



New Songs at Baya Gawiy

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM BAYA GAWIY'S SONGWRITING ACTION RESEARCH



We're making songs for the little kids to learn, but the words we put in them have a lot of meaning. They tell about caring for Country and having respect for your environment.

Patricia Cox, educator, co-researcher, songwriter



Our project

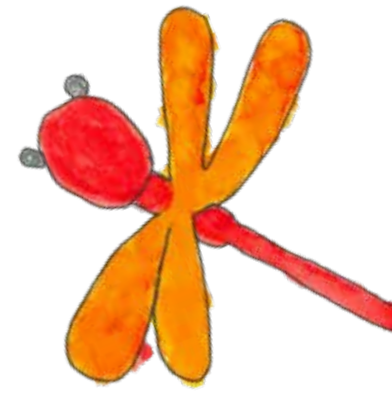
2022-2024

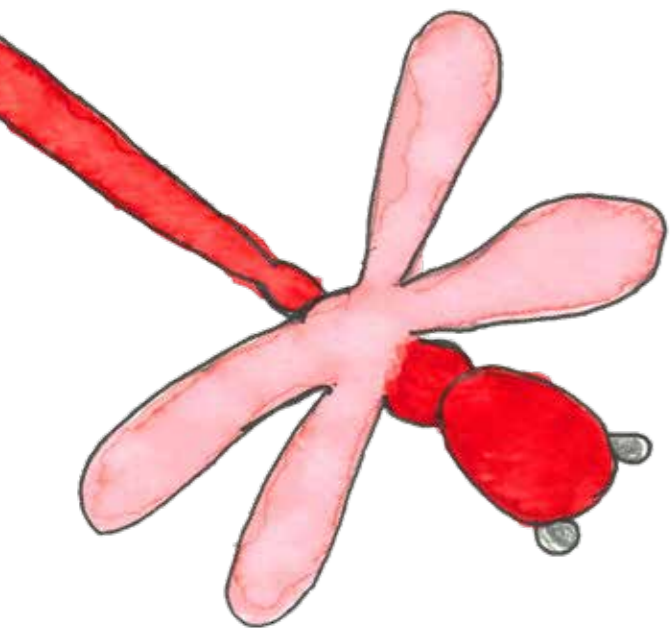
A songwriting action research partnership between Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre, Tura's Sound FX program, and the University of Melbourne.

Researchers: Patricia Cox, Susan Loughlin, Amy Menzies, June Nixon (MWRC); Gillian Howell (University of Melbourne, project leader), Annika Moses (Tura).

Songwriters: Patsy Bedford, Marcia Cook, Patricia Cox and family, Samantha Frank, Jayedene Green, Susan Hoad, Eva Nargoodah, June Nixon, Amarillo Oscar, Delphine Shandley, Brenda Shaw (contributors to the Language, Culture, and Wellbeing program at Baya Gawiy Buga Yani Jandu Yani U, MWRC's Early Childhood programs); Gillian Howell and Annika Moses (Sound FX team).

Big Language Education Yarn: Patsy Bedford, Marmingee Hand, Eva Nargoodah, June Nixon, Brenda Shaw (senior language custodians), with members of Baya Gawiy's Language, Culture and Wellbeing team.





Why did we do this research?

We wanted to:

- 1 Create new music-based resources reflecting community languages, life, and cultural knowledge.
- 2 Strengthen the Baya Gawiy community's engagement with heritage languages through music and singing;
- 3 Understand the ways that songwriting and new language songs contribute to community wellbeing.



If my Old People were here now and listened to these recordings, they'd be so proud to see the little ones grow and to carry it on and carry the knowledge from them in their hearts.

June Nixon, educator, songwriter, co-researcher

What were our research methods?



Group planning and research co-design



Collaborative Songwriting



Reflective Yarning

Including a big Language Education yarn



Song Recording



Impact Analysis

Most Significant Change methodology (story-sharing, community voting for most significant stories of change).



