

# The promised land

In the remote north of Australia, teacher, artist and activist **YALMAY YUNUPINGU** is fighting for Indigenous rights to education.

**Y**almay Yunupingu is a Yolgnu woman from north-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, where her people have lived for more than 40,000 years. She speaks 16 languages and has raised six children. She is a senior teacher and has taught for more than three decades in the bilingual Yirrkala Community Education Centre, which operates with a “two-way learning” philosophy and structure.

At preschool level, the students have the majority of their classes in Yolgnu Matha, the local language, and are gradually introduced to English as an extra language.

Yunupingu is also an artist and activist, and her lineage is inextricably linked with the birth of the Indigenous land rights movement.

It was her people who signed the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition to parliament, seeking recognition of Yolgnu rights to their traditional lands. This followed the government’s unilateral removal of more than 300 square kilometres of land from the Arnhem Land reserve to allow bauxite mining to take place. The petition and subsequent lawsuit were

unsuccessful—overruled by the now discredited doctrine of *terra nullius*—but they marked the beginning of the Indigenous struggle for land rights. In 1992, the High Court of Australia overturned *terra nullius* in the Mabo land rights case recognising native title.

A quietly spoken woman, Yunupingu introduces herself by her skin name, Gamanydjan, and names her clan language, Rirratjiyu.

Yunupingu was one of the first Indigenous people from her community to fully qualify as a teacher, when she graduated with a Diploma of Teaching in 1996 through (what was then) Batchelor College and is now Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

In 2005, Yunupingu won a state government Award for Teaching Excellence, which recognised her achievement as a bicultural role-model for students and staff. “A stalwart in the field of two-way education, she is an effective leader who works collaboratively with other staff members, and models and encourages professional learning sessions, action group meetings and community involvement,” the award citation reads.

Yunupingu also plays a central role in her community. She was a founding member of the Yirrkala Night Patrol (a highly successful community safety project, now stalled through lack of funding) and contributes to The Healing Place, an Indigenous ‘alternative’ medicine centre, and the annual Garma Festival set up by the Yothu Yindi Foundation to promote Yolgnu culture. She is married to activist, teacher and Yothu Yindu singer, Mandawuy Yunupingu.

### A quick response

As a teacher with 31 years experience, Yunupingu feels the frustration of the education gap between her community and the mainstream. “Education is really important for our children. We should be responding straight away when people ask for help. That’s what we expected to happen—a quick response.”

Her frustration is also aimed at the negative perception of Indigenous children and their communities. “We feel that we’re always in the spotlight, and it makes us feel bad,” she says. “Some kids are very smart.”

What matters to Yunupingu is that Indigenous children get recognition for this, and have the opportunity to become well educated. “We want things to be happening for Indigenous students. We want a good education, quality teachers, quality resources so we can start moving on, start doing our job.”

Following many months of negotiations between the school, the community and the state education department, the school has recently signed a Remote Learning Partnership agreement. “I’m happy that it’s implemented,” says Yunupingu. “We just have to try really hard to bring attendance up and see good outcomes for our children.”

One of the achievements of the Remote Learning Partnership is that a Batchelor Institute lecturer will



again be ‘on site’ at Yirrkala to help locals gain qualifications. “Many unqualified teachers are not released to go to Batchelor [near Darwin],” says Yunupingu. “They are not allowed to go, and many others are married and cannot go away.” It’s a positive outcome that was a long time coming. “This was happening 20 years ago, but was stopped.”

### Many successes

On current student numbers of around 210, the Yirrkala CEC has enough teachers, but with more students likely to attend as a result of last year’s NT intervention, the school will need more teachers, more tables and chairs and accommodation, says Yunupingu. And the community needs a new school. The old one, an asbestos building, is due for

replacement in April this year.

Retirement is on Yunupingu’s mind, but there’s unfinished business to attend to first. “I’m very passionate about teaching and I’d like to do something for my kids before I resign. We’ve tried many strategies to help our students succeed, but with that new remote partnership agreement we’re also linking in partnership with the community, because we want to see the community’s input into the school.

“I want to pass it on to the next generation—to my team teachers mainly—and help them with how to plan, how to teach the kids, how to make the resources.”

Already there have been many successes. The secondary school’s music program is going very well and IT is taking off. “The kids are doing podcasts—it’s all on

the web now and everyone tells us they’re very happy with what the school is doing,” says Yunupingu.

Last year, seven students graduated from Year 12 at Yirrkala CEC, and four students had graduated in 2005. The key achievement was that they did it from home, and didn’t have to be

sent away. That’s a critical step, says Yunupingu. “I’d like to see my children and grandson and their children’s children finish Year 12 at Yirrkala.

“I’d like to see them go to university.” •

**Yalmay Yunupingu spoke to KRISTA MOGENSEN, commissioning editor of Australian Educator.**

## + Resources

- “Education is the Key” report [www.aeufederal.org.au](http://www.aeufederal.org.au)
- Remote Learning Partnership [www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/indigenous\\_education/projects\\_initiatives/remote\\_learning\\_partnerships](http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/indigenous_education/projects_initiatives/remote_learning_partnerships)
- Garma Festival, 8-12 August 2008 [www.garma.telstra.com](http://www.garma.telstra.com)
- The Healing Place [www.healingplace.com.au](http://www.healingplace.com.au)

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