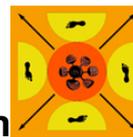


## Papulu Apparr-kari Aboriginal Corporation



# SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

*Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre's submission to this Inquiry takes the form of a statement that touches on our various areas of experience and expertise.*

Based in Tennant Creek, Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre represents the 16 language groups of the Barkly Region in the Northern Territory. These languages are Warumungu, Warlpiri, Alyawarr, Kayetye, Warlmanpa, Wakaya, Mudburra, Wambaya, Jingili, Kudanji, Ngarnga, Binbinga, Garrawa, Yanyuwa, Waanyi and Mara. Our name, Papulu Apparr-kari, means House of Languages in the Warumungu language.

Papulu Apparr-kari is funded by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, under its Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program. Recent closures of language centres at Katherine and Borroloola means we are now the only language centre left on the mainland of the Northern Territory. Our core business is the task of maintaining, recording and reviving the Indigenous languages of the Barkly Region. The work is urgent: of the 16 languages, at least 9 are significantly at risk.

We set out to achieve this in a number of ways.

We work with speakers of the language/s to create dictionaries and/or word lists.

We produce books, ranging in scope and subject matter: detailed learner's guides and dictionaries, traditional dreamtime stories, readers based around a concept such as the environment or body parts, short stories to interest children and others in aspects of traditional culture. These books are written in simple language and are illustrated and designed to engage young children, but have wider applications as well – a recent book about body parts was created for children and will prove a valuable resource for health professionals as well. To date we have published over 30 books, in multiple languages, as many as we can manage (eight, for recent titles).

Critically, every one of our stories is also available as an audio book that reads the story in both English and the traditional language. The dreamtime stories also have the stories animated to play on a computer.

For the past seven years, we have also been working with Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation on the First Language Learning and Literacy Program, to establish The Centre for

Indigenous Literacy, a joint project that meets our objectives of maintaining and revitalising Indigenous languages and provides crucial support for the development of literacy skills as well. What comes out of this process is a system that allows speakers to teach their language to others. It is one of the most critical programs we have ever been involved in, as it creates a genuine pathway for language to be passed on, that does not depend on linguists or language teachers, but rather uses the skills and knowledge of elders and others in the community. It is our hope that this approach to teaching Indigenous language will be widely adopted by schools.

We also provide a number of services, outlined below.

*Cultural Awareness/Introduction to Community/Cross Cultural Courses:* These are courses run for government departments and corporate organisations to outline some of the cultural differences that may impact upon their organisations when dealing with or employing indigenous peoples.

*Interpreter Services:*

In conjunction with the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, we supply interpreters for court appearances and to help with legal matters. Interpreters conducting this work have completed interpreter training. In addition we supply interpreters to assist communication with medical services and other functions of government and private enterprise if required.

*Liason/mediation:* We have teams of indigenous people who can mediate or liaise between indigenous people and organisations or enterprises to allow for effective communication or resolve disputes. In short we enable the breaking down of barriers and engage and support community members to be involved in all aspects of cross cultural issues needing to be discussed.

*Translation Services:* We can translate into both written and oral forms to help government services and others get their message out to indigenous people. English is a second language to many of the people of the Barkly, and translation is necessary for effective communication.

### ***Recognition of Indigenous languages and their role in education***

Language is the meaning of things. Knowledge of language and recognition of its value is at the core of cultural identity and pride. If you don't have language, you don't have traditional law or culture and our connections to country. Certain concepts cannot be translated at all; others lose subtlety and nuance in the shift from one language to another. To be without language is to be without culture.

Knowledge of language is thus vital to promoting pride and a sense of cultural identity. If you reinvigorate cultural identity, you create pride and, with that, a way forward. This is the lesson demonstrated by the experience of Indigenous people in other parts of the world – Native Americans in the US, for example, where culture and language are being restored to the centre of life though not before the loss of a generation. Here in the Barkly region old people lament that language and culture are disappearing and that at the moment the young ones are not listening to them when they try to pass their knowledge on – they say that language and cultural ways must be recorded for when the young people are ready.

