Federal Parliament Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Communities

Questionnaire Response from Why Warriors Pty Ltd and the AHED Project.

1. **What are the languages spoken in your community?**

Most of our work occurs in the community of Galiwin'ku but we work across NE Arnhem Land. In Galiwin'ku there are about 21 tribes, most of which have distinct dialects. Sometime the differences are very small and related only to the naming of that tribe's Law. The linguistically distinct languages in the region are classified by Yolŋu[1] by the word they use to mean "this/here". Using this broader classification there may be 12 distinct living languages in the region. Of these only 6-7 are likely to survive to the next generation. The region's diversity means that almost all local residents are multilingual, speaking 3-4 Indigenous languages. The lingua franca of the NE Arnhem land region are the sister languages of "Dhuwal and "Dhuwala." Variations "Dhuwal" are spoken by Djambarrpuyŋu, Liya-Gawumirr, Liya-galawumirr, Gälpu, Rithaŋu and Dätiwuy. Variations of Dhuwala are spoken by Gupapuyŋu and Gumatj tribes, among others. "Dhaŋu" is also common in Galiwinku, spoken by Golumala, Waŋgurri and Warramiri.

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

All age groups speak the lingua franca languages well and usually their mother or father's language. However, those languages that are not spoken across the region are rapidly being lost, being replaced by the "Dhuwal" or "Dhuwala" or English in some places. More important than the loss of whole languages is the loss of the deep conceptual and abstract terms that elders in the community hold dear. The younger generations are not using many of the deep concepts. For example, the word *Märr*, has many senses and meanings, it is a powerful concept that refers to a person's inner power, strength and their indebtedness to others. It is a concept that helps people to understand the dependency that is affecting our community. They speak of welfare making them *märrmiriw* - powerless and indebted. However, many young people do not know the word or use it. This actually creates a conceptual gap. And these conceptual gaps remain when they learn English. The children of this younger generation are learning an impoverished form of their native tongues, despite the prevalence of Indigenous languages in the region.

3. **Describe your project.**

Why Warriors provides two main services: 1) training of Dominant culture personnel in cross-cultural and communication skills, and; 2) the Arnhem Human Enterprise Development Project (AHED). Previously we have also provided cross-cultural educators to various organizations, particularly ARDS. All our field workers are trained to speak a local Indigenous language. The education we provide to Yolngu people is in this language. We are also working on the development of e-learning English literacy tools.

[1] The People of NE Arnhem Land. Including the communities of Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak, Yirrkala and parts of Numbawarr.

Our cross-cultural training focuses on giving Dominant culture people the attitudinal, conceptual and communication skills to work more effectively with Indigenous people. An important part of this is helping personnel to understand the relevance and usefulness of learning an Indigenous language. We have seen the number of dominant culture language speakers in the region increase over the nearly 10 years we have been providing such training. But the Government is still not very interested in requiring or even supporting staff working in Indigenous communities to learn the local language.

The AHED project is a service we provide to the Galwin'ku community to support locally driven development. We place and train Faciliators to help people overcome the economic, social, cultural and linguistic barriers that they face when they try to achieve major goals or develop enterprises (social, political or economic). Our Facilitators are gradually trained in the local language and culture and much of their role is resourcing and education. Often this education and training is achieved through finding experts in a given subject to come and teach people in the community, with the facilitator acting as interpreter and intermediary educator. They help transfer concepts from the Dominant culture world across to the Yolŋu world.

There are no other services like this in Arnhem Land and we saw that people were desperate for services that support their own ideas from their own cultural and social context. Most other training and business development projects required people to come into a dominant culture space where English is the only mode of communication. These projects required people to fit dominant culture feasibility pre-requisites that were often unrealistic. People were asking us for support because we understood their language and culture. And this drove the creation of the AHED project.

We are working with approximately half the clans in Galiwin'k and have 18 clients developing enterprises, including some large groups of 12 or more people. 35 different enterprise ideas have been shared with us of the 2 years we have been providing this service.

The majority of our clients are 35 to 65 years old but we work with some individuals who are over 70 and as young as 18.

