SUBMISSION TO

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Received from:

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1. Introduction

I am submitting this response as an expert on Indigenous language and literacy teaching in the Arandic language region in the Northern Territory. My areas of expertise are in the documentation, transmission and maintenance of Arandic languages and songs. The Arandic languages are a group of languages that include Kaytetye, Alyawarr, Anmatyerr and Arrernte, an area extending from Alice Springs north to Alekarenge. I have been assisting communities and schools to teach Aboriginal languages and songs at Alekarenge (Ali-Curung), Utopia, Willowra, Stirling, Neutral Junction, Ti-Tree as well as in Alice Springs since 1996. I have worked most closely with Kaytetye schools and communities (Barrow Creek area). Since this time many community members have expressed to me their desires for their children's education. A recurring theme is that teaching Indigenous languages in schools **strengthens social identity and well-being** (§), **improves school attendance** (§) helps **achieve better competency in English language** (§) and **improves competency in their Aboriginal language** which in turn leads to being a **well adjusted and useful member of their community**. These goals relate directly to the terms of reference for the *Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*.

2. Language Learning in the Arandic region

In the Arandic region, school language classes take the form of Indigenous Language and Culture programs structured under the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework which specifically strengthen Indigenous language and identity. These programs focus on children's *traditional* language that is often different from their *home* language, as is the case at Neutral Junction School. **It is essential to know whether the Indigenous language is the students' first language, or whether it is a second language (most commonly it is second to a variety of Kriol) in order to design and teach the Indigenous language effectively.** The inclusion of ILC programs in schools often results in parents being more insistent that their child attends school. ILC programs also result in greater parent involvement in the school, as ILC programs require speakers of the Indigenous language to teach the lessons. Children too

generally enjoy ILC and so this inspires their own desire to attend school. Neutral Junction School teacher Rosemary Kerrison stated that when on excursions, she could tell when the children were happy as they would sing English songs learnt at school, and when they were *really* happy they would sing the Kaytetye songs learnt at school.

2. The Kaytetye language situation

Kaytetye has approximately 200 speakers and is one of the smallest Aboriginal languages spoken in Central Australia today. It is spoken at Artarre (Tara) community and three outstations in the region: Tyemelke (near Barrow Creek), Ankweleyelengkwe (Walkabout's camp) and Arnerre (Crawford). It is also spoken at Ilewerr (Stirling) community, where Anmatyerr speakers slightly outnumber Kaytetye. Further afield some Kaytetye speakers live in communities such as Alekarenge, Murray Downs, Epenarra, Utopia Homelands, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. In these places Kaytetye is a minority language and not being passed on. **In this region there is considerable pressure on Kaytetye people to switch to using English or Warlpiri as the main language of communication.** Alekarenge is the largest community on Kaytetye country. Despite Kaytetye people's desire for their language to be taught at the school, this has never occurred for a variety of reasons. Today there are approximately only 5 people that can still speak Kaytetye at Alekarenge. Many people at Alekarenge have asked for assistance to learn to speak and write Kaytetye. Individuals at Epenarra, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek have also asked me. In this region people have little access to government funding and services for maintaining Indigenous languages. There are no classes or courses through any institution for adults to learn Kaytetye, despite the available resources (a Picture Dictionary, a set of Readers and a Learners Guide (all with audio) are available at IAD Press and the Tennant Creek Language Centre). As such, it is up to the individual to study Kaytetye from these resources on their own. **Once a language ceases to be spoken by children, it is very hard to restore it as a living means of thinking and communication in a community.**

2. Artarre community

In the Barrow Creek region, the loss of language, which also entails the loss of cultural knowledge, is looming large. Some Kaytetye people are acutely aware that the number of fluent speakers, with all the cultural knowledge that entails, can be counted on one hand. Kaytetye people lobbied the local school, Neutral Junction, for a Kaytetye program which began in early 2002 under the ILC strand of the NT curriculum. Artarre has a population of about 60 people and is on a pastoral excision off Neutral Junction Pastoral Station. Artarre has a clinic staffed by an outside nurse 3 days a week and a night patrol office with two part-time positions filled by local people on CDEP. There are no other jobs at Artarre, but there are two positions at the nearby school and seasonal station work.

3. Neutral Junction School

Neutral Junction School is a Northern Territory government school established around 1966. The enrolment for 2010 was 20, with the age ranging between 5 and 12 years old. Until 2010 it was a one-teacher school; now it has both a principal and a teacher, and the latter position is filled by community member and Kaytetye speaker Alison Ross. Prior to 1966 most Kaytetye people did not go to school. School was regarded as very important by the generation that had

not received it. In 1966 Lena Ngamperle was amongst the first students to attend Neutral Junction School.