Collaborative thematic analysis and development of findings



The New Songs teach our children about the Old Ways.

Marina Bonnie, educator



What were our research questions?

- 1 How do we best create music together across different knowledges and worldviews?
- 2 In what ways can collaborative songwriting support MWRC's goal of strengthening language, culture, healing and wellbeing for its staff and community?



What did we make?

OUR ACTION RESEARCH HAS PRODUCED

This includes:



12 NEW SONGS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS



15 NEW SONGWRITERS

3 songs in Bunuba

3 songs in Gooniyandi

5 songs in Walmajarri

1 song in Kriol

3 Lullabies

2 Counting songs

4 NEW RECORDINGS OF EXISTING SONGS



12 NEW SONGS RECORDED

6 PEOPLE PRESENTED THEIR WORK AT PURRUMPA

National First Nations arts and culture conference (November 2022)

WE HAVE MADE 16

RECORDINGS OF LOCAL SINGERS SINGING THE NEW SONGS

WE GATHERED 21 STORIES OF SIGNIFICANT CHANGE



10 PEOPLE

7 LOCALS AND 3 VISITORS TOOK PART IN A BIG LANGUAGE EDUCATION YARN

WE WILL PUBLISH



1 ALBUM OF SONGS



BIG COMMUNITY SONGBOOK

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE INDIGENOUS LITERACY FOUNDATION



What did we learn?

“
What should
we keep in
mind when
starting a
songwriting
project?”



WE DEVELOPED THESE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

FIRST LANGUAGE FIRST

Create the song in the heritage language first, rather than in English and then translating it.

REPETITION AND PATTERN

Use sentence structures that repeat throughout the song. This makes it easier to memorise, which increases regular use and engagement.

INVOLVE THE ELDERS

Include senior language speakers as songwriters, singers, language advisors, language checkers, and champions.

JUST ONE IDEA

Verbal and written stories have a lot of detail. Stick to one idea per verse or even for the whole song.

RECORD LOCAL SINGERS

Indigenous languages belong in Indigenous voices and that's who the children need to hear.

ACTIONS AND RHYTHM

Include non-verbal ways to participate in the song, such as claps, rhythms, actions, and sound effects.

THESE WERE OUR KEY CREATIVE STEPS

“What’s needed to do this in a good way?”

STEP ONE – SONG CREATION

Involve senior language speakers from the start if possible. Choose your theme or story. Going on Country and working in intergenerational groups can help ideas flow.

STEP TWO – DEMO RECORDING

Make a demo (draft recording) of the new song. Ideally the songwriter is the recorded vocalist, but they don’t have to be.

STEP THREE – REVIEWING AND IMPROVING

Use the demo to review the song and make improvements, e.g. fixing language, adjusting rhythms and melody, testing different ways of singing it.

STEP FOUR – FINALISING

Ask an Elder or language custodian to check the language and make final corrections. Incorporate any final changes.

STEP FIVE – SONG RECORDING

Record the vocals with the songwriter(s) and/or other local people who know the language. Local musicians can also play on the recording.

STEP SIX – SONG SHARING AND DISTRIBUTION

Share the new song widely: teach it in Circle Time, playgroups, at family nights and community events. Share it in other places where people gather, e.g. hospital waiting rooms. Ask local radio and shops to play it. Make the recording publicly available. Remove any earlier draft recordings from circulation (but keep them for documentation).

STEP SEVEN – SONG DOCUMENTATION

Use lyric sheets, chord charts and/or Western notation to make a written record of the song. Keep detailed records of the song creation process, e.g. names of songwriters and language consultants, examples of work-in-progress.



THROUGH OUR RESEARCH, WE FOUND

New language songs in early childhood spaces strengthened language, culture, and wellbeing through expanding Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing.

“How do songs and songwriting help our community?”

