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Introducing Wiradjuri language in Parkes

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Abstract

This is a personal account of the introduction of Wiradjuri language to schools and school communities in Parkes in central New South Wales. It discusses the need for language, culture and heritage, including the personal healing required, that can contribute to recovery from the loss of language and identity for Indigenous people. The introduction of Wiradjuri language, culture and local heritage in Parkes raised awareness and pride to the point where racism was significantly reduced in the schools. Further, the children's proactive, anti-racist attitude has had a positive impact on parents and the wider community. It is also evident in the political acceptance of Indigenous identity by the erection of Welcome to Wiradjuri Country signs by the Parkes Shire Council. The inclusion of Welcome to Country ceremonial sections for school assemblies has now expanded into civic ceremonial activities. Acceptance of this identity and growth in self-esteem can also be recognised by the enrolment of parents and community members in Wiradjuri language classes conducted in the evenings.

Murrugay barra (First steps)

People ask me when did I first get interested in the Wiradjuri language. My truthful answer would be, 'The language found me.' I also believe the Elders of the past who own the language realised that it was safe to come out again through the children, and we who learn and teach it now are only teaching new caretakers for the language and its future.

In 2004 I was invited to go to a language class at a school in the nearby town of Forbes. The class was organised by the deputy principal who had discovered the wonderful work that Wiradjuri Elder, Stan Grant Snr, and Dr John Rudder had done in getting Wiradjuri language revitalisation going. The deputy principal had made

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the classes free to the public in the school holidays, all on her own time. She had introduced Wiradjuri to the students in her school and had been getting great results with it. From that point on I was feeling as if I belonged. I then knew this was me and I knew I had to help get the culture of the language out to the community. I don't know how I knew; I just did. I still think the Elders of years gone by had whispered in my ear and told me.

Yindhamarru-gu Mudyigang-gu (Respect to the Elders)

To establish any Aboriginal language within your community you need the support of the Elders who will speak from their souls. It is their culture; it is alive within them, and it *is* them. They must be shown the respect they deserve and be informed about any language programs or projects you wish to begin. You need Elders who will let the past be released and decide that it is time to let the language be spoken again.

I knew of one Elder in town who was very concerned at what we were going to be teaching in the schools. I had the opportunity to show her. I gave a Wiradjuri welcome at a friendly barbecue at the high school, just to let this Elder hear the language being spoken again and as an introduction to the school. At the end of the barbecue she asked me to sit down and I was told that that was the first time she had heard Wiradjuri language being spoken since she was a child. This woman was viewed with great respect in the town so I knew at that point I was allowed to go ahead and, the more I sat and listened, the more words she started to say. She felt safe.

It is important to find out if your Elders wish to be involved. Sit down and listen to what they want spoken about and taught, like the Elder I just spoke of. I sat and listened to her and what she had to say about the language, what she would like it to achieve, and what I could speak of.

I showed her respect and she gave me respect back. Without that from her we couldn't do the language. So just because they can't speak language fluently doesn't mean they don't deserve the respect of being involved. Find out what they want to be taught and given away. Some topics, ideas and concepts they won't let you teach, so remember; you need Elders' approval to move on. As one Elder said to me, 'You must give it away to keep it.' and I still go by that theory today. The more we can tell people the more it will stay. The more language we teach, the more people will hear – and it's your language and you are entitled to learn it and speak it. On this journey I've learnt that Elders are essential as they are the knowledge-keepers, and school teachers are the knowledge-givers. Once a teacher learns some words they have ways of making it fit into a curriculum to suit a classroom situation. They are trained to teach and both will show you as many things as they can to help you.

Yalmambirra mayiny (Teach the people)

In 2005 a community meeting was held for anyone who wanted the language taught in the schools here in Parkes. From that meeting we found we had the community's

backing and principals' support. But, most of all, we had the teachers who wanted to help to get the language back through the classroom. You need teachers who themselves want to learn some of the language and can guide you in the direction needed to work together to get things going. Listen to the teachers from the schools. Don't dig your heels in and think, 'This is my language, not yours.' Don't ever think anything like that. The teachers want to learn language just as much as you do and they know how to teach. They have skills in using syllabuses and teaching programs and they are a vital support for Aboriginal community language teachers. They may not feel the language inside like you do, but they are needed. Believe me; they have a vital role in the whole way of getting things going and I have found any advice from teachers to be helpful.

To get things going in Parkes we had to sit down and do some real hard yards and work out time factors of when we thought the language could be started. We had to work many hours with the NSW Office of the Board of Studies (OBOS). We also formed a language group in the early days and it worked extremely well. OBOS supported the tutors and teachers to bring the language into the classrooms in the way of workshops and some resources. OBOS is essential to the goal you are trying to reach and they will bring the way of getting it into the schools.

It seems too coincidental that we had me learning the basics of the language at workshops in Forbes, OBOS supporting us to get the language going in schools in town, and teachers from the schools in town learning the basics of the language at workshops in Dubbo. To me there was a force at work, trying to get everyone together to teach language that was hidden and had not been spoken for two generations by the Wiradjuri people. I personally believe that the Elders of the past were working at getting things to fall into place. I can't explain it any other way.

