Kimberley Language Resource Centre
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SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS FOR THE INQUIRY ON LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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ABOUT THE KIMBERLEY LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTRE

MISSION STATEMENT

To advocate for Kimberley languages on all levels
To promote recognition that diversity in languages is central to Kimberley culture, land and identity and that Aboriginal languages have value in today's world.
To work in partnership with the diverse Kimberley language communities
To ensure Kimberley languages are passed on to children.

The KLRC is the only organisation in Australia focussing solely on Kimberley Aboriginal languages. The Kimberley was, and still is, the one of the most linguistically diverse areas in Australia with at least 42[1] language groups plus additional dialects identified. The KLRC Directors advocate for the 30 or so languages still spoken.

The organisation was established in 1984 by Aboriginal people concerned about the effects of colonisation and the continuing impact of Western society on their spoken languages and cultural knowledge. It is beginning its 26th year of operations with a wealth of experience and resources underpinning its service delivery. The organisation is governed by a Board of 12 Directors accountable to a membership from across the region. The office is based in Halls Creek in the East Kimberley.

The KLRC provides a forum for developing language policy to strategically revive and maintain (in other words, ***continue***) the Kimberley Aboriginal languages. The organisation responds directly to community requests for assistance with Language Continuation. It also provides services to the non-Aboriginal government and private sectors. For more information please see www.klrc.org.au

The KLRC's objectives fall under 5 AIMS

- Encourage the oral transmission of Languages and Knowledge
- Advocate for Kimberley Aboriginal Languages
- Build capacity in Kimberley Aboriginal people to own and manage Language and Knowledge continuation
- Engage in partnerships, develop networks and fundraise
- Strengthen the effective operations and governance of the KLRC

[1] Jabirrjabirr, Nimanburru, Ngumbarl, Jugun, Yawuru, Warrwa, Worrorra, Umiida, Unggarrangu, Andajin, Worla, Wunambal, Gaambera, Kwini, Mangala, Yulparija, Wangkajunga, Juwaliny, Malgnin, Doolboong, Winjarumi, Jawijibaya, Ngarnawu, Guwij, Wila Wila, Miwa, Yiiji, Bardi, Jawi, Nyulnyul, Nyikina, Kija, Miriwoong, Gajirrawoong, Ngarinyin, Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Karajarri, Walmajarri, Ngardi, Jaru, Kukatja

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DISCUSSION

The Kimberley Language Resource Centre (KLRC) is the umbrella organisation for Aboriginal language groups who have the same stated goal:
Kimberley Aboriginal children need to strengthen knowledge of who they are through their own heritage languages, cultural knowledge and family values.

What is happening now?

- Children are failing at school in the Western education outcomes of literacy and job readiness
- Children are missing out on their own oral tradition heritage teaching and learning – often leaving them without a comfortable place in either world
- The Western education system does not, and cannot, deliver culturally appropriate education that builds identity through Aboriginal languages, knowledge and values within the existing curriculum framework, and within four walls.

What do we know from research?

- When children have a strong sense of identity they are best able to integrate other ways of knowing the world
- Western educational methods can be integrated in successful ways with Indigenous education content when this is driven by the Indigenous groups
- The basis of any success is a curriculum that is culturally responsive and relevant
- Multilingualism is not a barrier to language and literacy achievement in monolingual schooling

What are the barriers?
The KLRC believes Language Continuation at the home and community level is being set up in opposition to the Closing the Gap focus on improving English literacy and other education outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal people in the Kimberley want their languages to continue or to be revived, but they also want the increased life choices offered by success in the western education system. In consequence, language speakers are not comfortable using their languages in everyday life. They fear that will hinder educational progress in English. This makes successful outcomes for Objectives 2, 3 and 4 of the National Approach to Indigenous Languages problematic to achieve (http://www.arts.gov.au/topics/indigenous-arts/indigenous-languages-national-approach).

The significance of a regional Aboriginal organisation like the KLRC is to safeguard Aboriginal aspirations for heritage language knowledge and to ensure the people central to Language Continuation are supported, acknowledged and incorporated into any strategies or policies developed by governments, academia or service providers. No single federal or state government department can do this job. Furthermore, state and federal education systems cannot be responsible for the continuation of Aboriginal oral tradition heritage at the community level when all they can offer is Aboriginal languages as a western curriculum subject. Education departments cannot drive community level Language Continuation.