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

It is the process of our dominant culture staff learning Indigenous languages in order to provide accurate information to our clients that has the greatest impact on the use of languages locally. Through our service, people can learn how to develop a business or social enterprise or improve their health, using their own language (and at the same time discover new English concepts). This allows people to develop their community in a space that honours their language and their intellectual capacity, which is expressed in their language. In English, people know that they may come across as sounding simple, but in their own language they sound powerful, revealing the intellectual capacity they hold within. This we think it the most effective way to value the Yolŋu languages.

As we said above, our training for dominant culture personnel explores the reason why it is essential for dominant culture staff to learn indigenous languages, for improved communication and education outcomes.

We receive no funding from Government for these projects - our training is fee for service, but the AHED program is provided free to Yolŋu clients in Galiwn'ku, with the help of funding from Rio Tinto Aborignal Fund, Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation and individual donors.

We are seeing Indigenous owned, controlled and managed projects and even organisations starting to grow into sustainable enterprises. Unlike the previous era, where the management ofAboriginal organisations in this region was English dominated, our clients' enterprises' internal operations are part of an Indigenous linguistic and cultural space that they determine.

We have seen gradual improvements in the attitude of Dominant Culture personnel toward Indigenous languages. Many wish for the opportunity within their work space to learn the local language. We hope that our training has had something to do with this. We know that our book *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* by Richard Trudgen has had much to do with this, as many people often tell us how it has inspired them.

5. **How are your languages taught in schools?**

We do not work closely with the school. However, parents often tell us that the school undervalues their languages. The local school has worked hard to retain bilingual education in the first three years of schooling, despite removal of funds by the NT Government for bilingual education. But interest in schooling for children in the community seems to drop off as they get older. High school years in particular fail to engage students. I believe that the English only environment contributes to this. Dominant Culture teachers at the school are not given enough training in the local language, despite the fact that many want this training. As a result, many often give up and leave after a year or two. All these issues also impact on the retention of local teaching staff. The school seem to be struggling to retain Yolŋu assistant teachers. Over the years we have observed that this is due in part to the lack of control they have in the classroom and work place because the school environment is dominated by English.

6. **What interpreting and translating services are available in your local language? How useful and effective are these?**

The Aboriginal Interpreter Service based in Darwin provides a number of Yolŋu interpreters both in Darwin and in the communities.

Interpreters are often highly skilled in translating every day conversation, however, their ability to translate intangible terms and professional level English is poor (see our explanation of problems with intangible terms in our submission). This is because not enough work has been done to train these interpreters and that not enough work has been put into charting the Yolŋu languages so that they can have access to English to Yolŋu Matha [2] dictionaries for health, legal and economic fields. Underlying this training failure is a cultural assumption that Indigenous People who are fluent in speaking English and their own language therefore have a full and accurate vocabulary. See the report by ARDS Inc. "A lack of Mutual Respect " [3]for some example of the misunderstanding that occur in the legal system despite the use of interpreters.

[2] Yolŋu matha = languages of the Yolŋu people.
[3] See page 20 – 35 http://www.ards.com.au/print/Absence_of_Mutual_Respect-FINAL.pdf

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

Training new staff takes time in an environment where government and other personnel are moving at a rapid pace, driven by the media, the election cycle and the "white man's" need to "save" the Indigenous people. The linguistic, cultural and learning needs of the whole community come second to this false urgency that the people themselves experience as a burden. This leaves us trying to train our facilitator to support our Yolŋu clients, while our clients are missing out on opportunities, because things are changing too much.

Funding is also difficult to obtain because most grants and funders do not value programs that train dominant culture personnel to use Indigenous languages. This is not seen as important or even relevant by those that do not work on the ground. The common belief is that Yolŋu can somehow chart the complexities of both English hand their own language without help from English first language speakers.

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

We would like to see our facilitation and support services delivered in all the communities in Arnhem Land so that people can be enabled to successfully build their own enterprises, while using and valuing the power of their own languages. At the same time we see a need to expand training in local language to provide this to Dominant culture staff beyond our own. We hope that as English first language staff start to use the local languages in their work places, that Yolŋu people will be more empowered in those spaces and have more opportunity to learn Dominant culture knowledge - not to mention the relational benefits that arise from the two cultures understanding each other.