

Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring  
Language and Culture Centre

# **Miriwoong Language Nest**

## **Project Evaluation**

December 2014

# Introduction

Inspired by the success of the Language Nest model internationally, Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring (MDWg) Language and Culture Centre's Miriwoong Language Nest program was designed as a promising early childhood immersion-based native language education program for children in and around Western Australia's remote Kununurra area. Appropriating the Language Nest model to suit the Aboriginal Australian context, each Miriwoong Language Nest session works to surround children with the local and critically endangered Miriwoong language through fun and friendly activities such as simple talk, storytelling, songs, games and arts/crafts. In doing so, the sessions positively contribute to an overall innovating and exciting language revitalisation strategy, while also bolstering 'extra-linguistic' benefits such as increases in self-esteem; heightened levels of inter-cultural awareness, empathy and respect; and broader educational engagement and achievement potential among all children involved. As highlighted by the Australian House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs' [Our Land Our Languages](#) report, "International research has shown that early childhood Aboriginal language and cultural programs lead to increased self-esteem, improved academic performance, improved school attendance, reduced drop-out rates and better proficiency in reading skills in both the Indigenous language and English." MDWg has certainly seen great progress in, and potential for, achieving such outcomes through the Miriwoong Language Nest initiative.

The Miriwoong Language Nest program was first trialled in the latter half of 2013 and has been fully operational throughout 2014. Program design and delivery has been carried out by a team of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers, with the support of a (non-Indigenous) Language Nest Facilitator. Together, these women have:

- Committed to their own continued Miriwoong language skill development, under the guidance of elders and more senior Miriwoong speakers;
- Developed a range of new, Miriwoong-specific language learning and teaching resources and curricula;
- Delivered regular 20-30 minute Miriwoong Language Nest sessions to children in a range of partnering play, childcare and educational groups, including: Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme, the Pindan Centre, the Children's Services Support Unit (CSSU) Kununurra Early Learning Centre and the early years at Kununurra District High School and St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

The team has also consistently documented and evaluated program patterns, progress and potential, with such data not only helping to support smooth and successful project delivery throughout the year, but also helping to inform this end-of-year formal Project Evaluation and to direct future project plans. MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team is extremely grateful for the support of its start-up sponsors—the ILS and Lotterywest—and hopes that this evaluation will help to reflect the Miriwoong Language Nest program's value to current and prospective project partners alike.

Part 1 of this evaluation will involve responses to the key evaluation questions set by Lotterywest.

Part 2 will summarise and visually represent some of the program's more quantitative results.

Part 3 will summarise and visually represent feedback retrieved from participating children.

Part 4 will summarise feedback retrieved from staff at partnering play, childcare or educational organisations.

Part 5 includes a qualitative reflection from a Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer involved in the design and delivery of the program.

Part 6 will list some of the Miriwoong Language Nest program's key achievements and success indicators.

Part 7 will list considered recommendations for the future of the Miriwoong Language Nest program.

Appendix A includes a collection of relevant media.

Should you have any questions regarding the Miriwoong Language Nest program, or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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**Language and Culture Centre**

## **Part 1: Response to Lotterywest's Set Evaluation Questions**

- **Did we employ the staff in the forecast time (July–September 2013)?**

Yes.

The [Language Nest Facilitator commenced work on 01/07/13](#) and [3 Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers \(LEOs\) commenced work on 02/09/13](#).

For more details regarding staffing for MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program, please see the 'Employment of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers' section in Part 2 of this evaluation.

- **Did we commence trial of the language teaching in the latter part of 2013?**

Yes.

[13 separate pilot Miriwoong Language Nest sessions were held between 02/09/13 and 10/12/13 in collaboration with 3 separate partnering organisations](#)—Save the Children Australia, the CSSU Early Learning Centre and Kununurra District High School.

There were a [total of 281 child attendances in these pilot sessions, with an average of about 22 children per session](#).

Trialling the language teaching in the latter part of 2013 effectively helped to:

- Develop the confidence and competence of the Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers;
- Establish positive relationships with partnering organisations and negotiate shared goals and project logistics;
- Evaluate Miriwoong language teaching resources, curricula and methodologies so as to better ensure quality program delivery in 2014.

- **Did we begin the formal Language Nest teaching in February 2014?**

Due to a delay in the arrival of the Miriwoong Language Nest project vehicle, as well as illness on the part of the Language Nest Facilitator, the formal Language Nest teaching [commenced in the first week of March rather than in February 2014](#).

However, as highlighted in response to the following three questions, program continuation and growth was exceptional and was by no means affected by the one-week delay in the program's launch date.

- **Did we deliver three two-hour sessions per week from February 2014?**

The trial language teaching carried out in 2013, as well as logistical preferences from our partnering organisations, showed us that shorter but more frequent sessions were most practical and conducive to children's learning.

The Miriwoong Language Nest team already began running 4 sessions per week during the first week of the program's launch (week starting 02/03/14) and the number of sessions per week escalated to up to 18 per week by the end of this year.

For more details regarding weekly session numbers, please see the 'Number of Miriwoong Language Nest Sessions Delivered per Week' section in Part 2 of this evaluation.

- **Did we increase the session numbers to four per week by April 2014?**

As mentioned in regard to the abovementioned question, the Miriwoong Language Nest team were already running 4 sessions per week during the first week of the program's launch (week starting 02/03/14). By April 2014, weekly session numbers rose to up to 6 per week and, by May 2014, weekly session numbers were as high as 15. The maximum number of sessions carried out per week in 2014 was 18.

This significant increase in weekly session numbers can be explained by:

- A decision to run shorter but more frequent sessions with the children as the Miriwoong Language Nest team recognised that shorter sessions better suit young children's attention spans and more frequent sessions, through repetition, better facilitate the language learning/retention process;
- A decision to run shorter but more frequent sessions because this fitted more practically within the hours that partnering organisations were able to accommodate us per week;
- An increase in the number of partnering organisations involved in the Miriwoong Language Nest program. While the Miriwoong Language Nest program started being delivered to 3 expected partnering playgroup, childcare or educational groups (Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme, the Pindan Centre, and the CSSU Early Learning Centre), two additional partner institutions (Kununurra District High School and St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School) also started participating in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions by May 2014.

- **Did we have 130 sessions with 1000 child attendances by December 2014?**

Yes—many more in fact.

The Miriwoong Language Nest team had delivered 338 individual sessions with a total of 4472 child attendances by the end of November 2014. This represents 2.6 times the number of sessions anticipated to be delivered and almost 4.5 times the number of child attendances expected.

The 130<sup>th</sup> Miriwoong Language Nest session had already been run by the end of June 2014, and the 1000<sup>th</sup> child attendance was already well reached by that same date.

For more details regarding the number of sessions and child attendances, please see Part 2 of this evaluation.

- **Did we provide 40 sessions on Waringarri Radio?**

Yes.

MDWg's Miriwoong Language Worker team had already established a Miriwoong 'Word of the Week' segment before the Miriwoong Language Nest project commenced. This segment continued throughout 2014 and 41 sessions were recorded and aired throughout the year. Although the Miriwoong Language Worker team continued to lead radio-related activities, Miriwoong Language Nest team members contributed to the development of content for the 'Word of the Week' segments and sometimes assisted with their recording.

The Miriwoong Language Nest team have now also begun recording vocals and instrumentals for an additional 'Miriwoong Song of the Month' segment to be launched on Waringarri Radio next year.

- **Did we meet the expectations of Save the Children, Children's Services Support Unit (CSSU) and the Pindan Centre (which runs the 'Stepping Stones' program)?**

Yes, and we also met the expectations of new partnering organisations—Kununurra District High School and St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

As highlighted by the results of a formal feedback survey distributed to staff at all partnering organisations in November 2014, 100% of staff at partnering organisations reported that MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program had met (if not exceeded) their expectations, and that they would like to continue to be involved in the Miriwoong Language Nest initiative into the future.

Some comments from staff at partnering organisations regarding the level at which their expectations have been met include:

- *"[The program] has not only met my expectations but has blown my mind as I have two children that participate in the Language Nest lessons not only*

*with our playgroup but also at other services and they love learning Miriwoong and speak some of the words at home.”*

- *“It has gone above our expectations as the 5 morning a week program reinforces what [the children] are learning and revisits what they have learnt. The parent feedback on this program has been fantastic and they wish for this to continue.”*
- *“[The program has] far exceeded my expectations!”*

For more details regarding the level at which the expectations of staff at partnering organisations have been met, please see the ‘Level at which Expectations Met’ section in Part 4 of this evaluation, as well as the ‘Testimonials from Some of Our Project Partners’ section of Appendix A.

- **Did the young children who participated in the program improve their knowledge and use of Miriwoong?**

Yes.

Although formal language skill assessment has been deliberately avoided in order to maintain encouraging learning environments for participating children, each Miriwoong Language Nest session has involved a range of fun and friendly activities that inherently assess the extent to which children are able to comprehend or reproduce relevant Miriwoong language elements. The Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers have worked with the Language Nest Facilitator to rigorously observe and record when particular stages of language skill development have been achieved by children taking part in the program.

Since the launch of the Miriwoong Language Nest program, the Language Engagement Officers and Language Nest Facilitator have noticed:

- An increase in the number of children able to comprehend Miriwoong language elements;
- An increase in the number of children able to reproduce (speak) a level of Miriwoong, not only when prompted to repeat a word/phrase after hearing it, but also when prompted to give a correct or appropriate response without any obvious visual or verbal clues;
- An increase in the speed at which children are able to progress through the Miriwoong Language Nest curriculum;
- An increase in the number of children taking the initiative to use aspects of the Miriwoong language even outside of individual Language Nest sessions (e.g. at the partnering organisation that they attend even when the Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers are not present, at home, and in the playground/other play areas).

Staff at partnering organisations, as well as participating children themselves, have also noticed an increase in their knowledge and use of Miriwoong.

Based on an end-of-year feedback survey, 100% of children surveyed mentioned that they could neither understand nor speak Miriwoong prior to their engagement with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team. Equally, however, 100% of children surveyed reported that they thought that the lessons with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team had helped them to understand and speak Miriwoong better.

Similarly, 100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest sessions had increased the knowledge/use of the Miriwoong language among the children in their care.

