

**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 the Indigenous languages and cultures of the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory. I am also making this submission as a way of communicating the wishes of a number of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

The desire of these communities is to see all Indigenous children growing up with the English literacy and numeracy skills needed to live in Australia but without compromising their Indigenous heritage and identity (§2).

My expertise is in Australian Indigenous languages, in particular the documentation, transmission and maintenance of them. Most of my research is focussed on the change in Indigenous languages as a result of contact with English and Kriol (the English-based creole language spoken across northern Australia).

Most relevant to this submission is my work in the Northern Territory in remote Indigenous schools and communities. I have worked in the Victoria River District for the past ten years as a linguist. For part of this time I was employed by Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation (Katherine Regional Aboriginal Language Centre) to facilitate Indigenous language programs in three community schools: Pigeon Hole, Bulla Camp and Amanbidji (§3). These programs were structured under the Indigenous Language and Culture (ILC) section of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework.

Over the years I have held a number of formal and informal discussions with these communities about their desires for their children's education (§2). A theme which is repeated time and time again is that teaching Indigenous languages in schools **strengthens Indigenous language and identity** (§4.1) and helps achieve better **competency in English language** (§4.2). These goals relate directly to the terms of reference for the *Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*.

From my own experience and discussions with communities, two approaches can be taken to the inclusion of language and culture in schools.

- (i) Small-scale Indigenous Language and Culture programs structured under the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework which specifically **strengthens Indigenous language and identity**. These programs focus on children's *traditional* language which is often different from their *home* language, if traditional language loss has occurred. The inclusion of ILC programs in schools has been shown to increase school attendance benefiting the full curriculum including **English language learning** (§4.1).
- (ii) Full bilingual programs which not only increase benefit **Indigenous language and identity**, but demonstrably improve students' **English literacy and numeracy** skills by providing a bridge between their home language and English. These programs focus on children's *home* language which may be different from their *traditional* language if language loss has occurred (§4.2).

In this submission, I speak from my own personal experience as a linguist working in schools and communities in the Victoria River District. I will also present some views from community members whom I have interviewed on this topic. They argue for the place of Indigenous languages and cultures in schools as way of achieving good educational outcomes for their children.

## 2. Community desires for good educational outcomes

In the four communities I have worked in - Kalkaringi, Pigeon Hole, Amanbidji and Bulla Camp - community leaders have expressed a desire for their children to learn English well, *though not to the detriment of their traditional language*. Many community leaders have expressed concern about the monolingual approach of the NT Department of Education, which operates from the assumption that Indigenous languages interfere with children's ability to learn English and that children need to 'let go' of their first language in order to learn English well.

Communities are also concerned that their desire for children to maintain their traditional languages and for them to be spoken in classrooms is being presented as an anti-English separatist movement. In fact most people in these communities want their children to learn both their traditional language and English.

Sandra Edwards (Kalkaringi CEC Assistant Teacher) and Topsy Dodd (senior ceremony woman) from Kalkaringi express a general consensus in wanting younger generations to learn both English and Gurindji.

It's really good if they learn two ways, you know like English and Gurindji. They are getting better and better at English and seem to be forgetting about Gurindji. But they have to get their language back so they can still keep on talking. They really want to be strong with their language, so it won't be lost forever. See we'll just have kids talking in English and Kriol, mixed. But we want kids to talk proper Gurindji, their own language. (Sandra Edwards, August 2008)

*Ngurnayinangulu pinak manangu karu. Dei garra habim tuwei - langgwij an jarrakap an English dei wanta habim tuwei kujarra, ngumpit-ku kartiya-wu.*

We would like to teach the kids. They should be educated two-ways - in Gurindji and English. (Topsy Dodd, August 2008)

Although communities believe that it is important for their children to learn English, they are very concerned that the emphasis on English-only education will be detrimental to the maintenance of their traditional languages.

