Establishing a school language program: 
the Parkes High School experience

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Abstract

This paper details the introduction and development of the Wiradjuri Aboriginal language into Parkes High School. It covers the process undertaken to initiate the program and its subsequent developments; the support received from various people along the way; the roles of those involved in the program; the material taught; the positive outcomes for students, the school and the community; critical success factors; hopes for the future; and areas in need of further development.

Initial interest and community consultation

I first became exposed to Wiradjuri language toward the end of 2005. A community and schools language meeting in Dubbo, where some ideas were floated and discussed by the New South Wales (NSW) Board of Studies (BOS), gave us the initial impetus. Participants were then very fortunate to have several days of intense Wiradjuri instruction from elder Stan Grant Snr and Dr John Rudder, sponsored by a nearby school establishing their own Wiradjuri program. This instruction was delivered to teachers and community members from Parkes, Forbes and Condobolin. Hearing the language spoken and being part of the positive experiences of others, who recalled words and phrases from their childhood, convinced us to set things in motion for introducing Wiradjuri language into Parkes High School.

Parkes High School is a co-educational public high school with around ten percent of the 700 students being Aboriginal. There are also three public primary schools, a Catholic primary school and a small Christian independent school in the town. Parkes Shire is a rural area of around 15,000 people, 10,000 of whom live in the Parkes township.

1 Parkes High School.
An essential element of an Aboriginal language program, emphasised strongly by Stan Grant, other community leaders and BOS, is the need for community consultation and endorsement. We advertised a community meeting to discuss the introduction of Wiradjuri language for the end of 2005, with a view to introducing it at Parkes High in 2006. We were privileged to have Stan and John attend the meeting, with Stan giving his support to the revival and teaching of Wiradjuri in schools.

Around 18 people attended the meeting, including a few teachers from the high school. Initially I was a bit disappointed with the turnout, until another perspective was put to me. Proportionately more parents turned up representing the Aboriginal students in the school than parents who attend parent and citizen meetings representing all students in the school. Considering this, it was a positive response and, as I was also reminded, small steps can lead to big things.

Stan Grant spoke about the revival of the Wiradjuri language, the benefits he saw for young people in learning the language, the fostering of pride and identity, and the turnaround from times past when speaking the language and practising culture were forbidden. He emphasised the importance of the local community’s wishes and views. I outlined the plans for introducing Wiradjuri language into Parkes High School. The meeting endorsed the proposal and a Parkes Wiradjuri language team was formed to oversee the introduction of the language into the school.

The team consisted of Wiradjuri community members, the school’s Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO), language teacher, Aboriginal studies teacher and myself (a teacher of social sciences). As co-ordinator of the Wiradjuri language program at Parkes High I was to liaise with the BOS, the school principal and executive, organise language team meetings and prepare funding submissions. Meeting fortnightly the group practised language, learnt new words and phrases and prepared material for use in the school. The Aboriginal members of the group gave cultural input and provided an important link to the broader Aboriginal community (see also Anderson in this volume).

Wiradjuri language comes to Parkes High School

Beginning in 2006 the language was taught to mostly Aboriginal students across all year groups, 20 minutes each morning during RATS time (Reading Across The School). When the rest of the school read books or magazines, we listened to, read, spoke and sang Wiradjuri. This time was chosen as it allowed students from several year groups to be involved, maximised the participation of Aboriginal students who showed the most initial interest, and didn’t compromise other established subjects in the students’ timetables. Across the school the RATS time aims to improve literacy by encouraging reading. Students’ literacy was not disadvantaged by giving up the general reading opportunity and replacing it with Wiradjuri language learning. Rather, as language teachers already know, the learning of another language assists literacy development. Pronouncing unfamiliar words, identifying nouns, verbs and pronouns, using suffixes, and comparing English and Wiradjuri grammatical structures all improve literacy.
We were very fortunate to have become a BOS project school in 2005–06. They arranged four two-day workshops each year and assisted our language team to write a program for a Stage 4 Wiradjuri language course based around the *NSW Aboriginal Language K–10 Syllabus* (BOS 2003). Chris Kirkbright, a Wiradjuri man who had been teaching the language in Sydney, attended the workshops and helped us with our language development. Stan Grant also came and shared his invaluable knowledge and expertise. At various times throughout the year our emerging language course was shown to and discussed with Wiradjuri community members for feedback and ideas.

At these workshops and other BOS seminars I was exposed to invaluable linguistic knowledge. I had never thought much about linguistic patterns and structures before in my life and now I was suddenly confronted with locative suffixes, transitive and intransitive verbs, ergative markers and the like. I had to hear it several times before things started making sense, and still not all of it does. However that linguistic instruction is very helpful when learning and using an unfamiliar language and these workshops really gave us the incentive to launch the language as a fully fledged course into Parkes High.