Please see Part 3 and 4 of this evaluation for more details regarding both partnering staff and participating children's assessment of their increase in Miriwoong language knowledge/use.





## Part 2: Quantitative Results Summary

Throughout 2014, a daily record has been consistently updated by the Language Nest Facilitator and the Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers to track some of the Miriwoong Language Nest program's more quantitative results. These are summarised below.

### Total Number of Miriwoong Language Nest Sessions Delivered

There were a [total of 338 individual Miriwoong Language Nest sessions delivered](#) throughout 2014, between 05/03/14 and 28/11/14.

This total represents [2.6 times the number of sessions expected to be delivered in 2014](#) by current project funding partners.

### Number of Miriwoong Language Nest Sessions Delivered per Week

An [average of more than 8 sessions per week were delivered](#) throughout 2014, between 05/03/14 and 28/11/14.

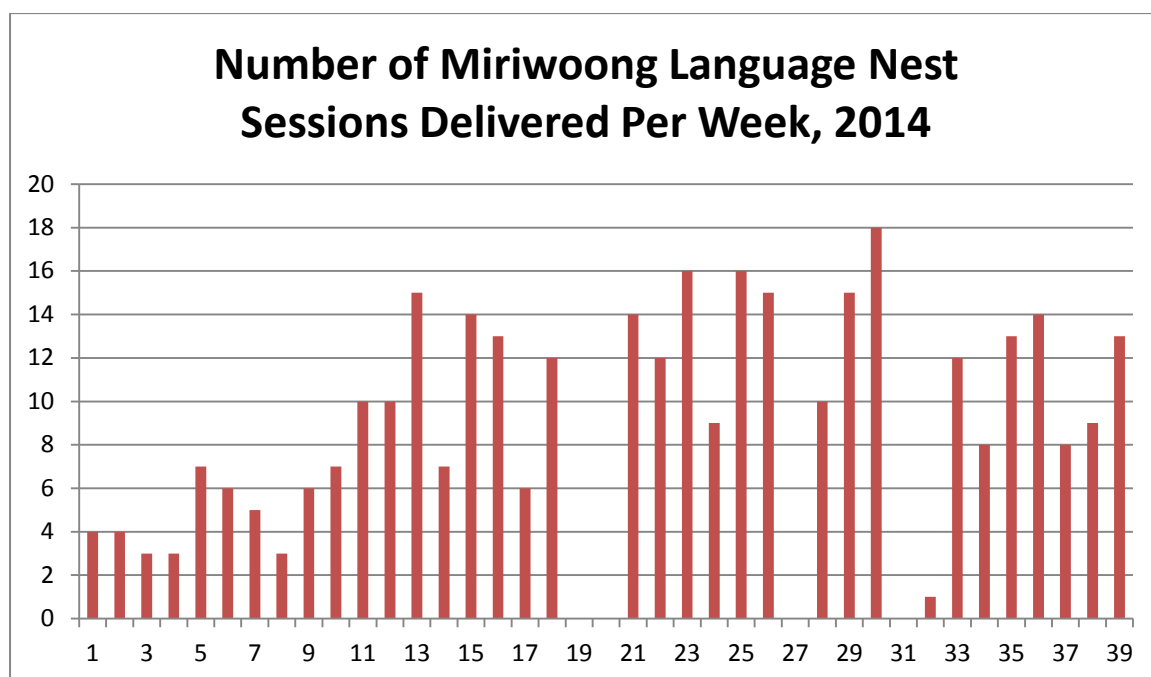
There were only 4 weeks within this period within which 0 sessions were delivered, which can be explained by:

- i) School holiday periods, within which the majority of partner organisations cease to host their groups of children, and during which the Miriwoong Language Nest team committed primarily to resource and curricula evaluation and development;
- ii) The first week of September, during which the Miriwoong Language Nest team travelled to Broome to host a workshop about *Language Nests and Immersion-based Native Language Learning/Teaching* at the WANALA conference.

Otherwise, [the minimum number of sessions delivered per week was 3, with the maximum being 18](#). This maximum number of sessions held in a single week represents [more than 3 times the number of sessions expected to be delivered per week by the end of 2014](#) by current project funding partners. Current project funding partners anticipated 5 sessions to be held per week by the end of 2014, and MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team [exceeded this expectation \(i.e. delivered more than 5 sessions/week\) for 28 out of the 39 running weeks of the program](#). Indeed, [almost half \(~47%\) of the running weeks involved the delivery of double if not at least triple the amount of expected session numbers](#).

The graph on the following page visually represents the number of Miriwoong Language Nest sessions delivered throughout the 39-week 2014 program, with the

horizontal axis representing the week number and the vertical axis representing the session numbers.



### Number of Sessions Delivered to Each Partnering Group

The Miriwoong Language Nest program started being delivered to 3 expected partnering playgroup, childcare or educational groups: Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme, the Pindan Centre, and the CSSU Early Learning Centre. By May 2014, the early years at 2 additional partner institutions—Kununurra District High School and St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School—also started participating in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions.

136 sessions (~40% of total sessions) were delivered to children at the CSSU Early Learning Centre.

82 sessions (~24% of total sessions) were delivered to the 4 pre-primary classes at Kununurra District High School.

48 sessions (~14% of total sessions) were delivered to the kindergarten and pre-primary classes at St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

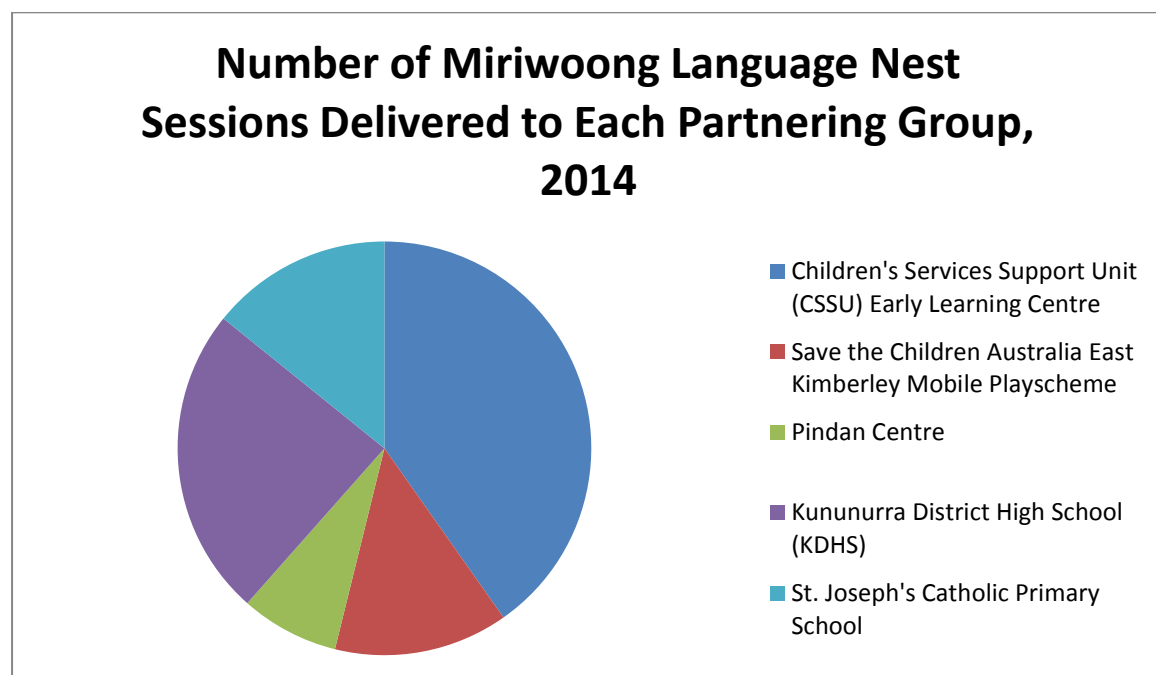
46 sessions (~14% of total sessions) were delivered to children taking part in Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme at Mirima community, Molly Springs Community or in White Gum Park.

26 sessions (~8% of total sessions) were delivered to children at the Pindan Centre.

Differences in the number of sessions delivered to each partnering group can be explained by factors such as:

- i) When MDWg established a partnership with each group;
- ii) The number of sessions that each group was interested in receiving and was able to accommodate per week. Generally, Miriwoong Language Nest sessions were held on anywhere between a daily and weekly basis with each partnering group;
- iii) The number of 'sub-groups' within each partnering group. For example, there were 4 separate pre-primary classes at Kununurra District High School but there was only 1 pre-primary class at St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

The graph below visually represents the proportion of Miriwoong Language Nest sessions delivered to each of MDWg's partnering play, childcare or educational groups.



It is worth noting that 100% of current partnering groups have indicated that they would like to continue to engage with the Miriwoong Language Nest program next year, with the majority of partnering groups even unpromptedly inviting MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team to expand on the number of sessions delivered to them.

### **Total Number of Child Attendances**

A total of 4472 child attendances in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions have been recorded between 05/03/14 and 28/11/14.

This total represents almost 4.5 times the number of child attendances expected to have been recorded in 2014 by current project funding partners.

