

**Submission for Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Affairs**

As a group of Yolŋu (Indigenous) teachers at Shepherdson College, Galiwin'ku NT we respectfully make this submission. We apologize that it is brief, but our day to day responsibilities at school and family and community obligations don't allow us much time to spend on it. We as Indigenous people who have the knowledge of our own languages and understand the importance of not losing our languages, on behalf of our own children, want to express our concern.

Balanda (Non-Indigenous people) should respect our languages because our languages were here long before the English language. Balanda should recognise the importance of Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia. More than twenty Yolŋu languages are spoken here at Galiwin'ku and each and every one of them is important. It would be a tragedy to lose one of them. Each one of them plays a part in our understanding of how the different elements of our world - people, land, animals and plants - are connected.

Teaching in Indigenous languages all through the school is important, but it is especially important in the early years of a child's schooling. When our children first come to school they can't speak or understand the Balanda language. Hearing someone speaking their own language makes school feel not such a strange and frightening place. When the Balanda teacher is teaching and the children don't understand, we Yolŋu teachers are needed to help them understand in their first language. Through their own first language children are:

- able to better understand and communicate;
- teach and learn from each other;
- respond to the Balanda teacher by thinking and talking about things in their first language and then if they are able answer in English; and
- better able to come to understand the unfamiliar language of English.

There are some Yolŋu and two or three Balanda who are able to interpret and translate in our languages. We need more interpreters to help with communicating with police, courts, banks, hospitals and health centres, and Centrelink. We also need people who can interpret in other languages - not just Djambarrpuyŋu. We need more teachers who can speak and read and write Yolŋu Matha.

Our Indigenous languages keep our identity and culture strong. We understand everything in our world through them, from the rise of the sun to the setting of the sun, every part of our lives and heritage, and what we pass on to our children and grandchildren. The essence of our identity and culture is in our language including the way we teach and learn:

Gurraŋay dhäruk – the intellectual language of scholarship of our elders

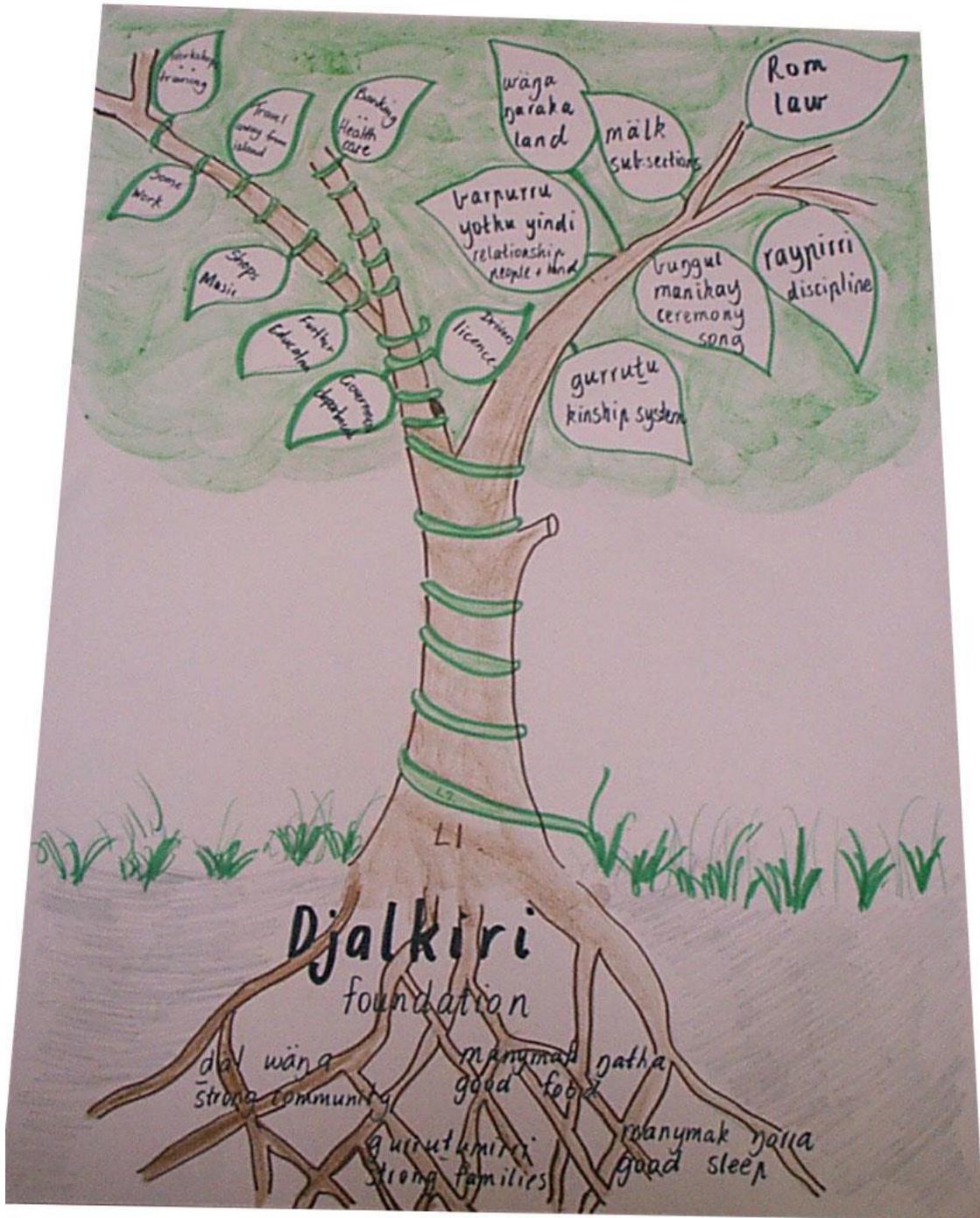
Gurruŋu mala dhäruk – the language about family and how we relate to everyone in our community

Yolŋu manikay - the language of our songlines about the sea and land

Wakaŋurrrkanhawuy - telling about our history including our ancestors and our future descendants.

We want our children to learn our own languages. We don't want to lose our language for our own identity depends on it. Our language is important for ourselves and our children so that we can fit easily with our ceremonies. Our language makes us strong and healthy.

The following tree drawing created by a group of Yolŋu educators a few years ago symbolises the need for children to have strong foundations in their first language and culture. Yolŋu Matha is needed to participate, talk about and understand important themes in Yolŋu culture, land, skin names, kinship, ceremonies etc. The vine, climbing up the tree represents English and western culture 'growing' on the strong Yolŋu culture and language foundations. At the top of the tree, English and Yolŋu culture and languages are both strong and play important roles in a Yolŋu person's life.



When the parents of Shepherdson College students were asked what they wanted their children to learn at school, they said:

- To respect and love each;
- Rom – Yolŋu law, lore and culture;
- Behaviour and discipline;
- English speaking, reading and writing;
- Yolŋu oral history;
- Yolŋu and Balanda Maths;
- Yolŋu and Balanda Arts;
- Health, Hygiene and Sport;
- How to use computers and other new technology;
- How to look after and care for the environment; and
- Strong Yolŋu language including reading and writing.

As Yolŋu teachers we need help to achieve this. We need recognition and support from governments and education departments. We need more professional development for ourselves, more Yolŋu teachers who are strong in Yolŋu Matha and English, and more resources to teach our languages to our children and grandchildren.