*Ngurnayinangkulu kurru karrinyana karu yu nou kula-lu marnana jutup. Ngulu marnani "Nyawa-ngkirri". "Nyawangkirri-ma", nyampayila ngulu marnana "Murlangkurra". "Kawayi murlangkurra," kuya yu nou. An "Pinka-kirri," jei tok rong jarran. "Pinka-kurra," kuya. "Pinka-kurra kanyjurra". "Nyawangkirri," dat not rait word jaru. Ngurnayinangkulu kurru karrinyana kuya laik ngurnayinangkulu jutuk kuya-rnangu jarrakap brobli-wei.*

We listen to the kids, you know, and they don't talk properly. For example, they are always saying *nyawangkirri* for "that way". They always say *nyawangkirri* not *murlangkurra* which is wrong. You should say *murlangkurra*. And they also say *pinka-kirri* for "to the river" which is wrong. They should say *pinka-kurra*. *Nyawangkirri* is not proper Gurindji. We listen to the kids and they don't talk as well as I am talking to you. (Bidy Wavehill, Gurindji elder, August 2008)

*Jaru ngulu marni jutuk nyawa-ma yapayapa-ma. Ngulu marnana waput-karra. Ngulu marnana half-half nyila-ma jaru-ma karu-ma.*

The kids used to talk properly. Now they mix everything up. They speak half Kriol and half Gurindji. (Ronnie Wavehill, Gurindji elder, August 2008)

The response from the NT Department of Education has been to suggest that they are not responsible for teaching traditional languages, and that this learning should take place in the home. They argue their responsibility is to teach the children English literacy and numeracy. In reply, community leaders in Kalkaringi, Pigeon Hole, Amanbidji and Bulla Camp argue that teaching traditional languages helps the children learn English by engaging them in their children's schooling, thereby increasing school attendance as more parents encourage their children to attend school. Large scale two-way programs more directly help children acquire English literacy and numeracy skills by providing a bridge from children's home language into English.

One of the results of the English-only policy of the NT Department of Education has been that schools are perceived as places of non-Indigenous education which communities feel alienated from. A follow-on effect is that community members do not feel that they have much to contribute to their children's school-based education. The

degree of community engagement is low with the result that school attendance is also low.

*School-jirri ngurnayinangulu yanangku. Jarrakap ngurnayinangulu marnangku. Jarrakap ngurnayinangulu marnangku, jaru-yawung. Ngulu pinarri du karrinyana nyarralu-ngan. Tumaji kula-lu marnana jaru-ma punyu. Nyatparrak-wei ngulu marnana.*

We want to go to them at school. We want to speak to them there. We'll talk to them in Gurindji. They have to learn Gurindji as well as English because they don't speak Gurindji well. They are not speaking Gurindji properly anymore. (Violet Donald, Kalkaringi community elder)

Communities want a place for language and culture in their schools. They believe that language programs, whether small-scale programs run through the ILC section of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework or full-scale bilingual or two-way schools will have the effect of drawing the community back into the life of the school.

### **3. History of maintenance and revitalisations programs in the VRD**

None of the schools in the Victoria River District has ever been bilingual or two-way. The closest two-way school was Lajamanu, 110km from Kalkaringi, which had a Warlpiri-English bilingual program until this year. Despite the lack of two-way programs, many of the schools in the Victoria River District have had or have small-scale traditional language programs structured under the Indigenous Language and Culture section of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. Most of these programs have been funded by the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) and have been run with the assistance of Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation.

#### **3.1 Kalkaringi**

Kalkaringi has a long but sporadic history of formal language maintenance work. Baptist missionaries ran a Gurindji school program in the 1980s. Gurindji also figured very strongly in church life, at this time. Many hymns were translated into Gurindji, as was the Eucharist and other church sacraments. Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation started the school language program again in 1996 and it ran until the end of 1999 when the then Principal discontinued the program. The community's desire to reinstate the Gurindji language program has been hindered by an English-only policy of one long-standing Principal.

