. Young people are seen not to respect their elders, however young boys are following the example set by older people. Such behaviour has led to cages on the buildings which is considered a terrible step;
- c. Treatment of Assistant Teachers / Local Staff – concerns were voiced that at times such persons had been treated poorly and provided with “busy work”, rather than real tasks within the classroom. It was thought that perhaps the non-local teachers / staff did not acknowledge and articulate the importance of the Assistant Teachers directly to them;
- d. Interaction & Encouragement – more whole staff activities were required as these are very good for morale. This includes activities between School staff only and also with the wider community. There must be more encouragement and recognition of the efforts of all staff from all quarters, and recognition of the need to provide pastoral care support for staff;
- e. Skills audit – it seems no record is kept of the training undertaken, skills and qualifications gained of people in the region. As a result, local people are bypassed upon changes occurring within the ranks of non-local staff i.e. the “corporate knowledge” is not retained for the benefit of new non-local staff at the community;
- f. Training & Staff Development – all staff i.e. teachers, pool, office etc, require ongoing training on a regular basis;
- g. Succession planning – continuity is vital, yet this does not occur in an organized manner with respect to either local or non-local personnel;
- h. No or inadequate cross-cultural training and orientation – this has either not occurred in the past or not carried on, making initial interaction with people in the region difficult;
- i. Bilingual program / literacy & numeracy – inadequate resources had been provided, however the focus on the English aspect was also seen to be lacking. As a result, the students here, in contrast with Daly River and Palumpa, are not able to converse in English to the same extent. With respect to literacy and numeracy, levels were generally poor. A specific note was made that a local belief is expressed that, “We don’t all need English; if some learn, that is OK”. It was also considered that there was still the need to have more awareness and understanding of the bilingual program among new staff of the School;
- j. Lack of employment – while this had not been an issue some decades ago, it is seen as a major difference in the way that the community functions now in comparison to

the way it used to. Further, it coincides with a lack of vision by many – i.e. no sense of a school to work transition, no goals and no reason to achieve;

- k. Adult Education – there is a need for improved men’s and women’s health education. “Babies are having babies”, therefore people are not developing a school-going culture.

## B) What was Good / DID Work Well

- i) Attendance – Over the years, there has always been a core group of attendees. They are able to be identified, as are their families. They clearly have the support and encouragement of family, who understand the value of and have a culture of education;
- ii) Consideration of Assistant Teachers / Local Staff – relationships with the local staff members, who were very loyal and supportive, was / is vital. They are the backbone of the School structure and it would not function without them – they are essential to education. They are part of a welcoming School community that is growing in confidence, particularly with the establishment of the Leadership Group, and provide good role models (Note: However, with the exception of one, all are female);
- iii) Cross-cultural training and orientation – while this has been an area in which the community has struggled in the past, the introduction of the new Cross-cultural Awareness Course has been very positive;
- iv) Bilingual program / literacy & numeracy – seen as a positive because once literate in one’s first language, then can move to the second. Need to do this because it is important to have a voice;
- v) Interaction & Encouragement – one of the positive aspects of the Social Club had been that it provided a social event. It was a place for men and women from across the community to meet and discuss matters. These social events need to keep occurring as they are an opportunity for integrating out of work;
- vi) Training & Staff Development – The RATE program was an excellent source of training and lifted confidence and self-esteem. Gaining qualifications through professional development was very important and was seen as a key to the education process as it meant knowledge and power, interaction and dialogue. A team approach and/or learning and planning together in core groups was best, with sharing ideas between staff (e.g. Floodwalk) an essential. The Leadership Team is a very positive development at the School;
- vii) Sport and School Events – these were often considered as the centre of the overall community and included various sports programs, open days, concerts, pageants etc. Outside coaches have come to assist, while there has also been the ‘Skool’ Sports Program. Interstate trips have provided an incentive to come to school;

- viii) Adult Education – parents have participated in health, Alcohol Awareness and sex education programs.<sup>52</sup>

It is also important to highlight aspects of the discussion which led to the above summaries, and we turn to some of the more notable now:-

### **ERA 1: 1945 - 1990**

From her experience, Sr Emmanuel observed that, when schooling commenced in the 1940's [with girls only], the time allocated to formal education was from 9-12:30. The subjects taught were:- Religion; Literacy; Numeracy; Oral English. Then, at 1pm, a siren sounded and everyone stopped – students and workers. At 2pm, a further siren sounded and everyone became active again. From an education perspective, this led to the afternoon session where, if the tide was right the students would go out and collect seafood. If instead it was a low tide, an alternative activity would be to go out to get *thithimampe* (fan palm fronds) plus dye for the colouring of woven dilly bags.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1950's, Fr Leary recognised that the students were very skillful in the aspects of hunting, tracking and food gathering, and in the knowledge of various languages. He also pointed out that he in fact learned a great deal, more so than what he taught. Due to this experience, he became convinced that the whole education process was upside down, approaching the teaching of the children with an “empty vessels” mentality. In reflecting, Fr Leary realized what he had to learn was respect for the culture that he was working with and not being the “dominant culture” – that is, seeking to impose. He also had to acknowledge the importance of country to each individual, because he saw how it backed the children's faith in each other. In summary, he described his experience in this way:-

“I had come to give so much, but education means to draw out, not impose upon”.<sup>54</sup>

From 1968, Gerry McCormack – a primary school teacher at the time – observed that one of the rules that applied was only one language was to be spoken while at school – English. He taught literacy, numeracy, religious education and oral English. As with Sr Emmanuel's experience, the [period after 3:30pm] was dedicated to sport, games and general physical education. Further, all meals were eaten in the dormitories.<sup>55</sup>

Leon White, who arrived in 1970, was given no preparation at all in the way of orientation. While he was expected to run the Boy's Dormitory, this in fact ceased to exist in late 1970 to early 1971. It had, therefore, operated from 1947 to 1971, a period of some 24 years.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 24-26;

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 40;

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 40-41;

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 41;

As a result of his interaction with the local population, Leon White considered that you very quickly learnt that you didn't know very much. In applying this to the classroom, there were local teachers in some rooms on their own and they had the prime responsibility for education. In 1974 there was a great realization that trained local teachers were needed. Even so, in 1969 Boniface Perdjert – who was fluent in English – went to Kormilda College for teacher training and became the first trained teacher assistant. Others were to follow in his footsteps, attending higher education through Kormilda College, Monivae College and, later, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. They then later worked back in the school.

At this time, the community was self sufficient – meat was available through the cattle yards, vegetables were grown in the gardens, a chicken shed provided eggs and poultry, and bread was made at the local bakery. When one attended at the local store, you were served by locals. As Leon White observed, kids leaving school knew they had a job to go to.<sup>56</sup>

In 1974 there were moves made to begin a bilingual program. Then, in 1978, *Murrinh-patha* began to be used as the language program. Sr. Teresa Ward taught for 12 months before really commencing the language program. Children who were there every day learnt to read very quickly. Children at school regularly were often those whose parents valued education themselves. If there were attendance issues one would speak to the families, and usually this was enough. It was a very significant time and things changed drastically. Open days were held, and one noted response was a father who said: “My daughter writing a language we speak”. He was glowing, and ethically this was very important.