In Tennant's Creek there is no such thing as normal Australian life for the young people – they are caught in a transitional moment between traditional culture and growing urbanisation; the

values of the community no longer seem relevant, but nor does school. These young people see the world in terms of white fella way and black fella way. Education is white fella way, and generally not valued – not surprising, because the education system does not value them. It does not value their language or their cultural identity. Instead, it places obstacles in their way. It teaches them in English, which is second or third language for many, and that makes learning hard. It does not acknowledge the value of Indigenous culture and Indigenous understandings of the world, despite the contribution these could make to numerous areas of the curriculum. It measures success in narrow, exclusive terms.

There is no argument that children need English literacy skills. But in the first instance, what is most important is getting young people to attend school and getting them to engage with what they do there. The child who doesn't go to school doesn't learn. The child who is actually in the classroom may not be learning either, unless the program offered by the school is relevant and meaningful. The problem of relevance is likely to become even greater with the introduction of a national curriculum, which does not recognise the different needs of these students or the fact that they do not come from a literacy-based culture. Within the national curriculum framework, achieving successful outcomes is going to be even more difficult for these students.

### ***Translating and interpreting***

We have considerable experience translating documents for governments, particularly in the areas of housing, health and the law. A major challenge in this work is that English is a language of multi-millions of words, whereas most Indigenous languages have only tens of thousands or even fewer. English documents that do not recognise this simple difference may not be fully translatable.

We also observe that interpreters and translators are not always used when they should be. This was an issue with the Intervention, for example. Often, the need for translation is not understood because the poor level of comprehension amongst Indigenous people is not recognised by those who are addressing them. Like anyone else, Indigenous people do not readily volunteer that they don't know what something means.

Another problem is the assumption that Indigenous people can read their own language/s. Often, they cannot. They do understand the spoken form of the language however, and they do listen. For this reason oral/aural communication is often the most effective.

There are other areas of miscommunication. These may arise from the fact that the nuances an English speaker wants to convey are not available in Indigenous languages. There may be an assumption – incorrect – that different Indigenous languages from within the same geographic region are not that dissimilar. There are also cultural misunderstandings – resulting, for example, in meetings of men and women being addressed on topics that belong to the domain of men or women but not both or not both together. Our cross-cultural courses (for employees of the mining industry, government, private enterprise or anyone working with Indigenous people) are designed to educate participants about such potential solecisms; we believe attending such courses should be part of standard operating procedure for anyone coming to work with Indigenous communities.

We have also seen that when interpreters or translators are used, they are often poorly prepared for the work they are about to undertake. It is our recommendation that those employing an interpreter or translator should be willing to spend some time ensuring the

material is familiar and understood. Once again, this should be part of standard operating procedure.

### ***The effectiveness of current programs***

We find that we are producing some excellent resources but we need additional support to ensure they are widely used. At the moment, the use of our materials in classrooms depends on our relationships with individual principals and teachers. If they aren't interested, their students miss out.

The teaching of Indigenous language should not depend on the interest and goodwill of individuals at individual schools. Its significance and value needs structural recognition within the curriculum.

We would like to see primary school students receive several hours of Indigenous language instruction each week. We have language speakers trained in delivering the First Language Learning and Literacy Program who could do that work. Language and culture experiences cannot be delivered from textbooks alone. It's essential to recognise the oral nature of the tradition and use the community elders in face to face teaching to pass their knowledge on.

In conclusion, we have had many years of institutionalised top down projects that have had only limited success. We recommend our approach instead: working from the bottom up and engaging the community in working with the concepts and projects we have been trialling with The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, via the Centre for Indigenous Literacy Project. We firmly believe this work provides the opportunity to engage and give meaning to young people in their educational experiences. It gives them positive experiences with explicit literacy skill building components, and promotes pride, meaning and relevance for them in their school experience. We have seen this leads to observably positive and improved literacy outcomes in both first language and English language learning.

**For more information, contact Karan Hayward, CEO, Papulu Apparr-kari Aboriginal Corporation, (The Tennant Creek Language Centre).**