> "*School*-arlelke aynanthe anywerr-antethenenhe. 'Wele *school*-lke *ready*-arrenhe,' waylpelepe angkenke, '*You fella go school*-warle atnyweye, mpele'. Ane *bush*-arenye tangkwerle apeyayne altaye. *School*-warlelke aynewanthe *learn'em*-ayleyayne aynewanthe *school*-arle 'Aye, *school teacher* rtame apenhengerne.' Renhe aynanthe *school*-arlelke atnyweyayne. *School*-le aynanthe aneyayne arleyake inenge, makwerle-ee. (L Ngamperle, 1986)"
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> *Then one day we had to go inside a school and sit there. A white person said to us 'The school is ready now, you all go to school.' Before we used to spend everyday walking around in the bush; now we were being taught things inside a school. A school teacher had arrived, so we went inside the school. There were lots of us teenage girls at school.*

The difference between those who had formal schooling and those whose childhood was spent in the bush is manifest in their degree of Kaytetye knowledge, as well as familiarity with classroom teaching. The Kaytetye program in the school relies on people with both skills: fluent Kaytetye speakers and people familiar with classroom learning, which tend to be younger people

The students

The children at the school vary in their knowledge of Kaytetye. Most children have some passive knowledge of the Kaytetye. This means that they understand Kaytetye but can not speak it. Such receptive bilinguals, also known as passive speakers, are described in Kaytetye as being able to only 'hear' a language. Some children can say a simple Kaytetye sentence, and some only a few words. The level of cultural knowledge amongst the children also varies. Children from the three outstations tend to have greater cultural knowledge than children from Artarre community

There are often some children who only speak Standard English. Sometimes these students have been Indigenous, sometimes non-Indigenous. At times, the language program has offered one context where the local children can excel beyond the Standard English speaking children. This has provided a 'leveller' so to speak, which assists the local children gain confidence in their ability to learn. The program has always been highly valued by the parents of these English-speaking children. One such parent stated that giving her children the chance to learn Kaytetye language and culture was the main reason for her moving out to Artarre community from Alice Springs. These children loved the Kaytetye language lessons as much as the local children.

4. The Kaytetye program at Neutral Junction School

The Kaytetye program began in 2002, when Kylie Fuad was the teacher at the school. The program can be described as a language revitalization program (Reyhner et al. 1999, NT curriculum framework p483). Younger adult's knowledge of the language tends to be only partial; and so the program is a way of supporting transmission of Kaytetye to the younger generations. Kaytetye people identified the following aims of the program:

1. develop self-esteem, a healthy identity and sense of belonging
2. learn about Kaytetye land, kinship and environment
3. improve student's oral skills in Kaytetye
4. raise language awareness amongst children, parents and the broader Kaytetye community
5. foster student's interest in language and music
6. introduce students to Kaytetye literacy

A major feature of the program is the use of music, which is delivered by Music Outback. Through singing and song writing, Kaytetye oral skills are being developed, as well as creating new contexts for using Kaytetye (song), Kaytetye literacy (through the creation of song books) and transmitting cultural knowledge, as traditional culture are the subject matter of the songs. In addition to these specific aims, the program has provided a number of other benefits to the school and community, including increased student and parent engagement, a sense of pride and achievement amongst students, improved literacy outcomes in English. The use of written Kaytetye has assisted the students in learning English literacy. Reinforcing the use of books, especially through the use of Kaytetye songbooks, and the constant reinforcement that words and letters represent things, is relevant to learning any literacy. Hearing and seeing the unfolding of a Kaytetye story, read by a Kaytetye teacher, I have seen the students fall silent and engage totally in a story. It may be that there is a feeling of pride that the content, the language and the teacher are '*theirs*'.

The program is delivered by teaching Kaytetye once a week for 1 hour, an elder and a younger literate person. There are also intensive workshops to train Kaytetye speakers in teaching skills, write Kaytetye songs, and prepare lessons. These happen once or twice a year. A linguist (usually myself), a musician (usually Steve Berry, Music Outback) and elder (usually Tommy Thompson) assist in these workshops. Sharing the Kaytetye songs at intercultural schools exchanges has been one of the most exciting things for both parents and children. CrocFest and MobFest are both events where Kaytetye songs and stories are performed with immense pride. The School language program won the NT Flame award in 2007 for their Kaytetye singing and song-writing program.