### **Number of Child Attendances Per Week**

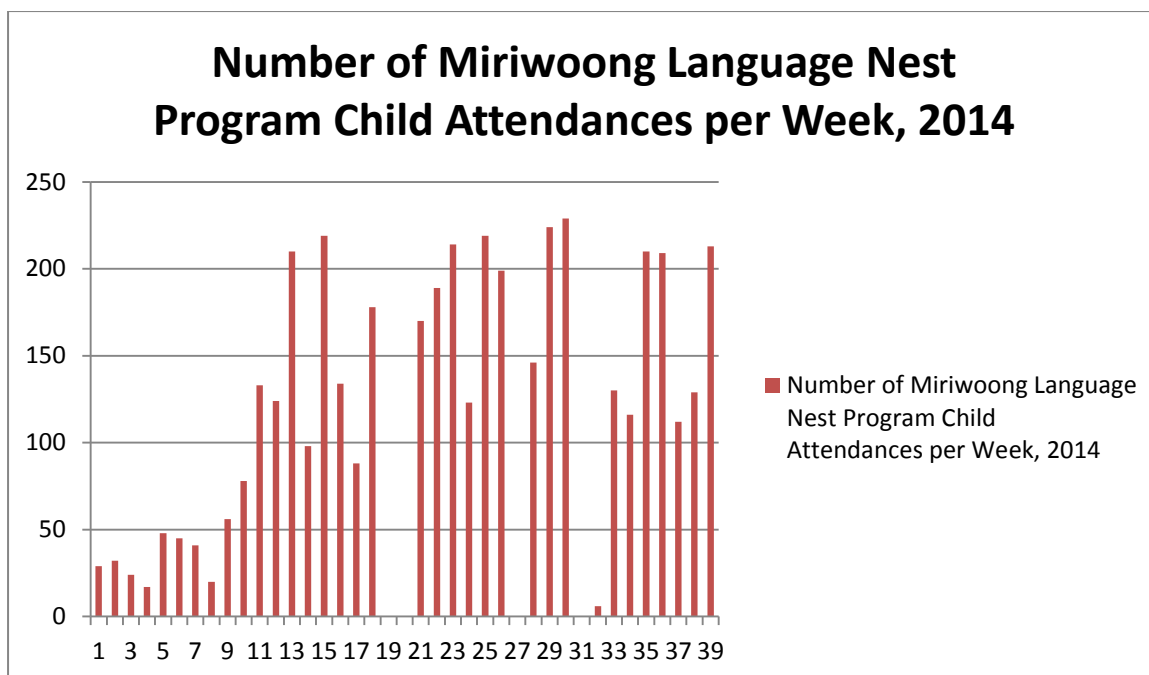
An average of more than 114 child attendance per week were recorded throughout 2014, between 05/03/14 and 28/11/14.

There were only 4 weeks within this period within which 0 sessions were delivered, which can be explained by:

- iii) School holiday periods, within which the majority of partner organisations cease to host their groups of children, and during which the Miriwoong Language Nest team committed primarily to resource and curricula evaluation and development;
- iv) The first week of September, during which the Miriwoong Language Nest team travelled to Broome to host a workshop about *Language Nests and Immersion-based Native Language Learning/Teaching* at the WANALA conference.

Otherwise, the minimum number of child attendances per week was 6, with the maximum being 229. The number of child attendances per week exceeded 100 for 22 out of the 39 running weeks of the program, and exceeded 200 for 9 out of the 39 running weeks. That is, child attendances per week exceeded 100 for more than half of the program's running weeks, and exceeded 200 for more than 23% of the program's running weeks.

The graph over the page visually represents the number of child attendances per week within the 39-week 2014 Miriwoong Language Nest program. The horizontal axis represents the week number and the vertical axis represents the corresponding number of child attendances.



### **Number of Participating Children Reached at Each Partnering Group**

At least 215 individual children participated in the Miriwoong Language Nest program throughout 2014.

At least 89 (~41%) of these children took part in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at Kununurra District High School.

At least 47 (~22%) of these children took part in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School.

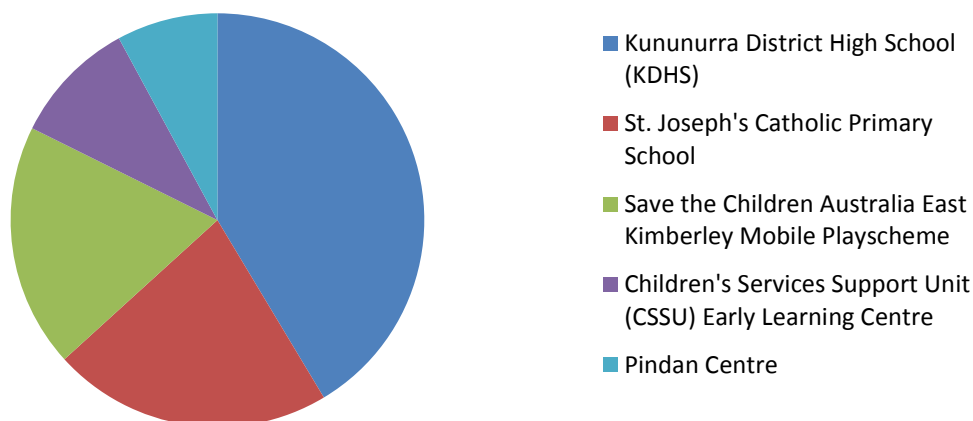
About 41 (~19%) of these children took part in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme sites—Mirima community, Molly Springs Community and White Gum Park.

At least 21 (~10%) of these children took part in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at the CSSU Early Learning Centre.

At least 17 (~8%) of these children took part in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at the Pandan Centre.

The graph over the page visually represents the overall proportion of children participating in Miriwoong Language Nest sessions at each partnering play, childcare or educational group.

### Overall Number of Children Participating in the Miriwoong Language Nest Program at Each Partnering Group, 2014



#### Employment of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers (LEOs)

A total of 7 different LEOs have been employed to work on the design and delivery of the Miriwoong Language Nest program between September 2013 and December 2014. 1 on-and-off Miriwoong Language Nest team volunteer was also hosted by MDWg through the government's Unpaid Work Experience Placement (UWEP) scheme between 12/05/14 and 05/08/14. Furthermore, female members of MDWg's existing 'Language Worker' team have shown a solid interest in, and commitment to, helping out with Miriwoong Language Nest operations where necessary or appropriate.

The LEO age profile has been quite varied, with ages at the time of employment ranging between 21 and 54 years.

The longest running LEO has been employed since March 2014 and continues to be a committed member of the Miriwoong Language Nest team. She has, in total, worked at least<sup>1</sup> 88 individual days and has delivered 224 individual Miriwoong Language Nest sessions.

Reasons for LEO absence from work have generally included:

- Illness;
- Community funeral days, grieving periods, or other cultural matters;

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<sup>1</sup> This number only takes into account days on which Language Nest sessions were run. The total number of days worked would be notably higher if school holiday planning/evaluation periods, days during which LEOs had to attend Mirima Council Directors meetings, or days during which LEOs participated in workshops/training were also taken into account.

- A need to attend important community meetings scheduled by other local organisations;
- Unavailable carers for one's children, grandchildren or other family members.

Reasons for LEO resignation from work have included:

- Physical relocation to a different part of Australia;
- Loss of a long-term carer for one's children;
- Other domestic issues.

It is worth pointing out that no LEO has reported to leave their job because of a lack of interest or enjoyment in the work that they were carrying out at MDWg and as part of the Miriwoong Language Nest team specifically.

It is also worth pointing out that, since the launch of the Miriwoong Language Nest program, staff at MDWg have informally noticed an increase in Miriwoong community members reporting a desire to:

- Learn or improve on their Miriwoong language;
- Work at MDWg or within the Miriwoong Language Nest team specifically.

Several suitable Miriwoong women have left their contact details with the Language Nest Facilitator should funds permit them to join the Miriwoong Language Nest team next year or into the future.

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## **Part 3: Feedback Retrieved from Participating Children**

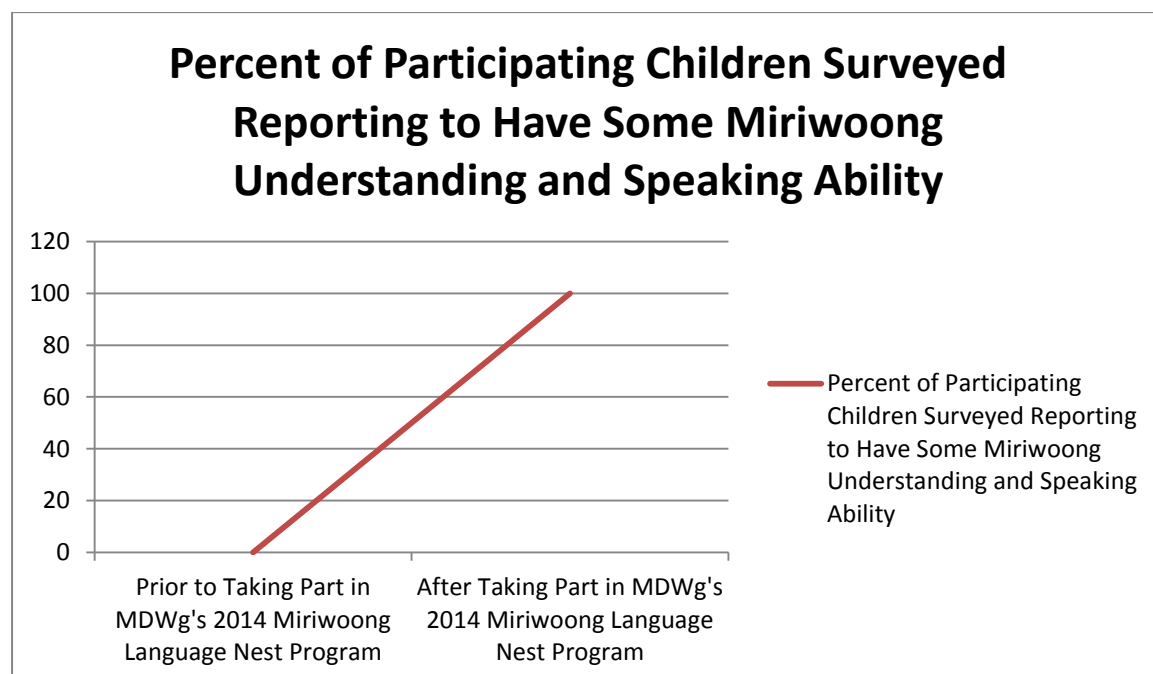
While feedback was informally retrieved from participating children throughout the year, a 10% sample size of the Miriwoong Language Nest program's child participants—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—was more formally surveyed in November 2014. The results of the feedback surveys are summarised below.

### **Level of Miriwoong Comprehension and Speaking Ability**

100% of children surveyed mentioned that they could neither understand nor speak Miriwoong prior to their engagement with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team.

Equally, however, 100% of children surveyed reported that they thought that the lessons with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team had helped them to understand and speak Miriwoong better.

The graph below visually represents the percentage of children reporting to have some Miriwoong comprehension and speaking ability prior to and after their experience with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program, and highlights the exponential increase in this regard.





### **Level of Enjoyment in Miriwoong Language Learning**

100% of children surveyed agreed that they enjoyed learning Miriwoong with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team.

