



#LanguagelsUs Ownership and Empowerment

Whilst learning and acquiring language is a truly uplifting and empowering journey, sadness among Gumbaynggirr learners exists due to our traditional language not being the first we fluently spoke. Due to the role that languages play in empowering Aboriginal people and communities, it is absolutely imperative that it is Aboriginal communities who own their local language and therefore direct how teaching and learning of their language occurs.

After much discussion over a number of years, the NSW Department of Education led *Gumbaynggirr Language Nest* was finally launched in February 2014. Post launch, there was a gap of over 6 months until the program actually commenced through the employment of a teacher/coordinator. The length of time it took for language learning to actually commence under this program can be blamed squarely on the Department's own processes.

These departmental structures and red tape that is applied to our languages is the source of concern for Aboriginal communities as it takes ownership of the language from community and places it with the department, thereby nullifying the language revitalization process.

The department applies its western mindset and processes to our language and dictates how our language is taught and learnt. For example, under the *Language & Culture Nest* it compulsory for community member language tutors to have a Certificate 1 in the target language in order to teach within schools. So here, the department is dictating who can and cannot teach, by assessing prospective language teachers within a western system that dictates graduates can read and write the target language, ironically through the use of English symbols, as well as demonstrate an understanding of linguistic conventions.

In Gumbaynggirr territory we have a few fluent, and a number of very proficient speakers who do not have a Certificate 1 in Gumbaynggirr language because, to them, language is the reward. For the Department of Education to deny these people's ability to teach their language is nothing short of offensive and is far from culturally appropriate or engaging. According to the department, the ability to read, write and understand linguistics is more important than an ability to actually speak the target language proficiently.

This demonstrates that, by applying their own western ideals, structures and 'red tape' to our language, the department actually inhibits its own ability to successfully administer the *Gumbaynggirr Language Nest* program as they cannot find enough people with the certification that the department requires to teach Gumbaynggirr. It also highlights the department's lack of understanding of Aboriginal communities and the cultural protocols that accompany our languages. And with this in mind, it is important to highlight that language and culture are one. Language is the carrier of culture.

So by dictating the direction of our languages, the NSW Department of Education is thereby dictating the direction of our cultures. Considering this, one can begin to understand the very real concerns that Aboriginal community members foster regarding this matter.

Given that language acquisition for Aboriginal people is a journey of empowerment and decolonization, it is imperative that Aboriginal people are given the first opportunity to learn and acquire their language. Under the direction of the NSW Department of Education, in many instances, non-Aboriginal people are being given greater opportunity to learn the target language.

Currently, the language hub teaches certain year groups within schools. These year groups contain both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students but there are Aboriginal students in other year groups at the same school who are missing out on language learning whilst non-Aboriginal students of the target year group are provided with greater opportunity to learn over the kids who actually belong to the target language.

Furthermore, due to the fact that the department only delivers language to government schools there are many Aboriginal students who attend independent schools who, again, are missing out on language learning whilst non-Aboriginal students their age are learning their language at government schools.

This is not culturally appropriate as it does not empower Aboriginal students in their own language and culture. In this space, empowerment for Aboriginal students occurs when they are given priority to learn their language and are then empowered to impart their knowledge onto their non-Aboriginal peers.

Our corporation (BMNAC) was contracted in 2016 to conduct Gumbaynggirr lessons for Aboriginal students at a local independent school. In doing this, we have witnessed, first hand, the sense of pride and empowerment that language acquisition creates. These students have conducted their own language lessons for their peers at year group meetings and are acknowledging country at school assemblies, entirely in Gumbaynggirr, on a regular basis. Through language, they are becoming leaders of their school.

With ownership, communities gain control over the direction of language and culture and are therefore empowered. Local communities are also best positioned to ensure the safety of cultural information and that cultural protocols are adhered to, issues that are put at risk by government departments that facilitate our languages.

Change for Aboriginal communities in terms of socio-economic prosperity will not occur until we are truly empowered. Empowerment through language will affect change in terms of education, housing, employment, incarceration and health. 'Indigenous kids who are connected to language succeed at school'¹, so if languages are delivered by the most appropriate and knowledgeable Aboriginal community members within community and school lesson settings we will see change, but a top down approach will only further disenfranchise and disempower Aboriginal peoples. Hence highlighting the need for local Aboriginal community ownership over our languages.

1 Greymorning, N, 2015., Live Communication