Naturally, then, getting community support was and is very important. It was also seen that social and cultural education was very important and there must be community input for this to occur. Also, one must respect and honour the culture. Non-locals considered that it was a joy to be educated by the local people, a real privilege.<sup>57</sup> The group noted that at school it was clear that the ‘white man’ was in control – it was their world. However, when out bush the non-locals had to rely on other people. When this cross-over was brought into the school scene, it was considered a godsend.<sup>58</sup>

Student numbers, as Rosemary Hogan observed in 1982, then began to fall. There was more consistency in the early 1980's, but less in the late 1980's. Ferdi Klesch, in 1984, also saw that (in what was known as the manual training area – comprising older boys) there were declining numbers throughout the year, and this was extremely disheartening. This was despite the fact that there were good teachers present in the mid- 1980's. However, after 1984, it was possible to observe a core group of attendees who were there every day and one could really see the progress that they made. It was also Ms Hogan's view that the impact of changes in Government and the allocation of funding affected

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 42-43;

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 43-44;

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 46;

things. There was money for nothing, and this led to a feeling of there being no incentive to work.<sup>59</sup>

The group also observed that there was now (in 2005) a predominance of white people working at Wadeye. In the early 1980's people set about getting an education so they could get a job – this was the message – and, at that time, Aboriginal people were in many different jobs. Now, there appears to be a complete reversal with a huge dominance of white people in jobs that had previously been performed by the local Aboriginal people, 20-30 years ago.<sup>60</sup>

## **ERA 2: 1991 – 1998**

The group responsible for reviewing this era made the following observations:-

A school vision was in existence which guided practice – it was shared and it was lived, and there had been collaboration in its production and ownership. The school itself was in a great community place, and this was enhanced when parents and others came in and read with students through the community reading program. It was good to teach from a structured program and this enhanced literacy development.

Aboriginal people and staff provided excellent support and structure for the school community. The staff, as a whole, was a very stable and loyal staff, supportive of each other.

The Indigenous staff were proud to be there and carried a great sense of pride. A growth in responsibility of Aboriginal staff led to an increase in confidence and assumption of responsibility for their own classes, for the school and for ones' own professional development. Through this began the formation of a local school leadership team (in about 1998).<sup>61</sup>

There was a cultural program which was held once a week with the elders. Religious education programs were also a blend of the two cultures. A range of general activities were in place, including usage of a computer room, manual arts, science demonstrations, sports, work experience, a cooking program, army cadets, and the library was well-resourced by the Literacy Production Centre for bilingual programs. It was considered that at this time the school was the biggest employer in the community.<sup>62</sup>

Despite these positive elements, school attendance was inconsistent. There was a great deal of fear due to bad nights after the social club would close. Yet it was also recognised that the social club provided a positive point of contact between the local and non-local members of the township. Nevertheless, there would be various break-ins and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 45-46;

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 46;

<sup>61</sup> One had existed previously, but it was not on an official basis like this one. Personal communication, Mr Gerry McCormack, 2009

<sup>62</sup> *Education Workshop Report*, op cit, p. 49-50;

acts of vandalism, and the children's attitude reflected that of the community at the time. There was a negative community perception of education and therefore school attendance, resulting in great difficulty in engaging boys in education. Much of this could be put down to the receipt of unemployment money, which reflected an attitude of receiving money for doing nothing. In addition, there was a lack of respect for the elders amongst the young, with a subsequent sense of powerlessness by the adults in the control of children. As part of their new 'rituals', the young boys instead wanted to go to Berrimah gaol – it meant three (3) meals a day, one's own bed, and access to fitness equipment in order to increase physical size. Overall, there was a lack of relevance of education and lack of support measures for families with respect to discipline.<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, the group discussed the culturally-linked aspect of responsibility for training, and observed that men see school as women's business up to Year 6/7. After this point, it is – regarding young men in particular – in fact the uncles who have the authority to tell them what to do.<sup>64</sup>

Specifically, aspects such as MAP [Multilevel Assessment Program] testing simply didn't work as they were based on criteria different to appropriate community expectations – the context and starting points were very different, leading to unfair comparisons. In order to succeed, one had to begin where the students were at.<sup>65</sup>

### **ERA 3: 1999 – 2005**

Finally, the group associated with the most recent era noted the following:-

A drop-off in attendance was noticeable, but so too was a neglect of buildings. It was thought that this came down to a lack of funding with respect to infrastructure. Vandalism of such buildings was an issue, as was graffiti. In general, there was an absence of good resources. This was further highlighted at the beginning of each year when, due to high enrolment and attendance figures, understaffing was experienced which subsequently led to stressed staff. This stress was compounded by a lack of space and resources, both at the beginning of each year and then across the year.

Problems in Wadeye naturally impacted on students in the township. Examples included overcrowded houses, poor health, use of drugs, the consumption of alcohol and not enough involvement of fathers. For the young men in particular, there was a lack of positive activity, a lack of vision or connectedness between school, work and life, with positive goals and subsequent achievements. This was seen to lead to trouble at night with so-called 'gang' involvement. However, around them there appeared to be a lack of jobs in [Wadeye] and also a decrease in Aboriginal staff around [Wadeye].

The literacy and numeracy levels were not as high as was desirable, and there was a high turnover of non-Indigenous staff. This meant that many good teachers left when they were really needed. Issues then arose as to inaccessibility to relief teachers and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 50-51;

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 17;

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 53;

interruptions to the timetable. Fighting between students occurred regularly and parent interference was more prevalent than was their assistance.

It was clearly identified that more teacher training for assistant and classroom teachers was required, especially for the young men in the secondary school area. In addition, it was seen that there needed to be better recruitment and retention of staff and, to assist this, more learning together – that is, not teachers and teachers' assistants workshops held separately, but genuine two-way learning in how to do things better together.

A greater pressure was observed, with “babies having babies” and the community not developing a school-going culture. There appeared to be fewer jobs for local people, so the question was inevitably asked:- “Where to after school?” This led to confusion:- It all just “doesn't make sense” so why come to school? Through this it could be seen that there were very few positive role models for kids and so they didn't see the importance of school.

The stress, exhaustion and subsequent burnout experienced by all teachers, but especially for local teachers, is immense. Yet, due to the huge demands of fitting everything in, there was little chance for a good break. The lack of pastoral support for staff and consideration for staff welfare was seen to be a great negative.

Positive aspects at this time were the creation of the Indigenous leadership group which was accepted and works well. This then moved to a new level when the co-principal position was created.

Sport and music were utilised heavily, as were culture days within the cultural program. The advent of Yrs. 11 & 12 were tremendously positive, as was the improvement of communication between school and families via parent meetings, newsletters and the end of year magazine. The introduction of VET programs that were less academic created more interest, especially from the boys. This kept the boys interested and increased attendance, particularly with outside experts coming in.

Great efforts were made to raise the profile of the school to central agencies and interstate. This was coupled with heightened endeavours to encourage greater attendance, which yielded strong results at the beginning of 2005. This was backed with encouragement for regular attendance – awards, assemblies, breakfast etc.

Further, as a result of [the COAG trial], it could be seen that the Northern Territory Department of Education, Employment and Training (as it then was) and the Catholic Education Office were working together better. This in turn led to more staff being employed and a noticeable increase in secondary students.

In turn, the Indigenous staff were growing in confidence and strength, and were developing their skills. From a school perspective, they were becoming role models for their own students.

There was now more formal assessment and profiling, which led to the setting of goals, a commitment to moving forward and a continual sense of the requirement to track results.