When asked *why* they enjoyed learning Miriwoong with the Language Nest team, some responses included:

- *"We get to learn a new language"*
- *"We have fun"*
- *"We get to sing songs"*
- *"We even get to play hard language games with no clues"*—this response indicates that children even enjoyed the *challenges* of learning Miriwoong.

### **Feelings Associated with Miriwoong Language Learning**

Of the children surveyed:

- 19 (more than 90%) mainly felt proud to be learning Miriwoong;
- 1 mainly felt happy to be learning Miriwoong;
- Only 1 mainly felt bored when learning Miriwoong;

No other feelings or emotions were brought up by the children surveyed regarding their experiences with Miriwoong language learning.

The graph below visually represents the children's main feelings experienced through Miriwoong language learning with the MDWg Miriwoong Language Nest team.



### **Attitudes Towards the Importance of Miriwoong Language Learning**

100% of children surveyed agreed that it was important to learn Miriwoong.

When asked *why* they thought it was important to learn Miriwoong, the main responses included:

- *“Because we get to learn lots of new language”*
- *“Because we get to learn what other people speak”*

### **Satisfaction with the Topics Taught by MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest Team**

100% of children surveyed agreed that they were happy with the topics or thematic content taught to them by MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest team. Topics this year have included ‘People,’ ‘Body Parts,’ ‘Animals,’ ‘Weather/Seasons’ and ‘Feelings/Emotions.’

When asked about what other topics they would like to learn about in Miriwoong, the main responses included:

- Animals
- What we Eat (Food)

Other main topics of interest mentioned throughout the year by children outside of the surveyed group include:

- Aboriginal (Dreamtime) stories
- Painting
- Indigenous Jewellery

***“I like the teachers—you are the best Miriwoong ladies!”***

*(Quote retrieved from a child by a staff member at a parnter organisation when asking the group of children in her care whether there was anything at all that they wanted to say about the Miriwoong Language Nest program or the Miriwoong Language Nest team).*

## **Part 4: Feedback Retrieved from Staff at Partnering Play, Childcare or Educational Organisations**

While feedback was informally retrieved from staff at partnering organisations throughout the year, formal feedback surveys were distributed to staff at all partnering organisations—Save the Children Australia, the CSSU Early Learning Centre, the Pindan Centre, and Kununurra’s two local schools—in November 2014. The results of the feedback surveys are summarised below.

### **Exposure to Miriwoong Language Education**

Only 1 out of the 5 partnering organisations were able to offer any form of Miriwoong language education to the children in their care prior to engaging with MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest program. That single organisation was Save the Children Australia, who responded:

*“We were fortunate to have [one of MDWg’s current LEOs] as part of our [East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme] playgroup and she taught the children a bit of Miriwoong. Also, we had a playgroup [located at] the [MDWg] Language Centre in previous years.”*

Nevertheless, without their former Miriwoong-speaking staff member, and without any of their remote playgroups being situated at MDWg any longer, Save the Children would not have had the capacity to continue engaging the children in Miriwoong language education without taking part in MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest program in 2014.

### **Increase in the Knowledge/Use of the Miriwoong Language Among Children**

100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest sessions had increased the knowledge/use of the Miriwoong language among the children in their care.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *“There is a definite increase in their usage of Miriwoong words.”*
- *“I have seen a great increase in the children’s knowledge in using the Miriwoong language. The way the Language Nest delivers the lessons is outstanding. The children are very interested and eager to get the answers right to games/questions.”*

- *"The children are now teaching their parents/grandparents/guardians new Miriwoong words. The children can recognise animals, body parts and environment (weather) and repeat it in Miriwoong."*
- *"I think it has in that they remember [Miriwoong words/phrases] from week to week... but I am not sure if they will remember and use them if they don't get to experience Miriwoong next year."*

### **Attitudes Towards the Importance of Miriwoong Language Learning**

100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that it was important for the children in their care to be learning Miriwoong.

When asked why they thought it was important, some responses included:

- *"I think it is vital that the children... continue to learn Miriwoong because over 95% of the children who participate [in our organisation's activities] are Miriwoong/Gajirrabeng or have connections to Miriwoong/Gajirrabeng families."*
- *"It is important as it's the local language and it would have died out if these steps had not been taken to engage local families and children."*
- *"I think it is important as this is a local language and it gives the children an understanding of the culture attached to the language."*
- *"It is extremely important. It teaches children about Miriwoong culture which increases cultural understanding and respect for Indigenous culture."*

### **Level of Enjoyment in Miriwoong Language Learning**

100% of staff at partnering organisations believed that the children in their care had enjoyed learning Miriwoong through MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *"I see how the children get excited to see the Language Nest vehicle approaching. [The children] have usually packed up and are eager to get started before the lesson starts. The children sit nicely on the mat and all of them get involved in the lesson."*
- *"On the arrival of the 'Miriwoong ladies' the children are really excited and start singing the welcome song before they enter. This is a fantastic sign as the children are showing that they are eager to learn."*
- *"Every week the children look forward to [the Miriwoong Language Nest team] coming into the classroom."*

- *“The children have really enjoyed the ladies coming in. We often talk after the ladies have gone and try and remember some of the words. They do miss the ladies if they are unable to come in.”*

### **Relevance and Meaningfulness of Thematic Content**

100% of staff at partnering organisations believed that the thematic content of MDWg’s Miriwoong Language Nest sessions has been relevant and meaningful for the children in their care.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *“The Language Nest has and continues to deliver meaningful content to the children of our group.”*
- *“The program is aged appropriate for the age of children they are teaching.”*
- *“I think the themes have been really relevant as they fit nicely with what we are doing in pre-primary and they are aimed at the children’s interests.”*

### **Effectiveness of Language Teaching Methodologies**

100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that the MDWg Miriwoong Language Nest team had used effective language teaching methodologies throughout 2014.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *“Their method has familiarised the children with other Miriwoong words as well as the content they have planned.”*  
(That is, immersion-based teaching allows children to learn words even outside of the core/focus topic areas).
- *“They have visual aids for the children which keeps them engaged throughout the session. This also helps with word/language recognition to prompt the children.”*
- *“Games and songs are appropriate for early childhood students.”*
- *“The ladies use games, songs, flash cards, actions and repetition which work really well for [the children] and every lesson is taught the same way and the children know what is going to happen and the expectations and they really are*

*learning. It's fun and the kids really enjoy it."*

### **Effectiveness of Language Teaching Resources**

100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that the MDWg Language Nest team had used effective language teaching resources with the children in their care.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *"The resources they use engage the children in the lesson more effectively."*
- *"The local community has published books [through MDWg]. These are fantastic resources as they use our local environment and language."*
- *"The resources the ladies bring are excellent. They are simple, bright, relevant and appealing to children. We love Mr Potato Head!"*
- *"Resources look great!"*

### **Level at which Expectations Met**

100% of staff at partnering organisations reported that MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program had met (if not exceeded) their expectations.

Relevant additional comments from staff at partnering organisations include:

- *"[The program] has not only met my expectations but has blown my mind as I have two children that participate in the Language Nest lessons not only with our playgroup but also at other services and they love learning Miriwoong and speak some of the words at home."*
- *"It has gone above our expectations as the 5 morning a week program reinforces what [the children] are learning and revisits what they have learnt. The parent feedback on this program has been fantastic and they wish for this to continue."*
- *"If the ladies are unable to attend they let me know and we organise an alternative time as the children really enjoy the Language Nest!"*
- *"Far exceeded my expectations!"*

### Interest in Partnering with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest Team Next Year

100% of staff at partnering organisations are interested in continuing to partner with MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team next year.

When partners were asked about suggestions for the future of the Miriwoong Language Nest program, some recommendations included:

- *"Only that it would be great if the program could expand to older age groups!"*
- *"I would really like to see the Language Nest continue next year and, if possible, move up into Year 1. The children and myself have really learnt a lot and have enjoyed these lessons. The way the ladies present the lesson suit how my class learn and the children really like interacting with the ladies."*
- *"The CSSU Centre would like to invite the Language Nest program to attend Tuesday's 'Small Branches Program' (playgroup). This will promote Miriwoong language among young Indigenous women to further the language within our local community."*
- *"I have seen a change in [the LEOs'] confidence throughout the program [and] would like to see [them] take even more of a main teaching role."*
- *"[Continuing to learn Miriwoong] is vital for the children as they are the future and will continue to keep the Miriwoong language alive. It also [helps to] build a strong sense of identity which is the first outcome of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. I would love to see [all] the lessons move back to country where the children can experience learning first-hand and in a traditional setting."*



**Save the Children**  
Australia

**Gawooleng Yawoodeng Mobile  
Playgroup**

Lot 706/ Pindan Ave, Kununurra





## Part 5: Reflections from Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer Rita Boombi



Rita Boombi has been the Chairperson of Mirima Council Aboriginal Corporation Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring since 2010. She also joined the Miriwoong Language Nest team as a Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer in early 2014. Transcribed below are her reflections on her experience working with the Miriwoong Language Nest team, as captured in an informal interview recorded in November this year.