Assistant Teachers at Kalkaringi have talked with the NT Department of Education and Training about setting up a two-way school at Kalkaringi. However the Department has shut down two-way schools rather than opened new ones them. More recently in 2008, Assistant Teachers set up a Regional Partnership Agreement with the NT Department of Education. They were promised a small-scale language program in exchange for better school attendance. The NT Department of Education did not keep up

their side of the bargain. A language program was not funded and the Kalkaringi community are understandably quite cynical about these kinds of agreements.

### **3.2 Pigeon Hole**

Pigeon Hole had a Bilinearra Language Program structured under the Indigenous Language and Culture section of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework between 2000. This language program was set up in 2000 by Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation and only stopped when DAC ceased operating.

### **3.3 Bulla Camp**

Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation ran a Ngarinyman language program at Bulla Camp school from 2000 until 2004 when it was discontinued. At this time, the IESIP funding changed to a per capita formula. which did not allocate enough money to the school to continue running the program.

### **3.4 Amanbidji**

Amanbidji had a school-based Ngarinyman language program structured under the ILC section of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. This program was run for five years (2000-2004 inclusive) and was facilitated from Katherine by linguists from Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation. A DAC linguist visited fortnightly, with community members running the classes without a linguist every second week. The linguists consulted with the community about lesson themes and made the language resources. A number of books and videos were created during the time the school program was running including themes such as body parts, trees, and damper making. The school program was put on hold with the death of an important community elder and was never reinstated due to difficulties liaising with the Amanbidji school Principal. The Principal has not changed since 2004.

### **3.5 Yarralin**

In 2005 Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation attempted to set up a Ngarinyman school program at Yarralin. However the Principal at the time was not enthusiastic about the idea and the program did not go ahead. Since then there has been a number of changes in Principal and the current Principal and Assistant Teacher, Joy Campbell, is working with the Katherine Group Schools ESL coordinator to set up a language program.

## **4. The importance of language programs to educational outcomes**

Indigenous people in the Victoria River District want a place for language and culture in their schools. They have often worked in partnership with Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation and the NT Department of Education to run such programs. The main barrier has been that the Indigenous Language and Culture (ILC) component of the Northern

Territory Curriculum Framework is non-compulsory.

Because ILC programs are not compulsory, funding is not automatically allocated. Instead Indigenous communities have had to rely on individual Principals and Diwurruwurru-jaru Aboriginal Corporation to compete for funding from limited IESIP money. The limited funds provide almost no training support for language speakers and workers. Additionally, the Principals are generally unsupportive of the programs and, in some cases, actively block them. They are able to do this because this part of the curriculum is not compulsory.

Nonetheless, where ILC programs have run, a number of palpable **benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages** have emerged. The programs have ensured a greater degree of community engagement and connection which has **strengthened Indigenous languages and culture**. A follow-on effect has been increased attendance of children at school and therefore positive effects on the acquisition of English (§4.1).

Additionally where large-scale two-way programs have existed in the NT schools, demonstrable effects **on educational outcomes** such as the level of **English language skills** have been observed (§4.2)

#### **4.1 Strengthening Indigenous language and identity**

Strengthening Indigenous language and identity is one of the focus areas of the Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities. This strengthened sense of identity is linked to an overall improvement of performance outcomes in schools.

High degrees of engagement and connection with non-Indigenous communities in Australia are achieved through culturally appropriate means. What is culturally appropriate in non-Indigenous education is not immediately obvious because the education system is structured by non-Indigenous people for non-Indigenous children from English-speaking backgrounds.

Some examples activities which are geared towards non-Indigenous children or assume a knowledge that is a part of non-Indigenous children's upbringing include:

- (i) more obvious activities such as reading English-language books with stories relevant to non-Indigenous children's lives,
- (ii) less obvious activities such as knowing that turning pages in a book from right to left progresses a story, and
- (iii) more abstract concepts such as knowing the importance of left/right (which is not salient in traditional Indigenous cultures which use north-south-east-west terms for small spaces including describing where a cup sits on a table in relation to a book)

Bringing local language and culture into the classroom achieves a sense of familiarity for Indigenous children. It is empowering and gives children 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.