KEY FINDINGS

- The new songs strengthened feelings of connection to culture and family, due to songwriters embedding important cultural knowledge in their song lyrics, and families sharing and singing the new songs together across generations.
- The new songs supported feelings of pride, meaning, and motivation for the songwriters and others in the wider community.
- The new songs became practices through which Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing were strengthened and broadened at Baya Gawiy. Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing are central to Baya Gawiy's philosophy and approach to curriculum.

The New Songs project has celebrated and amplified the knowledge of our Elders, making language learning more accessible and the knowledge of culture more resilient. The songs are the thread that pulls all the Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing together.

Co-researchers' summary statement



How did the new songs strengthen the Baya Gawiy community's Ways of Knowing?

- Baya Gawiy's children increased their use of heritage languages. Children were singing confidently in their heritage languages. They increasingly asked to sing and hear the language songs.
- Educators and families also increased their language knowledge. Families asked for copies of the songs so they could play them at home.
- The songs contain important cultural knowledge, supporting children's continued connection to Country and culture. Wherever they go, they can carry the songs, languages and stories with them.

Writing our songs has inspired us to explore, imagine, and create. All of us—educators and children—have learned new skills and more of our heritage languages. We feel more confident to follow our curiosity and to create new resources, through music and story, words and sounds.

Co-researchers' summary statement



How did the new songs strengthen the Baya Gawiy community's Ways of Being?

- Singing the new songs supported everyone's wellbeing. Educators observed enhanced feelings of calm, connection, safety and engagement among the children when the New Songs were sung.
- Songwriting and song-sharing supported participants' relationships, identity, and selfhood. The songs strengthened connections to culture, family, and place, and local Indigenous educators became more confident in using their current language knowledge in their teaching, planning, and formal study.
- Educators and songwriters felt proud of the songs they wrote or helped create. They felt proud of each other, and proud to carry on the work their Elders started.

Through the songwriting project we can see our community of children and educators feeling connected, calm, happy, proud, safe, and strong.
Co-researchers' summary statement

How did the new songs strengthen the Baya Gawiy community's Ways of Doing?

- Educators adapted their practices to incorporate the New Songs in the daily routine. By October 2023, our New Songs had replaced mass market, commercially produced, non-local songs and recordings at Baya Gawiy.
- Creating quality recordings of local songwriters singing their songs boosted children's engagement and is preserving Elders' voices and stories for future generations.
- Tura musicians developed new methods of song facilitation, helping songwriters use memory, imagined scenes, and deep listening to bring their melodies and lyrics to the surface.

Through recording all our new songs, we've been able to fill our learning environments with local languages and voices and embed these in our daily routines. The song recordings and their daily use are a way for knowledge and stories to flow from our educators to our kids.

Co-researchers' summary statement





Once you know your language so strong, that's it. There will be no stopping you, you know? You can just write anything into a song. We feel like the song belongs to us. You feel that different vibe, you know? That feeling, like, you're writing your own song in language – wow! ... And it's not easy, like you do it once and it's done – No. It takes time.

Patricia Cox, educator, co-researcher, songwriter



Significant changes observed by our community

We asked participants in the songwriting project to tell us about any significant changes they had observed. We then asked Fitzroy Crossing families, educators, and community members to select the most significant changes. This process showed that **the Top 3 Most Significant Changes** were:

- 1 Children are singing in local languages.
- 2 Recording our songs helps keep the languages strong for the next generation.
- 3 The new songs and music support everyone's wellbeing.

These choices indicate the tremendous importance the Fitzroy Crossing community places on heritage language maintenance, strength, and knowledge, and the benefits that language knowledge brings to community wellbeing and healing.