*One of my elders first told me about the Miriwoong Language Nest, and told me that I would be good to work for it. She told me that I would be a good person to help our children learn Miriwoong. She really encouraged me. She'd seen me since I was small and as I was growing up. She was the one who was my teacher. She taught me Miriwoong, and I think that is why she wanted me to join the Miriwoong Language Nest team—because she knew that I would give all of myself to the Language Nest and to working with our little 'woothoo-woothoong' (children). The old people are so very happy about the work that we are doing, and were so happy when they heard that I joined the team. Sadly, the old woman that most encouraged me to join passed away before she could actually see me working with the Language Nest but I think that she is looking down on me now and she must be so happy that I took her word for it and joined in to teach our woothoo-woothoong the Miriwoong language.*

*I myself am very happy every day that I work with the Miriwoong Language Nest team. This is my first time working with language. After I left working with CDEP Job Pathways, I knew I wanted to join. I wanted to join in and take my language out to the community and make people understand that this country—Kununurra—is Miriwoong country.*

*The woothoo-woothoong are so happy when they are learning Miriwoong with us. They can now say words before we can say them to them! I am so glad that they have been learning my language. This year, I have learnt that I am really close to the children. I have never been so close to so many children in my life! This language brought me to them. They look up to me and I am so happy that they are learning Miriwoong. They already know a lot now. They talk in Miriwoong sometimes, even at home or when they see me at the shops. Even 'gardiya' (non-Indigenous) children recognise me on the streets and they call out "The language lady is there, Mum!" Their mums are so happy and they also tell me that they are happy that their children are learning Miriwoong language at school. They tell me that the children talk at home too, and sing our 'Woorlab Yarrenkoo Miriwoong!' ('Let's All Speak Miriwoong!') song to them. I think it is important to learn Miriwoong for gardiya kids too and even for gardiya teachers. If a little Miriwoong*



*kid in their class was upset and was talking in language, then they would be happy to know that their gardiya teacher would know what they want. Learning Miriwoong language helps the teachers to understand.*

*My favourite part of working as part of the Miriwoong Language Nest team is when I go out and teach the children. I am always so happy to see them, and they are happy to see us too. Sometimes we have visitors coming along to watch our sessions and see what we do and it makes me really proud. I am also proud of our old people—the ones who have taught me: my grandmother, my mum, and all of my other ‘ninggoowoong’ (family relations). I am so proud of them, and now I am passing on their good work. Now I want to keep going for as long as it takes!*

*In my life, when I was growing up during the station times, I used to talk Miriwoong. When I went away for school, I forgot about Miriwoong a little bit. But, when I went on work experience (which they used to have at the end of third year at school), I knew I wanted to work with children. That was my aim. In my heart, from that time onwards, I wanted to work with little kids. When I came back to Kununurra, I worked with little children at the ‘Green School’ as a teaching assistant. A few years later, I worked at ‘School of the Year,’ teaching little children yet again. That was when I was living out at my community. When I came back to town, I got bored. I wanted to work with children but there was no space for me yet. I had no choice and had to work with CDEP Job Pathways for a while. After that, though, word was coming out that they needed someone to work for Save the Children two days a week and I said “Yes! That’s me! That’s got to be me!” As long as it involved working with children, I was happy working with Save the Children for those two days a week until, one day, this Miriwoong Language Nest came up.*

*I didn’t think that I would be good enough to join the Miriwoong Language Nest team but, one day at a Mirima meeting, one of my elders told me “I think you’re suited to that new job there that has come up—that one with the Miriwoong Language Nest.” I looked at her and said “Alright then, I’ll think about it.” “Don’t think about it,” she told me. “You suit that job!” I joined the team and I had no idea that that old woman was soon going to leave us. It broke my heart when she did pass away, but I thought about what she told me and how she encouraged me. I was so happy, which is why I’d said “I’ll do it! I’ll join the team for our language and for our people.”*

*I am very happy where I am now. I am happy where we are now. The Language Centre feels like home to me. I am in the right place.*

*Everything has worked smoothly this year. No problems, no arguing or anything. I didn’t even find anything much too hard. I always get good advice from my old people, and I am happy working with ‘gagayi’ (granny) Steph—the Language Nest Facilitator. We are a good team.*

*I’ve got to just keep going. Even at times when I haven’t been myself,<sup>2</sup> I’ve always loved my job. I think of the woothoo-woothoong, and of myself, and I know that I am going to keep going with teaching my language.*

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<sup>2</sup> Rita Boombi tragically lost her long-term husband and one of her younger sisters in 2014.

*In the future, I would like for more young Miriwoong girls to join our team if a lot of funding comes up for us. It would be great for more Miriwoong girls to join in teaching what I am teaching now.*

*My experience with the Miriwoong Language Nest has been real good. In my life I wanted it to be this way—working with little ones. They are really taking in what we are teaching them. I see that a whole lot of children are interested in learning their language now, and their parents are interested too. I'm just so proud.*

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*Rita Boombi delivering a Miriwoong Language Nest session and applauding the children's language learning efforts and enthusiasm.*

## **Part 6: Key Achievements and Success Indicators**

Summarised in the list below are some of the Miriwoong Language Nest program's key achievements and success indicators:

- The Miriwoong Language team was selected as a finalist (top 4) in the prestigious WA Regional Achievement and Community Awards 'Community Group of the Year' prize category. The team also received a Certificate of Recognition from MP Melissa Price on behalf of the Parliament of Australia and residents of the Federal electorate of Durack for the work that they have carried out in the community.
- MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest project was externally evaluated by Jawun secondee Janaki Tampi and was selected as one of the Empowered Communities 'Best Practice' cultural-educational initiatives in the East Kimberley region.
- A recommendation of the Language Nest model and MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program was put forward in Wunan's draft Regional Children's Services Plan.
- As pointed out in previous sections of this evaluation, the Miriwoong Language Nest team has far exceeded expectations from current funding partners and staff at partnering organisations in terms of the quantity of sessions delivered, the number of child participants in the program, and the quality of language teaching carried out.
- As highlighted in previous sections of this evaluation, and as tracked through a huge amount of unmentioned anecdotal evidence, the Miriwoong Language Nest team has noticed a marked improvement in:
  - The ability of local children to understand Miriwoong;
  - The ability of local children to speak Miriwoong;
  - The level at which local children use Miriwoong, not only during individual Language Nest sessions but even outside of these sessions;
  - The level of enthusiasm shown by local children towards Miriwoong language learning and use.

- As captured in previous sections of this evaluation, and as tracked through a significant amount of unmentioned anecdotal evidence, the Miriwoong Language Nest team has noticed a meaningful increase in:
    - The number of Miriwoong parents and adult community members expressing an interest in learning or developing their native language;
    - The number of Miriwoong parents and adult community members expressing an interest in working for Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring or the Miriwoong Language Nest project specifically;
    - The number of non-Indigenous parents and community members expressing an interest in having their children (continue to) learn Miriwoong through the Miriwoong Language Nest program, and in learning the Miriwoong language themselves;
    - The demand for an increase in linguistic-cultural activities from local Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, organisations and institutions.
  - Beyond the linguistic, cultural, and socio-emotional benefits anticipated to be achieved through the Miriwoong Language Nest program, the Miriwoong Language Nest team is also thrilled to have seen some very positive indicators that the program is fostering a range of unexpected but important educational benefits such as improved school readiness, school transition, and school attendance among participating children.
  - As well as receiving their own training from internationally renowned organisations such as the Indigenous Languages Institute, the Miriwoong Language Nest team has also delivered some of its own very well-received workshops. For example, it delivered a workshop about *Language Nests and Immersion-based Native Language Learning/Teaching* at this year's WANALA conference to teach and inspire other Indigenous groups around Australia to initiate similarly successful language revitalisation projects.
-

# Part 7: Recommendations for the Future of the Miriwoong Language Nest Program

## Project Growth

The Miriwoong Language Nest program has grown incredibly throughout 2014 and, due to the valuable results that have come out of the program, the demand for early years linguistic-cultural education activities continues to rise. Where possible, actions should be taken to:

- Increase the number of Miriwoong Language Nest sessions delivered to current partnering groups per week.
- Increase the number of different partnering groups involved in the Miriwoong Language Nest program. For example, investigate avenues for delivering Miriwoong Language Nest sessions to children in the local Department of Child Protection Group Home, to those taking part in Wunan's PaCE program, and to those attending CSSU's Small Branches Playgroup. Preliminary discussions have already been held regarding some of these options.
- Increase the child age group within which sessions are currently being delivered. For example, expand school-based sessions beyond the Pre-primary year level and into Year 1 or higher grades. Not only would this allow for greater numbers of child participants in the program, it would also foster better *progressive* learning and development for those children who have already successfully made it through the 2014 Miriwoong Language Nest program.
- Involve greater numbers of parents in the Miriwoong Language Nest program so that parents can better foster their child's learning in the home and can themselves enjoy program benefits. The abovementioned recommendation to expand project partners could help to facilitate increased parent involvement, as could regular information sessions run for parents, the possible development of a parallel 'Miriwoong for Mums' program, and some of the training options mentioned below.

## Training

The Miriwoong Language Nest team has received valuable training in immersion-based early childhood native language teaching methodologies and planning processes from both nationally and internationally respected organisations such as the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity (RNLD) and the Indigenous Languages

Institute (ILI). Additionally, the team has itself delivered three very well-received workshops, including:

- *'The Language Nest Model and MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest Program: Key Principles and Plans,'* presented to staff from partnering organisations in November 2013.
- *'How Language Matters to Two-Way Learning, Working and Understanding in the Context of Aboriginal Child Health,'* presented at the WA Aboriginal Child Health Upskilling Course, February 2014.
- *'Language Nests and Immersion-based Native Language Learning & Teaching,'* presented at the WANALA Conference, August 2014.

Each of the Miriwoong Language Nest team members have also committed to their own ongoing Miriwoong language training and development through regularly participating in activities such as MDWg's [Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program \(MALLP\)](#). Even still, Miriwoong remains a critically endangered language, with less than a dozen fluent speakers still alive today. There is certainly scope to further develop current and prospective staff both linguistically and professionally. Some initiatives towards doing so might include:

- Having MDWg run a 26-week Miriwoong language and language teaching training course for interested community members, financially supported by East Kimberley Job Pathways' [RJCP](#) Group Activity scheme. Preliminary discussions are already underway regarding this initiative.
- Engaging committed Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers in the Department of Education's [Aboriginal Languages Teacher Training](#) program of study, or enrolling them in a Certificate III in Children's Services course. Preliminary discussions are also already underway in terms of incorporating a Miriwoong language component in the Certificate III in Children's Services course delivered by Kununurra's local Kimberley Training Institute (KTI).
- Continue to have the Miriwoong Language Nest team deliver workshops about early childhood immersion-based native language learning/teaching at relevant local, national or international conferences.