**A recognised Stage 4 language course**

Toward the end of 2006, Year 7 students were surveyed to see who would like to study Wiradjuri language the following year. From this we were able to create two classes that included 20 Aboriginal students. We were about to launch the Stage 4 program we had worked on in 2006. The school played a significant and commendable role here by freeing up timetable space for the two Year 8 classes. This was additional language above the mandatory 100 hours. Wiradjuri was also going to be taught to a Year 7 language class.2

A milestone was achieved when the school successfully applied for a grant from the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate of the NSW Department of Education and Training to employ a community language tutor, Ron Wardrop. He was able to come in to the school ten hours a week and work with the classes. This obviously is an important element of the program. For Aboriginal languages to have integrity, relevance and authenticity, they need to be taught by Aboriginal people. Funding to sustain real jobs for Aboriginal men and women in these educational roles is critical for the success of Aboriginal language programs.3

The students responded extremely well to the language tutor. They were interested in what he had to say and he also brought cultural expertise to the classroom with his art and music. As the teacher in the classroom my primary role is to write the program in

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2 In NSW all students must complete a minimum of one 100-hour language course as part of their School Certificate.

3 Unfortunately the funding to employ a community language tutor is not guaranteed year to year and is subject to budget constraints.
consultation with the language team, provide resources and manage the class, leaving most of the cultural and language instruction to our tutor. We come up with teaching ideas and language activities together with the help of the school’s language teacher who is a teacher of French and German, and now also team-teaching Wiradjuri. Having a trained language teacher involved really helps with the development of language activities and resources.

One of the exciting aspects of the language revitalisation is not only seeing kids learn language and culture, which fosters identity, pride and respect; but also to realise that Aboriginal languages have the potential to create job opportunities, not only in education but also in cultural tourism and land management. Our tutor’s work at the school has provided the students with an excellent role model.

2008 saw the continuation of the Stage 4 program taught to a new group of students. This year, however, all of Year 8 studied Wiradjuri language for three hours a fortnight. Select Year 7 classes again studied Wiradjuri as part of their mandatory language component. An exciting development in 2008 was that after being offered since 2007, Wiradjuri language could now run in 2009 as a Stage 5, Year 9 elective for the first time. Enough students in Year 8 embraced the Wiradjuri language and culture to choose further study in this area.

The material taught at Parkes High in Stage 4 has included basic greetings, animals common to the central western region of NSW, people and family names, body parts, numbers and natural features. Students are taught that locative and other nominal suffixes are used on nouns, with past, present, future and command suffixes used on verbs. By combining noun (actor), verb and noun (object) with appropriate suffixes a variety of sentences can be created. Incorporating pronouns and interrogatives further expands vocabulary and basic conversations can be held. An important aim of the BOS syllabus and the Parkes High teaching program is to move beyond wordlists into communication in the language.

At this stage students (and teachers) are still slow when speaking the language and take time processing sentences heard. A challenge for everyone is to use the language more frequently to increase familiarity and improve fluency. Songs have been an excellent way to learn language. One of the current Year 8 classes has relatively low levels of literacy, with some in the group experiencing learning difficulties. This class has really embraced the songs and sing with gusto, more so than any other group I have had.

**Cultural relevance**

A significant part of the language program is Wiradjuri culture. Stan Grant stressed from the beginning that language and culture must go together. Indeed, learning words without cultural connection is hollow. Our language tutor has contributed greatly here, again highlighting the need to have Aboriginal community members involved for the integrity and authenticity of the course. His didgeridoo and clap
sticks enliven songs and his artwork has brightened the room and given inspiration to students. We use the book *Windradyne, A Wiradjuri Koorie* by Mary Coe (1989) as a prime source of material on Wiradjuri traditional life. The first chapter of this book is excellent and describes Wiradjuri country, traditional foods, hunting and gathering practices, tools and weapons, roles of men, women and children, clothing and body adornments, and the significance and relationship with the land. A group of girls from various years have formed an Indigenous dance group at the school. They have been taught some traditional dances by an Aboriginal teacher at a nearby primary school. These girls have performed dances and traditional story telling at NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) celebrations in town and at school.

Despite the above, cultural relevance and knowledge is an area of the course that needs further development. Whilst we have canvassed some community members there is still much local knowledge we have yet to tap into. Stories, songs, words, significant sites, customs and traditions, if passed on and recorded, should be used in the language program. The school can play an important role in preserving and reviving this knowledge. Of course the school does not own the knowledge, that will always belong to the communities, but the school can help facilitate its transfer to new generations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

An exciting development here is the establishment of an adult community language group that has met weekly for the past two years. Led by community Elder Geoff Anderson, this group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults practise and learn Wiradjuri language, share knowledge and ideas, and prepare teaching resources. It requires teamwork, commitment and effort for a language to be revived. And, while we are a relatively small group at the moment (8–12 people), we are putting language out into the community, raising interest and awareness, and providing a link with the school language programs. In time it is hoped that more people will become involved, not only spreading the language further throughout the community, but also bringing out community members’ cultural knowledge and ideas.

Overall the language program has had a very positive effect on the school and wider community. It has raised awareness of Wiradjuri language and culture among the general school population and the town more broadly. Other classes in our homeroom read the Wiradjuri terms for animals and people painted on the wall and often have discussions around these. A Welcome to Country is now given in Wiradjuri language at all formal functions. This is increasingly common at community functions as well. Classes have sung and danced at school assemblies and community events.

For Aboriginal students, we believe the language program helps strengthen pride and identity and supports them to reconnect with their culture. For non-Aboriginal students, we believe the language opens their eyes to new ways of seeing a different culture, where the land is sacred and relationships between people and the earth carry special significance. For all, learning Wiradjuri is helping improve student literacy and promoting respect and reconciliation.
References

Board of Studies NSW (2003). *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus*. Sydney: Board of Studies NSW.