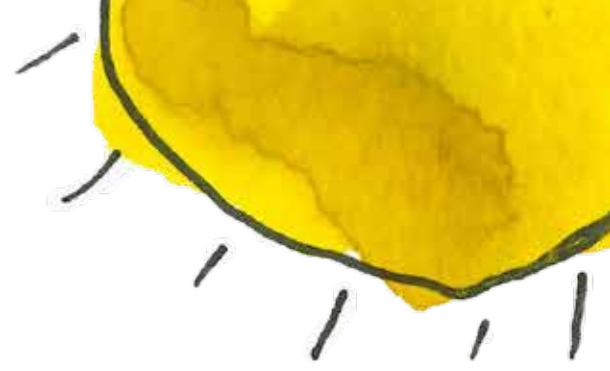
Current challenges for language education

Lots of people are working hard to strengthen language knowledge among children and young people in Fitzroy Crossing, but senior language educators in the Big Language Education Yarn told us about many challenges. These include:

- Children's opportunities to use their local languages in their education dramatically reduce when they transition to school. Standard Australian English is the language of instruction everywhere except language classes.
- Staffing for language programs is a challenge for Fitzroy Valley schools as well as for Baya Gawiy. We need to support adult language learners to build confidence and motivation to become teachers and remove any bureaucratic obstacles to their employment.

Songwriting helps us use language in a more simple way. You don't need to use so many words in a song. It makes us feel more creative, realising this.

Patricia Cox, educator, co-researcher, songwriter

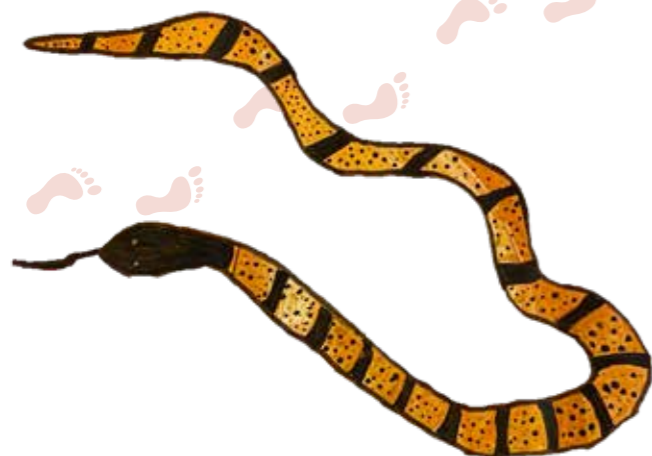


SONGS ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION:

- Songs are an effective language learning tool for young people and could be a source of continuity between Baya Gawiy and schools.
- Recordings of songs and stories help to ensure children can learn their language from Aboriginal language speakers, even if an Aboriginal teacher isn't present.
- Songwriting and other creative language projects may help keep adult language learners motivated and engaged with their learning.

Next steps

- Use the Baya Gawiy language songs to support children's transitions between early childhood learning, kindergarten, pre-primary, and formal education.
- Create new songwriting/storytelling projects with language teachers and Aboriginal educators in local schools.
- Encourage and support classroom teachers to make group singing of language songs part of daily classroom activities, rather than only during language lessons or music lessons.
- Recognise, celebrate, and utilise children's multilingualism and diverse language knowledge. Create opportunities for children to be language leaders in schools.
- Formalise a Community of Practice of songwriter-educators working in local languages in the Kimberley, to share resources and provide peer support.



For those of us learning our language, these songs have helped us memorise words and phrases. We've also sung the songs at home.

Younger local educators

Recommendations

The United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) is an opportunity to invest in the next generation of language leaders. We recommend the following:

1

Recognise and **elevate songs and songwriting** as important contributors to language revitalisation work and to achieving Closing the Gap Target 16: *'By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.'*

2

Prioritise investment and support for songwriters and song facilitators as part of language revitalisation work. Provide **training in song facilitation** for community musicians and early childhood educators to expand the pool of potential songwriters.

3

Provide targeted support for **women's musical development** and confidence. Most early childhood educators are women, and women can face complex barriers in realising their musical aspirations and potential, different to those that men may face.

4

Invest in **community-led research** to more deeply understand the connection between creative language projects (songs, books, etc) and the workforce development of the next generation of language educators for endangered Indigenous languages.



Acknowledgments and thanks



These songs and stories are all about connection and strengthening. And that's empowering.

Patricia Cox, co-researcher, participatory analysis session

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