## Staffing

Given the complex physical, historical, political and socio-economic challenges of the local context, MDWg has experienced relatively low staff turnover within the Miriwoong Language Nest team. The strategy of employing a *pool* of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers has been a successful way of ensuring the continuity and stability of Miriwoong Language Nest activities. Nevertheless, the critically endangered status of the Miriwoong language means that it is a significant opportunity cost to employ a Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer, invest in their personal Miriwoong language development, and then lose that

member of the Miriwoong Language Nest team. For this reason, an even bigger pool of suitably skilled *prospective* (even if not simultaneously employed) Language Engagement Officers would be recommended. Some of the suggested training initiatives mentioned above—particularly the proposed externally funded RJCP Group Activity training—could positively help to support effective and efficient recruitment of additional Miriwoong Language Nest staff in the future. A formal diversification of the roles of MDWg's (currently separate) Language Worker<sup>3</sup> team to include involvement in Language Nest activities could also act as an important buffer during unforeseen periods of Language Engagement Officer absences or shortages. Some of MDWg's current Language Workers have, on occasion, already informally volunteered to carry out Language Engagement Officer roles due to their genuine interest and enjoyment in the work of the Miriwoong Language Nest team.

The Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers have made great progress when it comes to having built their confidence and competence in carrying out Miriwoong Language Nest activities. While MDWg's original plan aimed at further empowering the Language Engagement Officers by phasing out the Language Nest Facilitator role, the experience of running the 2014 Miriwoong Language Nest program proved that there is actually a significant amount of practical and symbolic value to maintaining the Language Nest Facilitator position. Namely, there are presently a number of small practical or logistical complexities which add together to make it difficult for the Language Engagement Officer team to independently operate the Miriwoong Language Nest program without the support of a suitable Language Nest Facilitator. For example, none of the Language Engagement Officers hold a valid Driver's Licence<sup>4</sup> (nor would they easily or efficiently be able to obtain one), which is just one factor which would immediately impact on their ability to independently deliver Miriwoong Language Nest sessions. Moreover, however, the image and act of having a (non-Indigenous) Language Nest Facilitator meaningfully working together with a team of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers holds a great deal of *symbolic* efficacy—it represents all of the important ideas of inter-cultural respect and harmony promoted by the Miriwoong Language Nest program, and is positively read by the Language Engagement Officers, participating children, and members of the broader community. The 'Financial Sustainability' section of Part 7 will explore some options for monetarily maintaining the Language Nest Facilitator position.

### Resource/Curriculum Development

The Miriwoong Language Nest team has successfully developed a range of new, Miriwoong-specific learning/teaching resources and curricula. As highlighted in Part 4, 100% of staff at partnering organisations agreed that the resources developed by MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest team were effective and that so too were the team's teaching methodologies and the program's thematic content.

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<sup>3</sup> MDWg's Miriwoong Language Workers (as opposed to Language Engagement Officers) are mainly involved in language documentation activities, resource development, and the production of Miriwoong radio segments.

<sup>4</sup> This is a common issue among Kununurra's Miriwoong and broader Indigenous community.

Recommendations for the future of resource and curricula development include:

- Continuing to create a range of first-hand, Miriwoong-specific resources to ensure the most culturally responsive and effective teaching materials;
- Where possible, continuing to involve participating children in the resource development process (e.g. incorporate their photos, artwork or ideas into the production of learning/teaching materials) so as to foster an important sense of relevance, ownership and empowerment for these children;
- Where possible, subsidising the purchase of Miriwoong-specific resources to Miriwoong community members and parents of children participating in the Miriwoong Language Nest program so that language learning can continue in the home;
- Working on the development of an even more formal and comprehensive Miriwoong language learning curriculum that would be appropriate in the event of Miriwoong becoming a formally accredited LOTE subject in schools or unit/program of study in University/VET institutions.

### Financial Sustainability

MDWg is grateful for the start-up funding allocated towards the Miriwoong Language Nest program by the ILS and Lotterywest. Miriwoong Language Nest expenditure has been very well 'on budget,' and current funds will sustain the program until April 2015. Overall project costs will have reduced by that stage, given that staff are already well trained and experienced in delivering Language Nest activities, and have already produced a range of relevant language learning/teaching materials and curricula. Nevertheless, action needs to be taken in order to fully support the operation of the Miriwoong Language Nest program beyond April next year. MDWg has already applied for future program funding through alternative sources such as the Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) and is currently waiting for the result of these applications. Indigenous organisations such as [Wyemando](#) have also expressed a solid interest in providing smaller grants towards the Miriwoong Language Nest initiative. Furthermore, MDWg has a range of other strategic plans and actions in place to bolster the Language Nest's financial sustainability. For example:

- MDWg's own revenue raising activities such as the hire of its Conference Room, the sale of Miriwoong books/resources, and its Sponsorship Program help to give financial buoyancy to the Miriwoong Language Nest program;
- There is potential to deliver the program for a nominal fee-for-service amount, which would foster stronger financial sustainability into the future. St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School has already offered donations to highlight the value of program delivery;



- MDWg is able to provide in-kind support for the program through regularly hosted volunteers, interns and secondees;
- A commitment to further training will help to maintain and improve the quality of program delivery. In the longer-term, advanced training opportunities such as the Aboriginal Languages Teacher Training program may also make it feasible for the Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer's wages to be steadily funded through the Department of Education rather than placing a continued financial demand on MDWg and its current funding bodies. Additionally, completing a Certificate III in Children's Services, graduating with a Diploma of Education, or applying for [Limited Teacher Registration](#)<sup>5</sup> would again allow either the Language Nest Facilitator and/or one or more of the Miriwoong Language Engagement Officer's wages to be funded not through MDWg but through the Department of Education—at least for the school-based reach of the program.

### Evaluative Measures to Track

As mentioned in Part 6, the Miriwoong Language Nest team has seen some very positive indicators that their Language Nest program is fostering a range of unanticipated but important educational benefits outside of the expected linguistic, cultural and socio-emotional project outcomes. Therefore, alongside continuing to analyse the kinds of evaluative measures detailed in this 2014 Project Evaluation, it may be both useful and telling to track the following kinds of evaluative measures in the future:

- Where possible, it would be meaningful to note any increases in the percentage of (Indigenous) children attending school, preschool and broader educational programs since their engagement with the Miriwoong Language Nest program. If suitable, MDWg will compare general (pre)school attendance statistics to the specific Miriwoong Language Nest program attendance statistics and would hope to detail any gradual decreases in any previous levels of disparity between the two.
- If there is potential to compare patterns of school *transition* between children who have and haven't participated in the Miriwoong Language Nest program in their preschool years, this would make for another significant area of analysis.
- While *formal* language skill assessment will continue to be avoided in order to maintain encouraging learning environments for participating children, using fun and friendly activities to track the extent to which *individual* child participants (rather than the overall participatory group) are able to comprehend or reproduce relevant Miriwoong language elements according to expected curriculum outcomes would be worthwhile. Measured

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<sup>5</sup> Preliminary discussions about the potential to progress with this option have already been held with the Principal and Deputy Principal of KDHS. Both believe in the potential feasibility of this option, and have expressed in principle support for it.

improvements in the percentage of children meeting the learning outcomes of the Miriwoong Language Nest curriculum would be indicative of their capacity to reach improved achievement levels in all areas of learning. If feasible, the Miriwoong Language Nest team may be able to compare children's performance in the Miriwoong Language Nest program to their performance in other (pre)school subject areas.

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# Appendix A: Relevant Media

24 October, 2013 2:02PM AWST

## A nest to nurture language

By [Vanessa Mills](#)

Miriwoong children in the east Kimberley will soon be immersed in games, songs, books and activities designed to create fluency in the endangered language



[Download this mp3 file](#)

A nest is a place where little chicks are nurtured until they can fly. It's an apt image for a new nest being built in Kununurra, which will help children learn Miriwoong language.

The *Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre* has started the Language Nest, which will fully immerse children in Miriwoong. The Aboriginal language of the traditional owners of the Kununurra region is listed as critically endangered, because there are so few fluent speakers.

Nest Language Officer Santar Ward says her grandfather was a Miriwoong speaker, but he died when she was a toddler and she never had the chance to learn until she was an adult. Her skills have improved as a speaker through her own work to develop the resources for children.

The team has produced books, songs and activities for local children to use when they're in the Nest, and no English will be spoken.

Nest Facilitator Stephanie Woerde says the model has been successfully used in New Zealand for many years for children to learn Maori.

She says the Nest's pilot program has had results already, and it will be officially launched early next year.

The Language and Culture Centre is also well known in Kununurra for its cultural teaching, books, excursions and Joonba gatherings.

### Related Photos



Some of the Nest team Santar Ward, Alethea Ahwon, Kristara Carlton, Stephanie Woerde. The group is getting ready to carry out a special Language Nest session with children to celebrate National Indigenous Literacy Day (Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre)

### Related stories



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### Map Kununurra 6743



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The Nest is a language program teaching children the traditional language of Kununurra. Stephanie Woerde tells Vanessa Mills on ABC Kimberley how successful the first few months have been

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## **TESTIMONIALS FROM SOME OF OUR PROJECT PARTNERS**

- “What you are doing is invaluable for these children, to teach them Language is to connect them to Country, Spirit and Themselves. I believe this is the way to healing for these little ones and it brings such pride and strength to the families.”

-Kathy Hoff (Team Leader, Save the Children Australia East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme)

Contact: [kathy.hoff@savethechildren.org.au](mailto:kathy.hoff@savethechildren.org.au)

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- “This program has been a huge success for our children, it's been fantastic to see our local indigenous and non-indigenous children learn the local language. Without this program for the children the local language would most definitely be lost. This program is delivered to the centre 4 mornings a week, the local women and Stephanie are doing an amazing job transferring their knowledge through to the children and educators. The mix of songs, games, books and colouring activities really keep the children engaged in the session. Without the local women delivering this program the language would be lost in Kununurra. I thank you ladies for teaching our children, the rooms are buzzing with excitement when the children see you arrive and I thank you for tailoring the program to 2 to 5 years old children as this is the best age to learn language as they absorb everything you teach them.”

-Karen Curtis (Manager, CSSU Early Learning Centre)

Contact: [kununurraelc@cssu.org.au](mailto:kununurraelc@cssu.org.au)

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- “In 2013 I contacted the Mirima Dawang Woortlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre to discuss visiting the Centre. In November 2013, 45 Pre-primary children visited the centre and participated in the Language Nest Activities with Miriwoong Language Workers. Following this the Language Workers visited the school once a week for 4 weeks to teach the children some language and a song. In 2014 this program has expanded to a Miriwoong lesson for each of the 4 Pre-primary classes each week. This program engages over 80 children every week at Kununurra District High School. The children in my class are really enthusiastic about Miriwoong language and look forward to their language lesson every week. This program is building cultural understanding and respect for Miriwoong people and language amongst all students. I believe that over time this program will build confidence and self-respect for Indigenous children involved. The Language Workers are fantastic and they bring high quality resources and games to play with the children. I can't commend them enough for the amazing work they are doing to teach children Miriwoong.”