The school began to emerge even more so than before as a community leader, providing support, encouragement, and a sense of positivity. In part this was due to the formation of [TRC] which ensured a better sense of community was experienced, and that interaction between key organizations such as school and council occurred. Excursions and bush trips were held, a renewed focus was given to homeland schooling, art was exhibited and marketed, and stricter ‘consequence’ guidelines were set with respect to behaviour through the *Kardu Lurruth Ngala Cultural Centre*. Yet again, the commitment of regular attendees and their improved results could be seen. The bilingual program gathered strength again, and young men – both local and non-local – were working in the school, leading to a better relationship with the young [males] of the school. To assist the work of all, funding increased for tutors and a crèche was opened, leading to more employment opportunities.

Technology was positively employed, with digital cameras being used extensively. Through their use, and that of video cameras, new methods of writing books and telling stories in *Murrinh-patha* were explored. Importantly, non-local teachers were again staying for several years, taking the time to build the necessary relationships with staff and students.<sup>66</sup>

From the common themes identified in the Report and outlined above, a list of “*Suggested Priorities for a Strategic Plan*” were put forward for consideration. These are set out below:-<sup>67</sup>

- **VISION** – **review and build upon** the current vision for the School, taking into account (on a regional level):-
  - its role; and
  - the various clan groups and languages;
- **ATTENDANCE** – with reference to the experience of the 2005 School year in particular, **plan for increasing and retaining** student attendances at the School. Adequate support must also be provided by relevant Government and non-Government agencies, with parental/family attitude to education a key to success;
- **LOCAL and NON LOCAL TEACHING STAFF** – ensure that there is **acknowledgement** / continued acknowledgement of the backbone of the School structure – its loyal and supportive local staff. (Note: Areas which may need to be considered here include housing, remuneration and other benefits).

**Adequately train, resource and support all staff**, particularly with regard to the culturally different and challenging environment within which they work. Such training, resources and support measures should include:-

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 54-60;

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 27-28;

- Cross-cultural training and orientation;
  - Appropriate on-going professional development;
  - Updating and recording of skills, particularly with respect to all local staff;
  - Organised social interaction and encouragement;
  - Pastoral care;
  - Succession planning;
- **MALE ROLE MODELS** – address the need for and **encourage employment or participation** of males within the School, particularly with respect to young boys / men after Year 6 / 7;
  - **BILINGUAL PROGRAM / LITERACY & NUMERACY** – **continue positively** with this program, acknowledging that **English must receive adequate focus**. Ensure that all staff are encouraged to be more aware and understanding of the program and the way it works;
  - **SPORT and SCHOOL EVENTS** – if not already in existence, consider a School ‘Calendar of Events’ which has a definite (although flexible!) list of activities which are to occur on an annual basis and will involve the whole community. By way of suggestion only, the list may include:-
    - Open Day(s);
    - Swimming carnival – Junior and Senior School (if appropriate);
    - Athletics carnival – Junior and Senior School (if appropriate);
    - Various sporting events;
    - Concert(s); and
    - Interstate trips for Senior School students only.
  - **ADULT EDUCATION** – as appropriate, participate in the School and wider community in an effort to improve men’s and women’s health and sex education.

Clearly, the provision of education has been a challenge, and it continues to be so. While the Report was completed in 2005, and great thought, effort and resources have been expended since by persons Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, government and non-government, the situation has not improved in a dramatic way. Yet such matters are not new, nor the problems unheard of.<sup>68</sup> Infrastructure, human resources and teaching aids remain inadequate. Housing is desperately required. The place of and the need for education is not universally acknowledged by the residents of the Thamarrurr Region as a prime requirement. Consequently, enrolment and therefore attendance continue to lag drastically below the levels that are needed to make a significant and sustained impact.

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<sup>68</sup> See Shimpo, M. (Ph. D), “*The Social Process of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory*”, St. Jerome’s College, The University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario Canada, August 1978, City Library, Darwin; and Collins, B. et al, “*Learning Lessons – An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*”, Northern Territory Department of Education, Darwin, 1999;

## The Complaint

In response to the inequities identified by both *The Taylor Report* and *The Opportunity Costs Study*, and as alluded to above, Mr Tobias Nganbe, then Co-Principal of OLSH Thamarrurr, in 2007 lodged a representative complaint on behalf of the people of the Thamarrurr Region with AHRC.<sup>69</sup> The Complaint alleged “that the acts, practices and omissions of the respondents ... constitute unlawful discrimination under the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act 1986 (Cth)*”.<sup>70</sup>

The Complaint sought redress with respect to the alleged application of an agreement entered into between the Commonwealth and the Catholic Church in 1979 (“the Mission Schools Agreement”) which had allegedly led to the discriminatory application of funding formulae toward OLSH Thamarrurr, resulting in a severe lack of infrastructure, teacher numbers and resourcing and, ultimately, “adverse education outcomes”.<sup>71</sup> Such conduct had been experienced by those persons of school-age between 1979 and mid-2007.

The relief sought was:-<sup>72</sup>

- “A. An apology from each of the respondents.
- B. Compensation for loss or damage suffered by the class members.
- C. An account of funding foregone as a result of unlawful discrimination.
- D. Restitution of that amount for the purposes of funding education at OLSH.
- E. Costs”.

It is the adverse education outcomes and all aspects pertaining to them which are now sought to be addressed by way of the Complaint and, over the longer term, by the leadership of the people living in the Thamarrurr Region. Such a task is an immense one. At the time of writing, the Complaint is the subject of conciliation between the parties.

## A Different Culture

In considering the impacts of three (3) eras discussed above – Mission, Self-Determination and Intervention – and the introduction of Western-culture education, it is inescapable that one must acknowledge each of these aspects to have been overlaid upon a culture completely different to that which was introducing such concepts. Today, that fact remains the same – the Thamarrurr Region and Wadeye are home to approximately 2,500 persons who do not see the world in the same way as a dominant culture person.

For these people, the development of people and society has its base in beliefs that carry the authority of spirituality and ancestral law. What is happening today is something that has come from the past. To develop today, then, meaning comes from being connected to the past.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe v. Northern Territory of Australia & Commonwealth of Australia*, in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 20 April 2007;

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, para. 5;

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, para. 25;

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8;

In the Thamarrurr Region, Wadeye and the suburbs of Nilinh, Manthathpe and Wudapuli / Nama are home to the majority of members of over twenty clans from the region. Each individual, if they have learnt or are in the process of learning the knowledge of their forebears, is or will one day be able to describe in great detail their position in this complex and multi-layered society. Two things are of paramount importance – firstly, how you relate to your land and, secondly, how you relate to the people around you. Each of these works together.

To give a snapshot of this, we shall utilize an individual from the land-owning clan of Wadeye:-

- **Individual** – male or female;
- **Family** – they come from one of their clan’s eight (8) families;
- **Clan** – Kardu Yek Diminin – People of the Small Stone Land. A patrilineal (father’s side) land-owning system operates, meaning that each child receives rights to land, which they view as their Mother, through their father. People belong to the land (that is, to their Mother), not land belonging to people. However, few people would be aware of the existence, let alone the impact, of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 (Cth)*;
- **Language** – the Diminin are part of the wider *Murrinh-patha* language group, which is comprised of six (6) clan groups in total;
- **Moiety** – the entire society, of which they are a part, is comprised of two (2) moieties (i.e. halves of the society). These are the *Karrthin* (Spotted- or swamp-harrier) and the *Tiwungku* (Wedge-tailed Eagle). Essentially, the division is along the lines of coastal/salt-water, and inland/fresh-water. Due to the location of Wadeye, this individual may identify as a person from the Karrthin or the Tiwungku moiety<sup>74</sup>;
- **Totems / Dreaming Sites** – a widely-known totem of the Diminin is Ku Tek – the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. This particular totem has a special site from which it is said to have emanated;
- **Ceremonial Group** – as a Diminin person they belong to the Thanpa ceremonial group which is unique in that it does not have didgeridoo players, but women singing like an echo of the male singers who also use the singing sticks; and
- **Leadership** – men have the highest responsibility for land, and the acknowledged head of the Diminin clan is currently Mr Boniface Perdjert.