The local or regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) is vital for starting any Aboriginal language program in any school. Informing them of what you are hoping to achieve in the community is a step that must be made. They are needed to sign off for funding and letting them know gets the word out to the community that this is happening. If you get involved with the AECG it will make work easier for yourself. As soon as you mention that by doing this you can create employment, you will always be helped.

Bubay barra (Small steps)

Remember; take small steps to start off with. Don't expect things to happen in the first meeting, because they won't. It will take sometimes years to get a project like this off the ground. Remember that you are revitalising a language and it will take an enormous amount of time and energy. The Elders of the past are talking to you and you're in charge of sharing the language and getting it out to the public. I had a personal fear that I was taking things too quickly and the whole language reclamation would implode on me. I would deliberately walk away from it for a few weeks, up to a few months, until I felt it was okay to go ahead again.

You will know when you are going too fast; you will feel uncomfortable. Take small steps but, at the same time, don't ignore people who really want to help you like principals and teachers. These people want to learn a new language as well, so let them, remembering that you have to give it away to keep it. Wiradjuri language in some areas has not been spoken for two generations but in some areas has just been hidden. I feel I am now trying to bridge the gap and fill in a void – a void within myself and also other people. I have been trying to bring back unspoken words and I have met people who will want nothing to do with it, but also people like me, wanting more and more of filling the black hole within the soul.

I have met Elders who were ostracised for speaking language so they will need reassurance it's okay to speak again. You must have the drive to keep up the spirit and keep telling people it will work, because it will work and the results will astound you.

Yarrandhu ngiyang **(Speak your words)**

Keep listening to your heart and at the same time keep learning your language – just a few words to start with – then work those words into a small phrase. You will make mistakes. Learn from them, but have a go and don't worry. You must teach yourself the language and improve your fluency because no-one else can. You need to commit to the learning, the language. Most of all I personally have a commitment to the Elders of the past who have had the language taken from them. Remember this is your spirit and soul you're trying to share with people. You are trying to reclaim your ancestors' footprints, so don't rush it and be a good ambassador for the Elders of the past. They deserve it.

In my experience an effective way of getting the language into the ears of the community and accepted was to learn the Wiradjuri Welcome to Country. By doing so I found people were hearing those hidden words for the first time and, by doing it on a voluntary basis, I gave a better public impression. I can remember doing the welcome speech for a group of Wiradjuri healthcare workers and to see their faces glow, with me saying a few words, was just beyond belief. Some said later that day that they had never heard Wiradjuri words spoken since their grandparents spoke it, and comments like that will make you feel very proud.

I have had the honour of welcoming everyone from the premier of the state to Olympians and I had the chance to do the welcome when the cross for World Youth Day came through town. So, just by learning the welcome in your language, you will give a great public impression and you're letting words be heard. Remember that the adults you're speaking to are the parents of the children you want to teach it to; so make a good presentation.

Yalmambirra **(Teaching will start)**

I shared my enthusiasm for the language with teachers from the Parkes High School. They had begun a trial of the language and I joined them in a few workshops in 2006.

They were all as keen as I was and, by doing this, we were able to get more of an idea of what was involved in getting a program up and running. From this we actually held a meeting once a month for ourselves. We would meet at each other's houses and discuss language, what we could do with it, and how we can teach it. But, most of all, we started to teach ourselves some language. OBOS then asked Parkes High School to be a part of a pilot program and the school leapt at the chance. The language is now being taught in the school and each year gets stronger and stronger.

I was at Parkes East Public School one day and I had to see a teacher. I went into the library and she was teaching a class of Stage 1 and 2 students and they were singing 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. A teacher asked me did I know how to sing this in Wiradjuri and, fortunately, I did. This was my big chance. I had never stood in front of a class of children in my life and taught anything, and at no point of my life did I think I would be in this situation. I wrote the translation up on the board and taught them how to say the words and then to sing the song. The teacher was amazed at how the kids wanted to know more and, after a few short and very nervous lessons, we had the base set for the language to be placed into another Parkes school.

We had children asking their parents if they were Aboriginal and, in some cases, we had several students saying to Wiradjuri children, 'I wish I was Aboriginal'. The teacher and I would listen with amazement. We both thought, 'This is too good to pass up.' With what we had heard from the mouths of children in such a short time, we had to get it into the school more regularly. The teacher approached the principal and from there on we were teaching Wiradjuri in Parkes East Public School from Term 3, 2006, unfunded.

The staff met it with open arms and, with the little bit of what I knew, I had children saying hello in the playground and the school using some Wiradjuri words. But, most of all, the staff were trying to say some words. The teacher got me to translate the school assembly into Wiradjuri and the school still uses it today. We were educating the next generation of Australians on how to accept and learn about Wiradjuri culture, and the children wanted more.