- Nardia Rapanaro (Pre-primary Teacher, Kununurra District High School)

Contact: [nardia.rapanaro@education.wa.edu.au](mailto:nardia.rapanaro@education.wa.edu.au)





Initiative Name	Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre Miriwoong Language Nest
Topics	Education
Additional Topic	Culture
Additional Topic	Indigenous Authority
Region	East Kimberley
Synopsis	<p>The Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring (MDWg) Language and Culture Centre's Language Nest project aims to teach the local Miriwoong language to young children. The project is an immersion-based approach to early childhood Indigenous language education whereby, during a Language Nest session, children are completely surrounded by the Miriwoong language with no English being spoken. Children learn to use Miriwoong through fun and friendly activities such as simple talk, storytelling, songs, games, arts and crafts.</p> <p>The Miriwoong language is that of the traditional owners of Miriwoong country, which comprises a large tract of land in and around Kununurra.</p> <p>Miriwoong is listed as a critically endangered language, largely because there are currently so few fluent Miriwoong speakers.</p> <p>MDWg's Language Nest team began formally conducting regular Language Nest sessions on 5 March 2014. They currently deliver these sessions to four different partnering playgroup, childcare or educational groups: Children's Services Support Unit Early Learning Centre, Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme, Gawooleng Yawoodeng Pindan Centre and Kununurra District High School's pre-primary classes. Depending on the group, the Language Nest team runs sessions on anywhere between a daily or weekly basis. Weekly Nest sessions for Miriwoong children in foster care will commence on 17 May 2014.</p>
Objective	<p>The Language Nest model for early childhood native language education originated in New Zealand in the early 1980s, and has continued to be successfully used to teach children Maori. The Language Nest approach has also been effectively adopted in other parts of the world such as Hawai'i and British Columbia. The team at MDWg believe that adapting the Language Nest model to suit the Aboriginal Australian context will contribute greatly to the revitalisation of the Miriwoong language.</p> <p>The Language Nest program is just one of the initiatives that is run by MDWg Language and Culture Centre. The Centre was established in 1991 with the aim of documenting and revitalising the Miriwoong language and culture.</p>



The Language Nest also contributes to the stabilisation of the Miriwoong Language by employing staff as Language Engagement Officers, who themselves engage in continuous Miriwoong language training in order to become effective teachers, create resources for the Language Nest and ultimately deliver the Language Nest sessions to local children. This component of the Language Nest directly increases the number of Miriwoong speakers in the community. The Language Nest aims to increase the community's knowledge and use of the Miriwoong language and works toward ensuring that the language will be part of community life for generations to come. It aims to create a connection between the community to the Miriwoong culture more generally, and to sustain a strong sense of pride in that culture.

The Language Nest also strives to stimulate an awareness and appreciation of the value of bilingual and native language education, and to foster children's literacy and broader learning skills.

Importantly, a key objective of the Language Nest is to empower and increase the self-esteem of the Language Nest Language Engagement Officers and the children, as they participate in a new initiative which values the importance of Miriwoong language and culture. In particular the self esteem of the Language Engagement Officers has and will continue to grow as they begin to lead and take ownership of the Language Nest initiative.

The Language Nest furthers MDWg's broader objectives by contributing to the revitalisation of the Miriwoong language. That is, through immersing young children in the language through natural and enjoyable activities, the Language Nest program helps to ensure that there will be future generations of Miriwoong speakers, while simultaneously fostering an interest in, and appreciation of, the importance of bilingual/native language education.

**Case study in  
more detail**

The Language Nest is in its early stages of operation, with its first formal sessions having been launched on 5 March 2014.

Language Nest sessions are currently delivered to four different play, childcare or educational groups in and around Kununurra: Save the Children Australia's East Kimberley Mobile Playscheme, Kununurra Children's Services Support Unit Early Learning Centre, Gawooleng Yawoodeng Pindan Centre, and Kununurra District High School's pre-primary classes. The Language Nest team will also be delivering sessions to Miriwoong children in foster care as of 17 May 2014.

Children engaging in a Language Nest session are generally aged between 0 and 5 years. Sessions currently run for about 20-30minutes, each on anywhere between a daily and a weekly basis with each group. Running multiple sessions per week helps to ensure as much exposure to the Miriwoong language as possible, and the aim is to gradually increase the duration of each session.

Language Nest sessions operate in Miriwoong language only, so no English is spoken during the Nest times. Elders have given permission for non-Indigenous staff at partnering playgroup/childcare organisations to be given some basic Miriwoong language training in order to assist MDWg's staff with better facilitating a total immersion environment.

Stephanie Woerde is the Facilitator of the Language Nest project and, initially, she worked with the support of elders and more senior Miriwoong speakers to supervise the teaching and development of several Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers. These Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers spent a number of months developing their own Miriwoong language skills and commenced delivering the Language Nest immersion program to children on 5 March 2014. Eventually, Stephanie aims to do herself out of a job, so that the Language Nest is run and maintained by local staff in an empowering and sustainable way.



Getting the Language Nest project to where it is today has involved a number of important steps prior to Nest sessions being rolled out, including:

- intensive Miriwoong language training for Language Nest staff, under the linguistic guidance of elders and more senior Miriwoong speakers;
- training for Language Nest and partnering staff in immersion-based early childhood language education planning and methodologies;
- the development of Miriwoong-specific early childhood language learning/teaching resources; and
- the running of several 'pilot' or 'experimental' Language Nest sessions throughout the latter half of 2013 to evaluate how best to structure and deliver the more formal 2014 Language Nest program.

The Language Nest operates along the following four key principles:

**(I) Immersion:** The Language Nest is an immersion-based language learning environment, which completely surrounds the students in the language, and that language only. Facilitators communicate only in Miriwoong, and are to encourage the children to do the same. Immersing children in the Miriwoong language also means that Language Nest sessions are designed to be carried out as often as possible, and for as great a length of time as possible. A number of different delivery methods should be used so that the learning is always interactive and engaging. The aim is to create an intense but natural, positive atmosphere of language and learning for the children.

**(II) Community:** building a good Language Nest requires the strong support and involvement of community. A commitment is required from the student's family and friends, their playgroup carers, and the wider Kununurra township in order for the Language Nest to succeed. Fostering a whole of community enthusiastic attitude towards native language education will encourage more people to actively engage in learning and teaching the Miriwoong language and this will increase the student's passion for and proficiency in communicating in Miriwoong.

**(III) Intergenerational dynamics:** although children are the targets of Language Nests, the cooperation of older generations is essential. Generally, it is elders who have the most authority and ability to teach a native language. Also, it is because of the way in which children respect or look up to their elders that elders are reciprocally able to pass language knowledge down to children with relative ease and efficacy.

**(IV) The '3 Cs cycle:** the Language Nest aims to foster the '3 Cs Cycle,' with the three Cs being Comfort, Confidence and Competency. If children feel comfortable in their language-learning environment, then they are more likely to gain confidence in using the language that they are learning. Similarly, if children feel confident, then they are more likely to practice the language and are thus more likely to gain competency in communicating through that language. Comfort generates confidence, which generates competency, and so on.



## Governance

The Language Nest is one of several operations of the MDWg Language and Culture Centre which was established, and is governed by, Mirima Council Aboriginal Corporation. Mirima Council constitutes a Board of Directors composed of local Aboriginal people.

Stephanie Woerde is the Facilitator of the Language Nest project. She supervises and supports the work of several Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers who have been employed on a part-time basis to develop and deliver the Miriwoong Language Nest program.

The Language Nest is currently funded through a combination of two grants: one from the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Languages Support program, and one from Lotterywest. Current funding is anticipated to sustain the Language Nest program until April 2015. In order to operate after April 2015, the Language Nest program will need to seek additional funding.

## Outcomes

Since the beginning of the Language Nest project, MDWg has seen:

- A number of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers successfully take part in intensive Miriwoong language training to improve their own Miriwoong communication skills.
- A number of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers successfully take part in workshop training about immersion-based early childhood language education planning and methodologies.
- A number of Miriwoong Language Engagement Officers contribute to the development of new early childhood Miriwoong language learning/teaching resources.
- Regular Miriwoong Language Nest sessions being carried out since 5th March 2014, and a significant increase in the number of sessions being carried out per week over time.
- A broader community interest in Miriwoong language learning, including an increase in the number of project partners interested in having the children in their care learn Miriwoong.
- Gradual yet important indicators of the fact that children involved in the Language Nest project are developing an improved comprehension, or reproduction, of the Miriwoong language.

The Language Nest team set out to achieve the delivery of at least 130 Language Nest sessions, with at least 1000 child attendances, by December 2014. Based on the way in which the Language Nest project has progressed to date, the team is confident that it can achieve these goals by the end of 2014.

Team members look forward to continuing to enhance their own Miriwoong language skills, continuing to build new Miriwoong-specific resources, continuing to see improvements in the children's Miriwoong language development, and continuing to maintain and expand the Language Nest program throughout 2014 and beyond.