As with people from the other ceremonial groups, the Diminin believe that people of today are re-born from beings that were created in the Dreamtime. As a result, there is a direct spiritual bond between past and present, and each generation experiences the creative past for the first

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<sup>73</sup> “*Thamarrurr Region Cross-cultural Awareness Course*”, 2009, Thamarrurr Development Corporation Ltd;

<sup>74</sup> Falkenberg, J., “*Kin and Totem*”, op cit, p. 199;

time through ceremony. Creation took place at Kimul, an area of the Fitzmaurice River. Overall, *Kanamkek*, the Rainbow Serpent, is the giver of life, the source of authority and the follower of tradition. In conjunction with such spiritual matters, there is firm belief in the “little people”, the receipt of messages from animals and nature, and a fear of the “kidney-fat man”.

While the language of the Diminin is *Murrinh-patha* – a language which has now developed as the dominant language of the Thamarrurr Region due to the fact of gradual and then continued residence at Wadeye by the majority of the population – there are five (5) languages and four (4) dialects still used today.

An intricate kinship system operates, with people able to identify all others by specific relationship terms. This system is cyclical, meaning that, for example, a grandmother and granddaughter will call each other by the same name. Various levels of avoidance are observed, with the most common avoidance rule in place being that as between brother and sister upon either reaching puberty. Once this occurs there is no longer any contact between them, to the point that speaking the name of the other is forbidden, as is any conversation between them.

Even though the people of the Thamarrurr Region are made up of clans and fiercely independent parts, they are nevertheless also inter-dependent. This can be seen firstly by the example of ceremony, where a man from one ceremony group will rely on a special man from another to paint marks on his body. Another ceremonial example is when a man who wants to have his son initiated must organise a certain man from another group to perform specific tasks.

A second aspect of inter-dependence, which has a direct relationship with the kinship system, is that many alliances will also form through marriage where, in accordance with custom, a person from the Karrthin moiety should marry one from the Tiwungku moiety. However, this does not always happen.

Throughout daily life, the individual is constantly mindful of their position in wider society – what obligations they have to undertake for immediate family, what responsibilities they hold to those in special kinship relationships as a result of marriage, and to whom they must turn for valid decisions to be made with respect to family, clan, ceremony and land.

### **Today’s Educational Context**

From where we sit today, it is striking to observe the transition in lifestyle that the people of the Thamarrurr Region have undergone, and continue to undergo. There was a time when this entire society lived within the boundaries of their own individual clan estates as hunter-gatherers. When boundaries were crossed it was with permission, otherwise clashes ensued. Life followed the passage of the seasons, and reference to lessons of the past, spirituality, ancestors and elders were paramount. Knowledge was accumulated progressively from observing those older and imitating their conduct. Sacred information, or higher learning, could only be secured through ceremony after demonstrating that one was deserving of its provision.

In 2009, the sight before us is different – very different. This year is but seventy-four years since the arrival of Fr Docherty. In the historical journey of a society this is not a long period of time.



*collecting their life experiences; and, as a result of this social environment, what are the patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting that they now carry within themselves?*

In order to answer this question, it is important to remember the eras discussed earlier:-

1. The Dreamtime-1935 – The Aboriginal Era;
2. 1935-1967 – The Mission Era;
3. 1967-2003 – The Self-Determination Era; and
4. 2003-present – The Intervention Era.

Era 1 is commonly thought to have lasted for some 40,000 years. Eras 2, 3 and 4, on the other hand, have all taken place within a period of a mere 74 years. Change – massive change – on a cultural, societal, structural and political basis has been and is a constant theme. Sadly for them, very few if any elements of such change has been driven by the people of the Thamarrurr Region – rather, they instead have been driven by the dominant culture, its society, its structures and its policies. The result in 2009 is what we see, hear and are attempting to understand before us on a daily basis.

#### 1) The Dreamtime-1935 – The Aboriginal Era

There are but a few left from this time at Wadeye. Those who remain are predominantly female, were born in the early 1900's and now either spend their days at home, at the Aged Care or Respite Centres. While they are important members of their families and regarded fondly, they do not play a large role in community affairs. However, the fact that they are still present says something about the grounding received in that time prior to the coming of the missionaries which allowed them to cope with great change. They have lived through incredible times and survived – those that have come after them have not fared so well.

#### 2) 1935-1967 – The Mission Era

The people of this time were the first to experience a social environment markedly different to that in which their parents had experienced life. This was the time of continuous contact, of missionaries and Catholic theology and policy. It was ultimately dominated by twin desires:- to assist Aboriginal people in gaining an understanding of a new way of life because the loss of theirs was unavoidable; and, further, to assimilate them through evangelization.

The correlation between 'missionary culture' and 'Aboriginal culture' is interesting. At this time, the missionaries unilaterally attempted to teach a totally new way of life without a true understanding or acknowledgement, for the most part, of the culture already in existence. 'Good' and 'Bad' was judged from the missionaries' point of view, with the anchor-point being, naturally, Christianity. Christianity was brought in to provide spiritual nourishment where spirituality and intricate ceremonies already existed; sacred items were destroyed or banned and replaced with communion, wine and the tabernacle; English was taught to the exclusion of other languages; traditional structure and discipline were superseded by the religious orders and their system; and the head men of the time worked alongside the

Missionary Superintendent, priests and brothers of the new mission station, while the women partnered with the Sisters.

In a strange twist, this was perhaps the most ordered transition possible at the time. We say this because one religion was brought to replace another religion; male authority (elder men) with male authority (priests and brothers); female authority (elder women) with female authority (Sisters); structure with structure, and discipline with discipline. Respect was also present, because the missionaries – for all their faults – worked tirelessly with and for the people, rather than for their own material gain. Men were able to be guided by fellow men, and women by women. If for nothing else, it is due to this aspect that many missionaries are fondly remembered, even revered, to this day. The missionaries will always hold a special place in the hearts and minds of those from this era and beyond.

However, as we have seen earlier, the attempts to stamp out polygamy had an effect on the food-gathering capacity of families. In conjunction with that aspect, the coming of ‘work’ and the provision of rations for it changed a mind-set of self-sustenance to that of attaching oneself to the provider in order to ensure one’s survival. This discussion by Professor Stanner from his experiences in the area in 1959 is relevant:-

“I was soon compelled to spend part of almost every other day hunting because of the pressure on my food supplies. Each day was something of a battle to keep unwanted natives from settling nearby to live on me. They were peaceable but as persistent as running water. I was importuned at every turn for tobacco, tea, sugar, and flour in about that order of preference. ... I learned [through hunting excursions about the] motives which powerfully drive the blacks to parasitism. The life of a hunting and foraging nomad is very hard even in a good environment. Time and again the hunters fail, and the search for vegetable food can be just as patchy. A few such failures in sequence and life in the camps can be very miserable. ... The Aborigines rarely starve but they go short more often than might be supposed ... *The blacks have grasped eagerly at any possibility of a regular and dependable food supply for a lesser effort than is involved in nomadic hunting and foraging.* There is a sound calculus of cost and gain in preferring a belly regularly if only partly filled for an output of work which can be steadily scaled down. *Hence the two most common characteristics of Aboriginal adaptation to settlement by Europeans: a persistent and positive effort to make themselves dependent, and a squeeze-play to obtain a constant or increasing supply of food for a dwindling physical effort.* I appreciated the good sense of the adaptation only after I had gone hungry from fruitless hunting with rifle, gun, and spears in one of the best environments in Australia”.<sup>76</sup>  
(Emphasis ours).