Then the principal decided this was so good he applied for funding for it to be taught in the school, because he was starting to hear it spoken in parts of the playground. He noticed that the Koori kids' attendance and pride was rising. The principal applied for funding, knowing that I would help out in the school and basically make sure it was being taught properly. So he had no problems with it starting, as he knew he had someone to be there from the beginning and help it get off the ground. That makes a huge difference. The less work you make for the school the better they will like the idea, and by creating employment for someone to come and teach language you take the pressure off yourself.

Just remember that children are like sponges; they will absorb all the knowledge you give them and want more. What you give them they will see as neutral and without any political views at all. Whether they are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal children,

they all want to learn equally. I am not a teacher of any sort and I just let my thoughts flow from my heart with the students. You will be amazed just how much you do know. So give yourself credit and keep yourself one step ahead of them, even if that one step is one word.

The thing we learnt from this was that we needed resources for the students, so I then started making PowerPoint presentations for the children and searching for more language. This pushed me forward in the drive for knowing more words, thus improving myself. My biggest fear was being asked a question I didn't know the answer to. I would just simply tell the student, 'I will find out for you what that word is'. It really wasn't anything to be worried about at all. I thought I was saying words slow and clear but I realised I was too fast and I needed practice on pronunciation. So, remember that when you are teaching a class not everyone speaks a language and they don't hear it like you.

Ngurrigal guwalanha (Surprise happenings)

The language has turned out to be a wonderful thing in Parkes. And, with the schoolchildren in Parkes East Public School speaking some language, we have a school boasting zero racism. The parents have accepted the language and we find that it's breaking down the invisible wall of racism within the community. The student representative council of the Parkes East Public School approached the Parkes Shire Council for Welcome to Wiradjuri Country signs to be placed on the road north and south of Parkes. The Council agreed to this request from the school and the signs that are 4.5 metres high and 1.5 metres wide are seen by 5500 cars per day. So from the humble beginnings of 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes', the children of Parkes are now showing the Wiradjuri Elders and people respect. And they are returning the respect.

From getting the language in the school we have had something happen that I was not expecting. We have formed a community language class for adults. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults are invited. Anyone who wants to know some language or just have some personal healing; the doors are open. With the rapport we have built we are allowed to use the Parkes East Public School's classroom free of charge. It never ceases to amaze me that people come to a class, and they know words already that were being used by their parents or grandparents, and they didn't realise it was Wiradjuri. You will be told with great happiness that they know that word you just said because their grandmother said that. I know how they feel, as the more words I learnt the more words I realised I had heard from older family members. The principal met us with open arms and helped promote the classes with the school newsletters. Now we get between six and 11 people per week and we have trained two of our language tutors in the school programs through it. But I think to see an adult learn something that is missing from their childhood is amazing and the best way to learn something is to teach it. We make sure that someone is available every week for class to teach the language.

Once the language is in the schools you then create employment. We needed community teachers and we are lucky that we have three young people in Parkes who want to learn language and teach language. If you spread the word out that you are trying to get language going in your community, here is some advice; don't at any point turn anyone away from it. If someone asks you a word for something, tell them and if they keep wanting to know, tell them. This shows they want to know something about the language. Work on them and encourage them and these people can be your community teachers.

I personally have seen social healing begin to happen. When a parent comes to the community class I will tell them the first night they are there, they will feel a difference inside themselves in a few weeks. And in a few weeks they have all said to me they knew what I meant. I know what happened to me and what strength it has given me, so I was talking from personal experience. Learning the language that belongs inside will heal you. Learning your native language will make you feel more complete. As one Elder said to me, 'All our children are on a dreaming; they are lost. Teach them their language and they will find themselves'.

On a more personal note I have now created such rapport with the schools that I am one of the few people that can walk in off the street and be seen as nearly a member of staff. School students will yell out, 'Hello!' or, '*Yamandhu marang?*' And some Wiradjuri people in town call me the Language Man, a tag I will wear with honour. I have also been honoured by being put on the Wiradjuri Council of Elders and being asked to be a part of the Eastern States Language Group, with only two representatives from each state being asked.

Giyira (The future)

In the long term I know deep down that the language will stay in the school. It has more right than any other language in the education system and than anything else being taught. We are told we are a multicultural country and now we are beginning to study and learn about the first culture that was here. I have taken this challenge on, to get the language in the schools in Parkes as a community member. And at no point have I been paid for all the work I have done. People say, 'You should be paid.' and I just reply, 'No!'

I love it, that's why I do it. The word community means just that, community. You must keep positive with all the hard work you do. But, if you're coming from the heart, then it's not hard work because you love every minute of it. I have had the chance to meet some wonderful people and made many incredible friends from all walks of life and socio-economic backgrounds, but remembering at the same time I can ask favours from these people and they know I am there for them as well. You need friends like that; you can't do it without them.

We will face racial confrontations in the future; I know because people are always scared of something they know nothing of. But if we can teach the children we will

then have an entire generation of the future who will see Aboriginal culture as a part of this country. And it's alive, not something to be hidden away for museums or archives or as a painting to hang on a wall.

I think one young Parkes East Public School student's words sum it all up; 'I learn Wiradjuri language and culture so I can go home and teach my parents.' I don't think I could say anymore than what that young girl said to me.