# Aboriginal Community Leaders Interviews - Transcript

Question 8 - How can we teach our Language and culture in schools?

**Diane Singh:** I think it’s very important for language to be taught in schools, especially um to the Preppies. Start with the Preps. You’ve got to start right at the bottom so those kids can continue with the different stages all through primary school and then eventually into high school. And um to sort of be able to communicate with each other and um when we all went to school we learnt English you know and um the way we learnt it was by stickling little you know well more so to spell, was to stick little stickers on the chairs, you know.

Then when I was trying to learn French it was um it was ah putting French words on um you know on the chair, on the table, on the window, and that was the way we learnt but I never ever succeeded because you went home and nobody spoke French. Therefore, and nobody spoke French outside the class.

So, and I see that with um our language. I means it’s gotta be more than just teaching the kids, it’s gotta be interactive you know, our kids have to be interactive with each other. Maybe their parents should be brought into it and maybe a little session where the kids can go home and sit with Mum or Dad and you know, they can sort of um help each other and maybe it would start then in the home and then eventually the kids would ah it would spread to other areas.

**The Late Tandop David Tournier:** You know I wasn’t aware I suppose at that early age the significance of it because it was there, you know. We we didn’t speak it fluently, um mainly because Mum wasn’t allowed to, um and I learnt later that she could actually speak her language fluently, but she, her problem was she had no-one to talk to um and she’d only meet up with those people once in a blue moon who could speak with her and it used to be quite funny. You’d go and listen to ‘em talkin’ (hand gestures) like this flat out.

And now, now that I’m down here working in ah in Geelong, in Wathaurong, and I have been living in, in Wathaurong country on and off all my life, ahm so we now, now I’m now the language officer down there, and we’ve got a dictionary, we’ve got all these wonderful resources um. And now it’s we’re looking at ways of of, well I’m looking at the various ways of getting it out there in the community, whether it be schools, community groups, whatever.

Um, I do work in schools, delivering cultural studies and part of that obviously is ah the language and well I go to, with the kids you know, learning language, I go to a lot of schools and the first thing I do is write up on the board the greeting. Hello, or good morning, hello, how are you? This is Wathaurong country. My name is... And it’s all written in the Wathaurong language so it’s, what is it *koonyaba kardineeyoo* if it’s in the morning or *morgalyu* if it’s in the afternoon. Um *Nyoorra woorreeyn*, hello, how are you. *Keem barne barre wada wurrung nharee tandop David* which is um ‘This is Wathaurong country and my name is Uncle David’, and we start from there.

And then we might talk about let’s name some of the places, what’s um do you know this name. So I might write on the board *Lara,* I might write on the board *Birregurra,* I might write on the board *Geelong,* but I’d spell it in Wathaurong language or say it in Wathaurong language. I’d say ‘Hey, do you know this place?’ Um, Geelong, and they’d look at you, ‘But Geelong’s supposed to be spelt with a ‘g’’. ‘No, it’s spelt this way, this is how we spell it. This is the real word for Geelong, not Gee-long, *Djilong*. ‘Ohhh.’ And then we might say, then I’d say to them ‘*Korai-yio’* and that look at me ‘Oh that’s Corio’. ‘Yeah, you spell it this way, we spell it this way’. And so they get to know some of the towns in and around Geelong that are Wathaurong words and what they mean and things like that and ‘Oh we didn’t know that’.

And so with kindergarten groups I have, I think, 5 little pictures of, one of a kangaroo, what is it, kangaroo, emu, kookaburra, and frill necked lizard, and they have to tell me what they are. And then I’ll tell them what they are in the language. So they get to learn about those sorts of things too. So, you know, language goes hand in hand with a lot of things. All Aboriginal students, we did a Claymation DVD about, it’s based on Tiddalik the Frog who drank all the water but we couldn’t use that word *tiddalik* so we used the Wathaurong word *dyeerrym* you know, the frog that drank all the water. And the kids told the story about how the frog, you know, drank all the water and was greedy and all that sort of thing. And they did it through Claymation, you know, like Wallace and Gromit.