The education which commenced in 1941 initially targeted the girls, seeking to liberate them. Immediately this set them apart from the men in a way which previously was not known – they were the holders of more knowledge about the new culture. Boys’ education then commenced later in 1947. The overall result was that, to this day, those educated during this particular era are the ones with the greatest knowledge, capacity and competence with respect to the ways of Western culture. While their knowledge was and is by no means perfect, they

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<sup>76</sup> Stanner, W.E.H., ‘*Durmugam: A Nangiomeri (1959)*’, op cit, p.74-75;

had and have:- bi-cultural capacity; learned and think about issues two-ways; a consciousness of the wider world beyond the Thamarrurr Region; and an ability to interact with the people and events of that wider world due to travel and alternate experiences.

These generations of Aboriginal people had, over a period of three decades, transitioned from hunter-gather, to work for rations, then to work for money. They were genuinely educated for work and held jobs such as bookkeepers, gardeners, truck-drivers, carpenters, secretaries, teaching assistants, bakers and check-out operators. Men were making bricks and building their own houses; women were operating sewing machines and creating their own clothes. English was spoken, written and read, while mathematics was used daily. However, all still relied tremendously on the missionaries and lay-missionaries to continue to teach them, to be there and provide necessary and ongoing support as they wrestled with the enormous changes that their Aboriginal culture was undergoing.

In Wadeye today, those who were growing up and receiving education through the final stages of this era and its transition to the next – the 1960's and early 1970's – are relatively easy to identify. While there will always be exceptions, it is they who hold the positions of influence, the positions of responsibility; it is they who hold positions requiring education and Western learning. Yet it has not been easy. The transition to and impact of the next era has, in many cases, been lethal. Their number is now not as numerous as it used to be because massive change leads directly to massive upheaval. In this case, such upheaval has killed and caused much loss.

### 3) 1967-2003 – The Self-Determination Era

During the course of this era, our theme of change is hastened. In our view, the two most influential changes that occurred with little understanding or far too rapidly – or both – were, firstly, the introduction of welfare in all its forms; secondly, the changeover from Catholic Mission control to an incorporated local council – self-determination and self-management.

In today's politically-correct discussions, the word 'paternalism' is often used when dealing with the topic of 'solutions' in Indigenous affairs. Actions of the missionaries at this time were seen by some to be of a paternalistic nature and it was thought that, if the Indigenous population generally was to succeed in a new era of citizenship, it was time for them to be allowed to 'self-determine'. But they were not ready. Like learning how to ride a bike, a steadying hand was still required after the training wheels were removed. An encouraging voice was welcome after one fell off. Yet this was not to be – self-determination and local government was the new policy – and its spectacular failure in our area is plain to see, where it has effectively destroyed much of the previous effort by becoming a path toward social and cultural extermination.<sup>77</sup> A trusted guide working by one's side to assist in the navigation of Western culture was still a necessity. Their absence led to the equivalent of the leadership of the time stumbling in the darkness. About them, their society also began to stumble.

However, while the exit of missionary control was negative, we consider the introduction of welfare – money for nothing – to have been the major impediment to the development of

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<sup>77</sup> See Pye, J., (M.S.C.), "*The Port Keats Story*", op cit, p. 49;

capacity in the Aboriginal people of the Thamarrurr Region to lead a unique and empowered bi-cultural life in today's world. Why? It removed the incentive to consistently learn and constantly gain more knowledge about the new culture. It provided an 'easy way out' and led to a resistance to take responsibility.<sup>78</sup>

To put it simply, why take responsibility when what you required at a base level was simply given to you? A sound calculus of cost and gain was and has been made by generations across the course of a harrowing four-decade period. People have grasped most willingly at a regular and dependable food supply – and then through the local store and further afield, to cars, boats, stereos, flat screen TVs, iPods, mobile phones, X-Boxes and the like – for a lesser and ever-diminishing effort. The work effort displayed by the majority of the population in the 1960s – 1970s has been scaled down dramatically in 2009. They have successfully made themselves dependent<sup>79</sup> and, for those who are seeking to deal with the issue, now find they are gripped also by the passive welfare bureaucracy.<sup>80</sup>

Those who had experienced the positive aspects of mission life through the 1950's and 1960's – education, employment and improvement in material condition – held available positions and encouraged children to go to school. They appear to be the last ones to truly do so on a wide, generational basis, for the capacity of those now below the age-range of 35-40 is in the main severely diminished.

With the advent of equal pay and a forced return to a mission station never intended to house a major population and provide employment, people who had been educated to work in the new world could not find a job. Training Allowance had become no more than a dole out. The clear and easy alternative was unemployment benefits, offered freely and easily by the welfare service providers, particularly if one had many children. With its introduction, the welfare economy took deep root in the life and psyche of its recipients, and the nexus between meaningful work and sustenance became more and more difficult to uphold.

This was the new social environment – one where, even if you were educated there were not enough jobs for you to utilize your skills; even if you could find a job, you in fact didn't have to commit because it became gradually easier and potentially more financially rewarding to receive unemployment benefits. The Thamarrurr Region society had, in the blink of an eye, achieved Western-culture nirvana – retirement at an early age, with house plus benefits provided by the State.

Nirvana, however, began to morph into nightmare. The middle-aged to older leadership at the time of this transition between the eras struggled to hold the steering wheel. The steadying hand to the extent required was gone. Men, in particular, began to turn to the substance of alcohol as a means of escape, whether it be available at the local social club,

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<sup>78</sup> Pearson, N., "*Our Right to Take Responsibility*", Noel Pearson and Associates Pty Ltd, Cairns, Queensland, 2000, at p. 58;

<sup>79</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, '*Durmugam: A Nangiomeri (1959)*', op cit, p.75;

<sup>80</sup> Pearson, N., "*Our Right to Take Responsibility*", op cit, p. 58;

Kununurra or Darwin. Frustrations were initially drowned, but then learned to swim and resurfaced, most brutally in the form of physical violence meted out against those closest.

The underlying male role had undergone great change, great loss. Woman had in fact assumed the role of provider. She was the one who received the most benefit under the welfare scheme through a combination of unemployment benefits, child endowment and training allowance. He, on the other hand, was “*kardu makardu*” – nobody. The thoughts and emotions that now span generations struck with brute force at this time – in particular, anger, low self-esteem and ever-diminishing hope in the future. With social anomie setting in, a push back was inevitable.

Respect from others was replaced by a feeling of shame. The younger male, in particular, began to rise up and control was lost. It has been found that there was a process of rejection of the “new ways” and that young people displayed such rejection with anti-social behavior such as substance abuse, non-attendance at school, graffiti, actively seeking incarceration, theft, ‘gang’ association and other behaviour.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps it was “also a rejection of the ‘old ways’ that had begun to be denied to the youth, for example authority and ceremony”.<sup>82</sup>

Cultural collision was now taking its toll in the harshest of forms – upon the family unit. The older men no longer held overall authority, part of which had been removed by the coming of the Police. People lived in fear of their own children and society was turned upside down, particularly when ‘riots’ broke out between the ‘gangs’ which effectively divided Wadeye in two – coastal/saltwater against inland/freshwater.