The KLRC believes there is a crucial dialogue being overlooked by governments, the western education system and Aboriginal people and communities. This discussion can be summarised as a question:
If reclamation, revival and maintenance strategies in early childhood succeed in producing new generations of Aboriginal languages speakers, are western employment, education and training systems set up to effectively teach multilingual and bilcultural Aboriginal children and adults?

The KLRC posits that if the dialogue on Aboriginal languages acquisition (from birth) and learning (additional language) does not acknowledge the existence of Aboriginal, self-determined linguistic and cultural continuation strategies, then the programs being promoted by academia, government and education will either a) underpin the further decline of Aboriginal languages or b) fail because they cannot accommodate the reality of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of Kimberley children.

This latter is the current situation for many people in the Kimberley since the lingua franca of the region - Kriol - is not properly recognised and supported as a different language to English with a different cultural context underpinning it. The situation will become even more complex if children are bilingual with Kriol and an oral heritage language.

Is there a way forward?
Australian Aboriginal culture is the oldest continuous indigenous oral culture in the world. This identity shared by Kimberley Aboriginal people is in danger of being lost completely because they are not supported to pass this knowledge on in parallel with the teaching and learning provided through the Western system of schooling. This issue is not just about the maintenance of currently spoken languages, but about the renewal and revival of critically endangered languages throughout all generations. Kimberley people's concern is based in the daily reality of not hearing younger generations speak languages even though language still exists in the community – even critically endangered languages have been spoken in living memory. The discussion that needs to happen is about a future which includes oral Aboriginal languages and cultural knowledge operating in daily life, not as relics which have been documented and shelved for future revival.

Aboriginal people themselves know there is a connection between a lost identity and lost languages and the disadvantage they are experiencing in their living conditions, health, education and employment.

> ***This means that the Aboriginal structures for leadership are not there. The gardiya influence is so strong it's almost like a distraction. And our authority is slowly lost. You wouldn't let an athlete compete in the Olympics if they were not groomed, day to day. It's about exercising through knowing your language, cultural knowledge and using it in leadership roles. You can't just cast it aside for a time and then try to pick it up again (personal communication, Olive Knight, Walmajarri Elder, Wangkatjungka Community first quoted in the KLRC's submission to FaCSHIA's National Indigenous Representative Body consultations 2008)***

The crisis situation for linguistic and cultural continuation cannot be separated from national concern about general health and wellbeing and educational outcomes. Aboriginal people are concerned about both their own society and the wider society, but are currently only encouraged to engage with the concerns of the dominant western culture to meet Closing the Gap targets.

In order to change this situation, Aboriginal teaching and learning needs to be given equal status with western teaching and learning. For Kimberley Aboriginal people, the most suitable teachers of Aboriginal knowledge and values are the older generations and speakers of the languages. The most appropriate place to start developing teaching content for delivery through a curriculum is on country and in the community. The most appropriate teaching method for early years content is oral (see Appendix B –KLRC submission to the National Languages Curriculum consultation). Western schooling needs to build on Aboriginal teaching and learning content while introducing children to the wider community and the world through the Western teaching and learning content. The cycle of 'fitting in' Aboriginal knowledge to the Western knowledge system needs to be broken (see Appendix A - Casson and Bedford, 2010). There are clearly employment opportunities within this approach – opportunities which would strongly benefit remote locations where job choice is limited or non-existent.

Some comments on government policy

Currently the Western Australian government does not provide funding specifically for Aboriginal Languages. There is no state department to which the KLRC can apply for operational funds or for project funds. WA does not have an Aboriginal Languages Policy. The Department for Indigenous Affairs initiated a policy before the change of government in 2008 but this was not carried forward by the Liberal/Nationals government and it is not clear whether it will ever be implemented.

In regard to Federal policy –the KLRC is currently limited to Commonwealth monies through OFTA for both operational and project funding. The $10m allocated to OFTA for the MILR program out of an annual budget of $21.9b for Indigenous programming nationally (2010 Indigenous Expenditure Report, page xiv) is not sufficient to support regional language centres and smaller language projects as well as universities, TAFE colleges and even AIATSIS with their language work.

It is not appropriate for an Aboriginal-directed organisation to be competing with educational institutions and government departments for the survival of their languages. The true of cost of operating the KLRC including the funding required for its curriculum development and regional community language projects would approach $2m annually. Without this funding the biggest loser is not the organisation or the employees but the 30 languages of the Kimberley and the tens of thousands of Aboriginal people who lose an organisation whose sole focus is to prevent the complete loss of their oral heritage. The meagre MILR funds are directed towards the creation of resources and short-term projects. The survival of Kimberley Aboriginal languages as spoken, living languages requires much more than that.

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