Oh it was beautiful. you know kangaroo with them lips movin’, you know (gesture) emus and snakes and wombats and, you know, porcupines all talkin’ you know and that and ah so. They had, they just used the names of the animals. You know, here’s the kids telling a story about why the frog drank all this water but if you really look at the story within the story, it’s telling you that if you’ve got no frogs on your land, or in your river system, there’s somethin’ wrong with it.

**Dr Esme Bamblett:** Now my daughter and my son have developed little Language books. They’ve got, they’re called *Little Black Trackers*, *The Adventures of Little Black Trackers* and they’re based on the Bangerang Language. And so they’ve got a little one, there’s a little black tracker, little boy that goes hunting for animals and has got animal tracks, and the other one is a little girl and she goes collecting insects and has got habitats.

So there is a lot of cultural information in those books, but there’s also about reclaiming Bangerang Language and using those words and getting them out into the school. They’ve been developed for preps, grade one, two.

One of the problems we have had with the increasing cultural knowledge in schools is having people who are actually willing to stand up and do it. A lot of our people won’t do it, so the ones that will do it are the ones that should do it. And I think that’s the way it’s going to go.

I think that this new generation of our young people will do it. I think they’re a lot more confident, they’re a lot more at ease in the new, this new generation, and I think they will stand up there and they will pass on information.

I think they’re keeping the information. I think it’s not that they’re losing, they’re not losing anything, they are still very strong in their identity and, but they’ve got, sort of, the best of both worlds as well. They have the technological knowledge as well as the cultural knowledge, and they are confident to do it, so I think that whoever will do, it should do it.

I think that the technology does allow to do a lot more things today. And it does allow people to be at home and still participate. And, I think we did it first with the Koorie education. We had video linkups and we had teaching. We had that going with the kids. And it really worked well.

And I think that, there’s so many of our Elders, you know, it’s not only about travelling and that. It’s about them, how old they are and about, you know, sicknesses and that. If they were able to stay in community and still participate by being linked into a school, I think that that would be a really good way of doing it, and I think it would work.

See Language is about communication, and as we get into a new age and there’s technological inventions and all that, our language changes. Now Aboriginal Languages are no different. We have words in our Language - we didn’t have policemen before policemen came here, so one of the words that we have for policemen is *gunjabul*. Well, the word *gunjabul* is not an Aboriginal word. It’s actually from constable, *gun-jabul***.** So it becomes part of the Language. But we didn’t have it before non-Aboriginal people come here. So Language changes because culture changes, and that is the whole thing.

The problem we get is that, if people have a mindset where they’re stuck in the past, like me, I like the. I like to know how to spell something and not have it change on me. But it’s not realistic. But if I just stick in the past and, and refuse to move then I’m never going to be, I’m never going to accept anything else. And that’s the problem we have when people, they are stuck in the past and they don’t accept Aboriginal culture changes. All culture changes.

Our culture would have changed from forty thousand years ago, to twenty thousand years ago, to ten thousand years ago. Our culture had to change because the environment changes, life changes. So we have to accept that culture and Language change and they change because of what’s happening, our external influences.

And I think, you know, once we accept that, then we say right, we can actually teach what we know today, knowing full well that in ten years’ time it’s going to be different.

**The late John "Uncle Sandy" Atkinson:** For instance, we went and we got kindergarten children. You know, and kindergarten children are so easy to, to teach because they are hungry to learn anything. You know, so you could, you could, somebody who was pretty good at drawing kangaroos, or trees or anything at all, you could put that up on the board and put a story with it and, and, you know, and even go into songs.

Let’s go back to those basic points where we started off a journey, so to speak, with those little boys and girls, and, who knows, they’ll be, they’d probably be the ones who’ll teach us older ones too, because they will learn songs and, they will learn poetry and things like that and pass them on to Mum and Dad.

If ever we were going to save our Languages, this has been the best opportunity in two hundred years because of technology, you know. Now, now we could do DVDs, we could do CDs, we could do any amount of things, you know, that, that will help us.

And, I mean, if somebody comes along in five hundred years, all they’ve gotta do is go to the archives now and they’ll get it in and in a perfect unit, you know, that they can teach. And I hope that the rest of the world is doing the same thing and I’m sure they will be.

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