The attempt at self-management through KNI collapsed in 1994. Substance abuse, particularly alcohol and then marijuana, gripped and continues to grip the majority of the population of the Thamarrurr Region. This era cultivated an environment which then spawned a society at large that could not see the point in receiving an education. ‘Money for nothing’ replaced the need, the responsibility, to gain an intellectual understanding of the functioning of the Western world. The generations of this era, on the whole, did not see a place for themselves in that world because they did not need to function to a large degree in that world. One did not have to exert mental or physical effort in order to sustain an existence because existence was guaranteed, provided for by the State.

While tensions existed and continue to exist between the generations, the younger majority rely heavily on the older in their interactions with the ‘outside’ world for they cannot communicate confidently in English, they cannot read and they cannot write. Maths capacity is present to some extent due to the expertise gained via card games and gambling – a wonderful tool of wealth distribution. When discipline is required it either falls on deaf ears or is attempted vicariously, through the agency of a non-local person, a “*kardu mulak*” – angry person. As a result, authority and responsibility are consistently devolved to others.

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<sup>81</sup> Desmarchelier, X., “A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region”, op cit, p. 28;

<sup>82</sup> Ivory, B., “Nemarluk to Heavy Metal - Cultural Change and the Development of Contemporary Youth Sub-Culture at Port Keats, Northern Territory”, A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in Anthropology, Charles Darwin University, 2003, at p. 65;

Life now is lived predominantly in the bottom two sectors of Maslow's hierarchy<sup>83</sup> – food & water, sex & sleep, safety of family and property. Then there is the 'persistent as running water' pursuit of cigarettes, cash, cars, grog and gunja. In the 1990's, Wadeye and the wider Thamarrurr Region was in a state of social malaise. A society was 'lost'. Nirvana was, in all reality, nothing more than an "opulent disaster"<sup>84</sup> and "it is significant that the emergence of these problems coincides with the period when passive welfare became the economic basis of our society"<sup>85</sup>.

#### 4) 2003-present – The Intervention Era.

While the 1990's saw a state of social malaise and the collapse of KNI, it "created a climate whereby the people of Wadeye began to discuss the need for another way to manage their lives; another structure of governance that could provide both a legal representation of the function of governance within the contemporary world and which enabled valid recognition of all resident's rights. This structure, or way of life, is termed by the people *Thamarrurr*".<sup>86</sup>

From this process emerged the Thamarrurr Community Government Council and, through it, people saw that they could find a path, a means by which they could once again be responsible for their lives.

The sub-eras previously discussed included the emergence of TRC, the COAG trial, the Complaint, lifting of the RAE and introduction of the NTER. Unfortunately, just as steps were being taken by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike to address the social malaise, change driven by the dominant culture was again enforced upon the people by way of the abolition of TRC. On this occasion, however, those with the education and the support were more prepared than past generations – TDC commenced, and Thamarrurr Inc. emerged. Those same people – the ones born mainly in the 1950's and 1960's, who viewed education positively, had seen their children attend school (although perhaps not as consistently as they should have been), but had also seen the devastation and chaos of the 1970's and '80's – were the ones who now recognized the dire predicament which had befallen their society. While they were and are part of this society, feeling its impacts and suffering its challenges, they were the ones that had the knowledge and capacity to change it.

As a result, the generation of Aboriginal people in the Thamarrurr Region that is MOST bi-cultural, has a work ethic and understands the value of education, is now the generation that is charged with resurrecting from the mire the generations that are the LEAST bi-cultural, for whom training and work are unknown forces, and who have no real concept of education from a Western-culture perspective. Following all the lessons of COAG, this group is now turning its attention to that 'lost' element of society, those generations smashed by the

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<sup>83</sup> Maslow, A. (1970) *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row. See also <http://www.ruralhealth.utas.edu.au/comm-lead/leadership/maslow-diagram.htm> for diagram and discussion;

<sup>84</sup> Pearson, N., "Our Right to Take Responsibility", op cit, p. 39;

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 38;

<sup>86</sup> Desmarchelier, X., "A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region", op cit, p. 3-4;

welfare and self-determination era. They are also adamant that the same circumstances will not be experienced by those presently within the school system.

As we highlighted previously, the key themes are:-

GIVE EVERY KID A CHANCE  
&  
LOCAL JOBS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE

While acknowledging the challenges, there is a vision for the future:-

“We want to give our youth the opportunity to see the world beyond what they live in today. Through this education we want to open their minds and give them the knowledge to explore life outside Wadeye and the Thamarrurr Region; to help them grow strong; to take risks in learning for themselves; to make their own choices. All these things go to explain what I mean by saying:- EDUCATION IS THE KEY.”<sup>87</sup>

### **The Track Ahead**

Through the eras a major proportion of the peoples of the Thamarrurr Region have transformed from knowledgeable and resilient hunter-gatherers to entrenched welfare recipients. This transformation is now observable at an inter-generational level. Yet it was not always like this. Of a seventy-four year history, this major social malaise has only been obvious from the late 1980s, from which point the descent has gained momentum at an ever-quickening pace. Its birthplace, however, is some twenty years earlier. What then are the major differences between the pre- and post- late 1960s?

In our view, the differences are observable by revisiting the eras as two major blocks:-

#### A) The Dreamtime-1967 – The Aboriginal & Mission Eras

This block is formed by two periods. The first was simply Aboriginal, while the next was where one religion was brought to replace another; male authority (elder men) with male authority (priests and brothers); female authority (elder women) with female authority (Sisters); structure with structure, and discipline with discipline. *Respect* was also present, because the missionaries worked tirelessly with and for the people, rather than for their own material gain. Men were able to be guided by fellow men, and women by women.

At the end of the second period, Aboriginal people had transitioned from hunter-gatherer, to work for rations, then to work for money. LIFE was no longer about survival by means of hunting and gathering, rather it was now based upon WORK, both to build up

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<sup>87</sup> Nganbe, T., “*Speech at the Opening of the New Secondary Campus – Ngepan Kangkarlmawu (God’s Spirit) – at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic School*”, 20 November, 2007, p. 6, see <http://www.bowden-mccormack.com.au/uploads/news/opening-ceremony.pdf>;

the mission station and to provide labour for outlying farms and pastoral properties. While families were dependent upon another culture for sustenance, firstly through rations and then by way of the local store, two positive points remained:- money was not plentiful, and it had to be earned through work. Crucially, the people were genuinely educated *for work* and *held jobs*. English was spoken, written and read, while mathematics was used daily. However, all still relied tremendously on the missionaries and lay-missionaries to continue to teach them, to be there and provide necessary and ongoing support as they wrestled with change.

Overall, a genuine pathway existed – undertake education at the mission and further afield, enter the workforce, receive payment for services provided and then purchase food and other items.