Key Learnings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fundamental to the Language Nest's success has been employing staff who did not necessarily speak fluent Miriwoong, but were eager to learn and to the teach their native language, arose because of the fact that the few fluent speakers of Miriwoong in the community are mostly elderly people who do not always have the energy and ability to commit to the rigorous planning and teaching required to establish and run the Miriwoong Language Nest program. Initially intensive, and thereafter continued, language training for staff has thereby been an integral part of setting up and sustaining the Miriwoong Language Nest project.</li> <li>• Particularly given the investment in language training for staff, a strong and long-term commitment is required from staff in order to most successfully sustain the Miriwoong Language Nest project. The strategy of employing a large enough pool of staff members also helps to mitigate any issues surrounding commitment.</li> <li>• The greater the frequency of Miriwoong Language Nest sessions, and the greater the duration of each session, the greater the ability for the children taking part in those sessions to learn Miriwoong. Repetition is the key!</li> <li>• Thinking about the most culturally-appropriate learning/teaching content, and some of the more culturally-appropriate ways of delivering that content, also adds to the relevance and overall success of a Language Nest session.</li> </ul>
Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to increase the number and duration of Miriwoong Language Nest sessions.</li> <li>• Continue to build the number of Miriwoong-specific early childhood language-learning resources.</li> <li>• Where possible, to encourage more Miriwoong parents to come along to the Miriwoong Language Nest sessions so that they may be better able to learn how to effectively use Miriwoong with their children in the home.</li> <li>• Seek additional project funding so that the Language Nest program will be able to continue after April 2015 and beyond.</li> </ul>
More information	<p>MDWg Language Nest website &lt;<a href="http://www.mirima.org.au/language-nest.html">http://www.mirima.org.au/language-nest.html</a>&gt;</p> <p>"A Nest to Nurture Language" (ABC Kimberley 24 October 2013) &lt;<a href="http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/10/24/3876372.htm">http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/10/24/3876372.htm</a>&gt;</p>
Partner organisations	<p>Commonwealth Government Ministry for the Arts Indigenous Languages Support LotteryWest Save the Children Australia Children's Services Support Unit, Kununurra Children &amp; Family Centre Gawooleng Yawoodeng Pindan Centre Kununurra District High School Department for Child Protection &amp; Family Support Services</p>
To learn more, you can yarn with:	<p>Stephanie Woerde Language Nest Facilitator Mirima Dawang Woerlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre Kununurra, WA 6743 Ph: (08) 9169 1029 E: <a href="mailto:nest@mirima.org.au">nest@mirima.org.au</a></p>

## **Summary of Miriwoong Language Nest Program Feedback from Partner Organisations, Term 3 2015**

Summarised below is the feedback retrieved from education/care staff at organisations participating in the Miriwoong Language Nest program throughout Term 3, 2015. Feedback was obtained in survey form, involving opportunities for partners to respond to specific 'Yes'/'No' survey questions but also to provide further comments, constructive criticism, or suggestions for the future wherever interested. Due to confidentiality considerations, the names of those behind the comments or suggestions have been kept anonymous in the context of this summary.

<b>Question Asked</b>	<b>Percentage of Surveyed Staff from Partner Organisations Responding with a 'Yes'</b>	<b>Percentage of Surveyed Staff from Partner Organisations Responding with a 'No'</b>	<b>Additional Comments Given by Surveyed Staff from Partner Organisations</b>
<b>Outside of the Miriwoong Language Nest Program, are the children at your playgroup/childcare centre/school receiving any other Miriwoong language education during the hours spent in your care?</b>	0	100	—
<b>Do you think that MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest sessions have increased the knowledge/use of the Miriwoong language among the children in your care?</b>	100	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Most definitely! Many of the children love the fact that they can speak another language and know that it is the language of people in their area. Many of the Aboriginal children, even if they don't know the words in Miriwoong, like seeing animals and foods etc. that we do not normally see in the shops, but they may see out of school, and learning more about them. Some of the kids in my class are really starting to pick up on it!"</li> <li>• "They are enjoying hearing the ladies and are using the words, especially body parts and family members."</li> </ul>
<b>Do you think that it is important for the children in your care to be learning</b>	100	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The kids feel so clever and good about themselves. I believe it helps their English and ability to learn in other areas too. I am</li> </ul>

<p><b>Miriwoong?</b></p>			<p>amazed at how quickly they learn and retain the Miriwoong language. It is especially lovely to have local Miriwoong Elders in our classrooms and school. The kids' eyes light up when they recognise their relatives."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Absolutely. It provides the children with the skills needed to appreciate Aboriginal culture and peoples in the town they live in. It provides the children with positive experiences in communicating with Indigenous people and hopefully encourages the children to be positive towards people of different cultures."</li> <li>• "Yes, this is their language and it gives them pride in their culture to be learning it. Also, for the non-Indigenous students in my room, it gives them an understanding of the Indigenous culture and language."</li> <li>• "Yes, especially as some of the children are exposed to Miriwoong language at home. It is also beneficial for the other children to have the understanding that languages other than Standard Australian English are spoken by other people."</li> <li>• "I think that even if the kids in my class don't actually ever use the Miriwoong language in their lives, it's a really good way for them to be exposed to other cultures and to be aware of the similarities and differences, which they're getting by learning Miriwoong."</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you believe that the children in your care have enjoyed learning Miriwoong through MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest program?</b></p>	<p>100</p>	<p>0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Yes, as they have extremely positive comments and always look forward to the ladies coming in."</li> <li>• "They enjoy the way the lessons are run and seeing the ladies every week."</li> <li>• "Absolutely!"</li> <li>• "They enjoy anything that involves singing or games and the Language Nest program incorporates these really well!"</li> </ul>

<p><b>Do you believe that the thematic content of MDWg's Miriwoong Language Nest sessions has been relevant and meaningful for the children in your care?</b></p>	<p>100</p>	<p>0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Definitely—especially for the children to learn about the plants and animals which are relative to their everyday lives—they really enjoyed this theme.”</li> <li>• “Definitely. They really enjoyed learning body parts and the weather.”</li> <li>• “They really loved talking about food this term as it was very relevant and straight forward. Animals in first term is a great introduction. I think some of them would like to learn a few more phrases to pretend they’re having a conversation.”</li> <li>• “The topics tie in with the topics of this age group. Next year I’d like to remind myself with an overall yearly plan of the topics so that I can weave the language more into our thematic [school] topics each term.”</li> <li>• “Working on the same themes as our program has been great.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you believe that the MDWg Miriwoong Language Nest team have used effective language teaching methodologies?</b></p>	<p>100</p>	<p>0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The team has been so effective and have a natural ability to teach children and present content in a fun and dynamic way.”</li> <li>• “You’re amazing—keep up the great work!!!”</li> <li>• “The games, songs and picture cards really help the children and the repetitive lessons help them know what is coming. They really enjoy the relaxed nature of the lessons and it helps them focus on what the ladies are teaching them.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you believe that the MDWg Miriwoong Language Nest team have used effective language teaching resources?</b></p>	<p>100</p>	<p>0</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Great pictures that are clear, simple and easy to use. Toys in first term were also great.”</li> <li>• “Use of a variety of resources has been really good.”</li> <li>• “Yes. The pictures they use are clear and large so the children can easily see what they depict. The games they play are fun and</li> </ul>

			engaging.”
<b>Do you feel that the Miriwoong Language Nest sessions are appropriately, sensitively and successfully tailored to vulnerable or ‘at risk’ students?</b>	100	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There is such strong positivity when the ladies come in and all children are actively encouraged to participate but without pressure or stress. There is the opportunity for children to be prompted if they need help and they all receive praise for their efforts.”</li> <li>• “The ladies are very aware of the family and community connections of the children in my class and, as such, they tailor their lessons as such.”</li> <li>• “I think it caters for everyone!”</li> </ul>
<b>Do you feel that the Miriwoong Language Nest Program supports your organisation in understanding and building some of the relevant knowledge, skills, activities and networks to respond to the needs of the children in your care (and, where relevant, their wider families and community)?</b>	100	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I feel this [weekly] language session helps us to build relationships with the Indigenous community. It is a start that we at the school can build on. It gives us reason and an avenue to include more culture and language in everyday school life. I think the school needs more of this.”</li> <li>• “I think there is a subtle level of support as teaching and non-teaching staff develop an awareness and appreciation of the culture and language. This provides staff with a new level of understanding of the contexts some of their students come from and, I think, a greater understanding of how to communicate effectively with other members of the community.”</li> <li>• “Yes, and would there be an opportunity, or do you think it would be appropriate, to involve the local families in some of our sessions so they may develop an understanding of the language, and be aware of how you are working with the children to develop their sense of identity and cultural awareness?”</li> </ul>
<b>Which of the following Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes do you believe the Miriwoong Language Nest</b>			—

<p><b>Program helps to support?:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children have a strong sense of identity</li> <li>• Children are connected with and contribute to their world</li> <li>• Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</li> <li>• Children are confident and involved learners</li> <li>• Children are effective communicators</li> </ul>	<p>100</p> <p>100</p> <p>71 (rounded)</p> <p>86 (rounded)</p> <p>100</p>	<p>n/a</p>	
	<p>n/a</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “All I wish to say is many thanks for providing the Language Nest to all students in the Early Years area of the school. It has been wonderful to see the interaction between the Language Nest ladies and the children. You have been so positive, friendly and approachable. The children have truly benefitted from this program and it has opened the children’s minds to the language and culture of this area. It has also been a source of pride for the Indigenous children in the class as they are able to participate in and share their own knowledge, language and culture with their peers. So, once again, thank you.”</li> <li>• “The children always look forward to and enjoy their Language Nest lessons. The Language Nest team are always very positive and encouraging of our students. The students love learning Miriwoong through songs and games and the use of pictures is also great, as this targets many different learning styles. Thank you for all of the hard work that you have put into preparing the lessons for our students. It would be great to see the lessons continue in future years.”</li> </ul>



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “The children really love the sessions- thank you. They are fast-paced (which young children need), active and involved. As we have briefly discussed in the past- it would be great to represent the Miriwoong Language Nest sessions in the children’s portfolios—just through some simple vocab or picture worksheets. For example, when we were learning about feelings, as per your suggestion, the children drew an emotion on the blank face, then we labelled with the Miriwoong and English words. This was then placed into the children’s portfolios for their families to see. As our sessions are short, I would be happy to facilitate the children completing the worksheets—or instead of doing weekly short sessions, we could do fortnightly longer sessions to allow time for the children to reflect on their learning through a written/pictorial activity? I am flexible and open to suggestions to what you think will work best.”</li><li>• “Just a suggestion—would it be possible to have our own ‘Goodbye Song’ translated into Miriwoong?”</li><li>• “Thanks Rita, Rose, Rozanne and Steph for coming in each week! The kids are really enjoying their Tuesday mornings! [Even] many of the non-Indigenous kids are really starting to pick the language up after never having any previous exposure and understand what different cultures in their area involve and are about.”</li><li>• “We love it and please keep going.”</li></ul>
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