House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into language learning in indigenous communities

Questionnaire

Yirrkala School Literature Production Centre

and Yolngu Action Group

1 What languages are spoken in your community?

Yolngu Matha Languages

Dhangu – Galpu, Ngaymil, Rirratjingu, Wangurri, Golumala

Djangu – Warramiri

Dhuwal – Djambarrpuyngu, Djapu, Marrakulu Datiwuy, Marrangu Dhudi-Djapu

Dhay'yi- Dhalwangu

Dhuwala- Gumatj, Madarrpa, Mangalili, Munyuku, Gupapuyngu

Dhuwaya

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

All Yolngu people speak Yolngu languages very well.

Children to older adults in Yirrkala can all speak Dhuwaya. All children in Yirrkala speak Dhuwaya. Most young adults speak Dhuwaya.

Young adults can generally listen but do not speak their clan languages.

Adults of approximately 40 year and over can speak their own clan languages. This depends often on the person and their family.

Galpu children can listen and speak their clan(father's) language. Children of Galpu mothers also speak Galpu.

Elders all speak their clan languages.

In some language speaking groups with very small numbers such as Ngaymil, some adults of 40 years plus are not speaking their father's language.

3. Describe your group and project:

Yirrkala School Literature Production Centre (1 teacher Linguist, 1 Literature production supervisor and 2 Literacy workers) supporting the Bilingual program at Yirrkala School.

Production of resources to support the bilingual program throughout the school. These include, books, readers, support materials: posters, charts, games, flash cards, worksheets, phonics activities, activities for interactive white boards, school magazine etc.

Archiving of older materials such as photos, audio tapes and workshop information.

Yirrkala School Yolngu Action Group(YAG)- YAG is comprised of Yolngu school staff: teachers, assistant teachers, tutors, Inclusion Support Assistants and the Senior Cultural Advisor.

YAG is Yambirrpa Schools Council's advisory making group at Yirrkala School. It advises and informs Yirrkala School senior management team.

Why was it important to start up?

When children first come to school they arrive speaking their first language, Yolngu Matha. They do not speak English. The bilingual program at the school was started to promote literacy and oral skills in both 1st language and English. It was important in helping to support, preserve and maintain first language through the implementation of oracy and literacy programs in first language taught by Yolngu staff and supported by non-indigenous staff.

How long have you been running? 36 years. The program was started in 1974 in Gumatj. It was later changed to Dhuwaya because Dhuwaya was the language that most of the children in Yirrkala were speaking.

What age group(s) are you working with? Preschool to Senior Secondary aged students.

How many people are involved? 220 people including students, classroom teachers and support staff.

4. What activities do you do to record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

How are local schools involved? The bilingual program is run at Yirrkala School.

What help do you receive from the government or other organizations to carry out your activities? The school bilingual program is funded by the NT Department of Education and Training.

Can you describe how your project's activities may have helped the whole community?

Over the years the bilingual program at the school has produced many young adults who are literate in both English and Yolngu Matha.

Graduating students have taken with them knowledge which has helped them in their work areas and allowed them to stand strongly in both worlds.

The students and community members can see that the school values highly Yolngu language and culture through support for language and culture programs.

Community Engagement. Projects held over the years such as the Galtha Workshops brought together students, teacher and elders from Yirrkala and surrounding homelands to explore and record many aspects of traditional knowledge.

Interaction and cultural exchange projects with the local Nhulunbuy Schools has led to shared understandings and developed positive relationships within the local communities.

Annual involvement with the Garma Festival has led to sharing of language and culture with the wider community.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages taught at school?

The school has a maintenance bilingual program. Students are involved in formal and informal activities in reading, writing, listening and speaking, singing, dance, painting and other cultural activities.

Ongoing regular oracy and literacy programs in Dhuwaya are taught from Preschool to Year 6. The amount of time spent in instruction in and through first language in early childhood is greater than instruction time in English. The time spent learning in first language decreases as the students progress through school while the amount of time spent learning in and through English increases until students in Year 6 spend approximately 40 minutes a day working in first language. Clan languages are taught in workshops in the Primary years.

Secondary Yolngu Matha is usually taught as part of secondary workshops.

Programs are delivered by trained Yolngu teachers or Yolngu Assistant teachers or Literacy workers.

What difference has the teaching of local languages made to the children's attendance and achievement at school? This is a difficult question to answer because local languages have been taught at the school for over 30 years.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local languages?

Registered interpreter service.based in Darwin but with locally based interpreters available.

ARDs Yolngu radio

How useful and effective are they? They are crucial in assisting people in areas such as health and justice.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

Recruiting and training new young Yolngu teachers and literacy workers.

High non-indigenous staff turn over.

Irregular student attendance.

Languages with very low numbers of speakers left. Projects are needed to help preserve those clan languages before it is too late and there are very few or no speakers left.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

A strong bilingual program throughout the school supported by the community and Federal and Territory governments. Yolngu students who are balanced in both worlds: strong in their Western knowledge and English and strong in their own identity, cultural knowledge and language.