#### B) 1967-present – The Self-Determination & Intervention Eras

While this block is also formed by two periods, it is our view that it is a far less stable time, featuring greater change, less support and a gradually murkier pathway between the need for education and the ability to purchase food and other items. This is borne out by the sub-eras:-

- a. 1967-present – equal pay, the provision of a ‘training allowance’ and the commencement of social services for the Aboriginal population, including welfare;
- b. 1967-1978 – changeover from Catholic Mission control to a local council;
- c. 1978-1994 – incorporated local council, KNI;
- d. 1994-2003 – collapse of KNI and the search for another method of governance;
- e. 2003-2008 – emergence of TRC;
- f. 2003-2006 – the COAG trial;
- g. 2007-present – lifting of the RAE and introduction of the NTER;
- h. 2008-present – abolition of TRC and introduction of the VDSC; and
- i. 2008-present – upon the abolition of TRC, commencement of TDC and the emergence of Thamarrurr Inc.

Importantly, the strength of authority which had transitioned from Aboriginal men alone to Aboriginal men working with male missionaries was now transferred to non-local governance and ‘representative’ structures working with Police as the law-holders. While local people were certainly involved through KNI, we say that over the long term they acted with no real support or genuine understanding of the ways of Western society governance. They could no longer see the path to be followed. As they lost direction, authority was also supplanted.

Under the structures present in the first block, this society still functioned and learned, although it certainly had its challenges. Under the latter, the social environment spawned a society at large that could not see the point in receiving an education – no longer was going to a school a path to getting a job, having money and purchasing food and other items. ‘Money for nothing’ replaced the need, the responsibility, to gain an intellectual understanding of the functioning of the Western world. One did not have to exert mental or physical effort in order to sustain an existence because existence was guaranteed, provided for by the State and the ever-increasing number of non-local people resident at Wadeye upon which and to whom local Aboriginal people attached themselves by way of a persistent and positive effort to make themselves dependent. This was the ‘pattern of thinking, feeling and acting’ that people of the Thamarrurr Region carried within themselves. As a result, LIFE became a consistent devolution of authority and responsibility to others, and WORK – and therefore EDUCATION – was seen to be meaningless.

With respect to education then, we revisit our earlier questions:- What has been the impact of the clash of Aboriginal as opposed to Western, Catholic, educational philosophies? How have the people of the Thamarrurr Region reacted to its implementation? Has it been successful, or has it failed dismally? Or is it somewhere in between, trying to work its way through in a bi-cultural context?

In terms of the two major blocks noted above, the first seemingly demonstrates that, overall, the implementation of a new education philosophy was in fact positive and successful – the people were genuinely educated *for work* and *held jobs*. English was spoken, written and read, while mathematics was used daily. Bi-culturalism was alive. However, if taken in isolation, the second would demonstrate the complete opposite – an utter failure.

So, then, is education somewhere in between, trying to work its way through in a bi-cultural context? We suggest that this would be a somewhat simplistic conclusion to draw. Our view is that what has occurred before us – this turning away from education – is *not* due to the failure of education itself. Far from it. It is actually a deeper reaction to a clash between our respective cultures, a clash that has been dominated by the Western society.

The result of this clash is that the aspects of locally-owned and understandable governance structures, autonomy, authority, responsibility, respect and discipline have been negatively impacted, to say the least. This has led to the inability to create and see a genuine pathway forward, resulting in a society lost, a society in deep malaise – a society for which work and education are meaningless.

LIFE has been pared down to its base level. In order to gain food and other items, there is a seeking of money by way of attachment to the State, non-local structures and non-local persons, the great majority of which and whom have little understanding of the culture with which they are dealing or what is actually occurring. While misunderstanding of Western concepts remains a factor, it could be argued that the people of this Region have, effectively, accepted a lower standard of living because they have been successful by that attachment in obtaining a constant or increasing supply of food for a dwindling – or in many cases, non-existent – physical effort.

To resolve the effects of this clash, an holistic approach must be centred on the following:-

- Governance – local autonomous structures, led by local people, empowered to take control and responsibility; and
- Vision – a clear path enunciated by the leadership of the Thamarrurr Region, guided by the key principles of GIVE EVERY KID A CHANCE and LOCAL JOBS FOR LOCAL PEOPLE, which demonstrates to the people of the Thamarrurr Region that there is a link between education, employment, opportunities and choices – a better life; and
- Support – adequately trained and resourced support staff working at ground level with the leadership of the Thamarrurr Region who are taking control and responsibility.

In 1978, Mitsuru Shimpo conducted wide-ranging study upon education in the Northern Territory. He produced a report entitled, “*The Social Process of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory*”, and in it he concluded with this message which we see as crucial to resolving the educational ills of the Thamarrurr Region:-

“I believe that if Aborigines regain self-confidence and autonomy, they will develop themselves. And the role of non-Aborigines is to assist the Aboriginal people to re-gain their self-confidence and to restore them to their autonomy. If non-Aborigines do not do this, Aborigines will continue to be their burden for centuries to come. Now is the time to think about this issue”.<sup>88</sup>

This message was delivered 31 years ago, at the time when our present malaise was in its infancy. It has not yet been heeded. This failure has impacted dramatically upon the delivery of education in the Thamarrurr Region. The overall issue of education – our challenge and responsibility – is one that can only ultimately be solved at the community level by the people who understand the broader social context within which it is to be delivered, and are therefore able to identify and request the support required at the appropriate time. It is about regaining self-confidence, autonomy and the capacity to self-develop. As Tobias Nganbe recently said:-

As I see it, we are not in this together – we are now separate: school, council, clinic, others. We are not really operating as a community. This is back to Kardu Numida days of being separate, not together. We must get back to togetherness, we must get back to Thamarrurr”.<sup>89</sup>

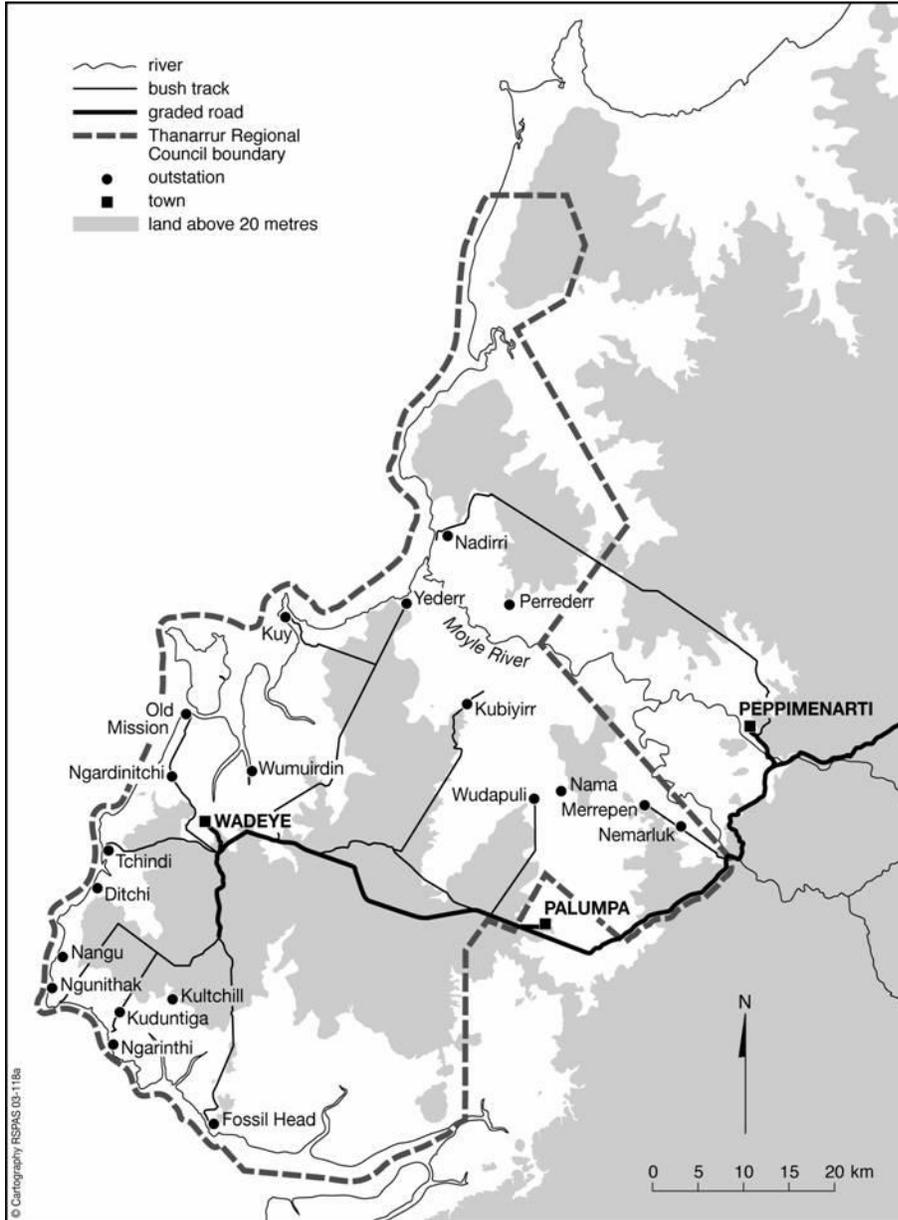
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<sup>88</sup> Shimpo, M. (Ph. D), “*The Social Process of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory*”, op cit, p. 176. See also Collins, B. et al, “*Learning Lessons – An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*”, op cit, p. 174-175.