This was my experience facilitating small-scale ILC classes in the remote area schools in the Victoria River District. On the days when language classes were run, there was a heightened engagement in the school on the community's part.

The classes were run by a language team which consisted minimally of a linguist, a language speaker and a number of language workers. The speaker and language workers were local people. Classes also included a bush day or camp once a term. On these days, many more community members participated in the school activities, enjoying the first-hand chance to see their children learning.

Parents reported to me that their children would come home, talking about what they had learnt in class such as plants and their traditional uses. In turn, the parents could engage with their children's education by extending their knowledge. This became obvious to me, as a linguist facilitating the language programs. When we revised topics such as plants and their medicinal uses in class a year later, children would remember Indigenous names for these plants and their traditional uses. Their retention of this knowledge was not due to something they had learnt in a one hour class the previous year, but the fact that they had discussed this topic with their parents who had then discussed it further with the. They told me that they felt more connected to their children's education, as a result.

Teachers also reported that they saw more parents in the school on the days that language was taught more than any other day of the school week. As a result they 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. The classes also gave them a chance to see their children's English-based work displayed on school walls and in workbooks, which made them proud.

Engaging the community in their children's schooling had a follow-in effect of increasing school attendance because parents encouraged their children to go to school on the days that the ILC programs were being run.

## **4.2 English literacy and numeracy**

Although ILC programs have little direct effect on Indigenous children's English literacy and numeracy skills (although increased attendance does, which the ILC programs do affect), the larger scale two-way programs do. Yet no two-way schools exist now in the Northern Territory. This is one of the focus areas of the Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Currently the way that remote area schools in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory are structured works for children whose first language is English. Yet there are few non-Indigenous children in this area and the Indigenous children do not come to school speaking English. These children are either first speakers of Kriol (in Amanbidji and Bulla Camp) or they are speakers of Gurindji Kriol (in Kalkaringi, Yarralin and Pigeon Hole). As a result, literacy and numeracy levels are very low.

Despite the fact that children do not know English when they begin school, the classes are taught solely in English. Additionally, teachers have no background in ESL

teaching which is reflected in their teaching methodology. They teach the children as if they are first language speakers of English.

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 example, the *Learning Lessons* report suggests that the NT Department of Education and Training should "support 'two-way learning' programs in schools where the local community wants such a program, and assessment demonstrating the essential elements for its effective delivery are in place" (2005, p. 13).

The *Indigenous Languages and Culture* (2004-05) report found that children in two-way schools performed marginally better on the Australia-wide MAP (Multi-level Assessment Program) testing than children in schools where no language was used. Despite the recommendations made by these reports, no new two-way programs have been implemented since 1999. For example, Kalkaringi has requested such a program in the past and the possibility has never been investigated by the NT Department of Education and Training (§3.1).

## 5. Conclusion

The Federal Government, NT Department of Education, the broader Australian community and Indigenous people all share a similar goal which is to see Indigenous children performing as well as non-Indigenous children at school.

*The difference lie in how to get non-Indigenous children to that point.*

The NT Department of Education claims that the presence of language and culture in classrooms does not help children from an ESL background. They point to the decreasing performance of two-way schools. Yet over the last 20 years, they have been decreasing funding to the two-way schools, employing people as teacher-linguists who are unqualified for these positions and decreasing the training provided to non-Indigenous teachers. The increasingly poor performance of these schools can be correlated with the gradual degradation of these schools. In short, these schools have been set up to fail.

The NT Department of Education believes that if two-way schools were to be made into English-only schools, the performance of the students will increase. Yet most of the remote area schools in the NT are already English-only and children perform no better in these schools than in two-way schools.

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.

Where they do speak their traditional language, the use of it in the schools provides a bridge to English.

But the use of language and culture in the classroom must be embraced by the NT Department of Education and non-Indigenous teachers and Principals for it to work. Programs which are not fully supported both financially and in practice will inevitably fail.

## 6. References

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