The program has stalled at times because the school has not been able to find funds to pay the Kaytetye teachers or run the workshops. **For language learning programs in schools to be successful they require regular on-going funding.** Funding to pay Kaytetye teachers and develop curricula and deliver teaching training should not be contingent upon the particular school principle at the time; it needs to be available to the community irrespective of the ability of the current principle.

Bringing Kaytetye into the classroom has given a sense of familiarity for Indigenous children. It gives Kaytetye people some ownership over their education. It also means that their families feel that they have something they can contribute formally to their children's education. It is a powerful statement of *your language is important.* Over the 10 years that I have seen this program develop, I have seen children come home, and sing and talk about what they had learnt in class. Children together, and parents and children discuss the meaning of the Kaytetye words in the songs and in turn, the parents could engage with their children's

education by confirming and extending their knowledge. Retention of material learnt in the Kaytetye lessons was better amongst those children who had parents who discussed the material with them.

At the times when Neutral Junction School had the language program going regularly, more parents were involved in the school generally, not just when the language lessons were delivered. As a result the non-Indigenous teacher got to know more of the students' parents. The parents were entering the classrooms when they might have been too shy before, often because they were conscious of their lack of formal schooling. When language programs were being run, they felt their knowledge was being valued in the school setting, which gave them more confidence to interact with teachers. Selma Thompson, a Kaytetye parent from Artarre community states:

> *It's good for the kids to learn Kaytetye songs, but those songs are important because they are Dreamtime stories. The kids need to know those stories, the places and dreamings for those places. The songs are a good way for them to learn these stories through their language. They also can understand what the songs are. It is important to explain the story as well. Kids are getting stronger in language all the time (Selma Thompson, May 2007).*

Reversing Language loss

Aboriginal English (AE), which is a creole at Alekarenge, is the prestige language in the Kaytetye region. This is what children speak even when addressed in Kaytetye. The pressure to switch to speaking AE rather than Kaytetye or Standard English comes from a range of complex forces. To reverse language loss where Kaytetye is still spoken, its use needs to be expanded to other contexts as well as the home. Schools, preschools, courts, hospitals, government agencies and business transactions with large companies all need to be done in the Indigenous language using interpreters. In terms of education, it needs to be recognised that using children's first language as the medium of instruction in the classroom is best practice. Language enrichment curricula for high schools need to be undertaken. Recruitment, support, training and professional development of speakers of Indigenous languages as language teachers needs to be a priority.

In contrast, at Alekarenge where Kaytetye is not the first language of the Indigenous people, the language needs to be taught as a *second language*. Formal teaching of Kaytetye, and the development of classroom resources to support teaching it as a second language, is essential for language learning to be effective in regions where it is no longer spoken.

In both contexts making Indigenous languages attractive to young people is crucial for the future of Aboriginal languages. Support for communities to go through informal and formal training to attain goals of Indigenous language restoration. Recruitment, support, training and professional development for Indigenous people to learn their languages and to become skilled language teachers and language revivers is needed. Development of language nests is also required. It is essential that the wider community recognise Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia, and that in many communities maintenance and restoration of

language is essential for reconnection to culture and identity, and for community well being. This needs to be enshrined through recognition of Indigenous language rights.

Language learning in schools the Kaytetye region

Despite the fact that no Kaytetye children speak Standard English as a first language when they begin school, classes in schools in this region are taught solely in English. Teachers are not trained to have knowledge of the students first language which is either Kaytetye, Alekarenge creole, Anmatyerr or Warlpiri. Furthermore, the lack of home language content in these schools directly contradicts a number of key recommendations made by the *Closing the Gap* initiative and *Learning Lessons* (1999) and *Indigenous Languages and Culture* (2004-2005) reports about the inclusion of children's vernacular language in the school curriculum. **For any language learning to be effective, either Standard English or an Aboriginal language, teachers need to know about the first language of the students (L1) and curricula needs to take into account the linguistic features of the L1 language.**

Conclusion

The Federal Government, NT Department of Education, the broader Australian community and Indigenous people all share a similar goal that is to see Indigenous children performing as well as non-Indigenous children at school. The path forward is to engage Indigenous communities in their children's education. In non-Indigenous communities, the children who perform well at school are the ones with parents who are engaged with their education. The situation is no different for Indigenous families. The place of language and culture in the classrooms, whether as a small ILC style program or as a full-scale two-way program, will ensure this engagement and have follow-on effects for the performance of children. Even where children do not continue to speak their traditional language, its presence in the classroom gives students a sense of pride and relevance. They feel that their identity is being acknowledged and is important. The learning of Indigenous languages must be part of all children's education. Programs that are not fully supported both financially and in practice will inevitably fail.