<sup>89</sup> Notes of Meeting held at OLSH TCS Library, Monday, 31 August 2009.

## **ANNEXURES**

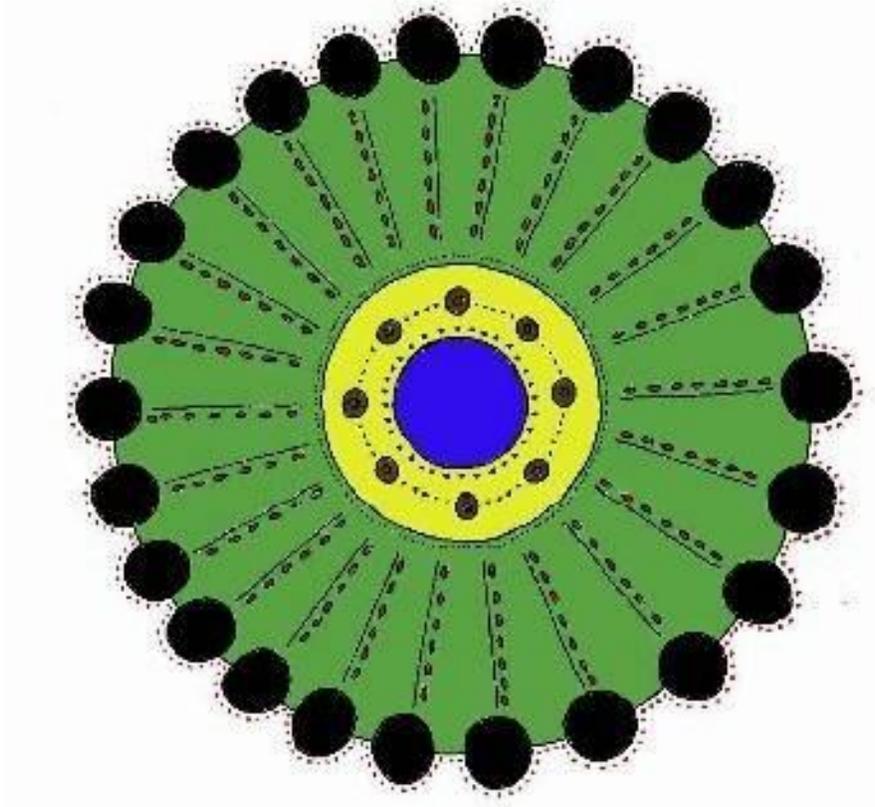
Annexure “A” – Wadeye and Werntek Nganaiyi (Old Mission)<sup>90</sup>



<sup>90</sup> Taylor, J. 2004. *Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance: Insights from the Thamarrur Region, Northern Territory*, ANU E Press, Canberra.

**Annexure “B” – Thamarrurr Logo** (As described by Tobias Nganbe (under direction of Thamarrurr Elders))

*The large outside black dots represent the different land owning groups that are members of Thamarrurr. The black line and red dots towards the centre represent tracks and footprints. The dots within the yellow area represent the people, animals and plant life. The green and yellow colours represent the land. The blue in the middle represents a waterhole life and everything else Aboriginal way from our grandfathers, including knowledge, wisdom and survival.*



**Annexure “C” – Heads of School, Port Keats Mission / Wadeye, 1941-2009**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Surname</b>	<b>Comment</b>
1941	Sr	Magdalen	McNamara	
1942-44	Closed:- WWII			War years
1945	Sr	Killian	Crosdale	
1946-47	Sr	Magdalen	McNamara	
1947-49	Sr	Maureen	Flemming	
1950-53	Sr	Helen	Cooney	Was still at school (but not as Principal) until end 1956; in Darwin in 1957
1954-57	Sr	Mary	John Bosco	
19 June 1957-15 April 1959	Fr	Fred	Mordaunt	Teacher in Charge (TIC) Boy's school
1958-59	Sr	Andrina	Scully	
19 May 59	Sr	Mary Jacinta	Ryan	TIC Girl's school
1960-61	Sr	Therese Marie	Hillas	Arrived December 1959. TIC Girl's school; Teacher: Sr Bernadette Mary
20 Dec 60	Fr	Pat	Lefroy	TIC Boy's school; Been in charge 3 months; left end 60.
1962-66	Sr	Christopher	Keane	
1 May 62	Mr	Karl James Michael	Quinn	TIC Boy's school for 1 month; no teacher for more than 1 year
26 Oct 64-end 1965	Mrs	E	Nelson	TIC Boy's school; on 26/10/64 been in this position 6 months. Boy's dorm: Mr Devereux
7-8 Dec 1965	Sr	Andrina	Scully	TIC Girl's school - been there 11 months; Teacher: Sr Mary de Lourdes - 14 mths

1967-69	Sr	(Marie Claire) Paula	Izard	Relieving Principal
2-5 Aug 1967	Sr	(Marie Claire) Paula	Izard	Head Teacher for 18 months; Sr Andrina, 2.5 yrs; Fr Hyland 1.5 yrs; Wendy Guiney 7 months.
1970-74	Sr	Mary	Francisco	
1975-87	Mr	Gerry	McCormack	Left Oct 1987
Oct 87-end 1987	Ms	Sandra	Hegert	Acting Principal
1988-2000	Sr	Elizabeth	Little	
2001	Mr	Paul	Dalgliesh	
2002-2003	Ms	Jan	Pilcher-Juniper	
2004-2005	Ms Mr	Jan Tobias	Pilcher-Juniper Nganbe	Co-Principals
2006-2008	Ms Mr	Ann Tobias	Rebgetz Nganbe	Co-Principals
2009	Ms	Helen	Cooney	

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