



Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.**

Dear Dr Dacre,

On behalf of the Northern Territory Catholic Education Office, I tender for your consideration the following reflections in response to the some of the terms of reference for the abovementioned enquiry.

**The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.**

Achieving proficiency in Standard Australian English (learned as an additional language by students in our Indigenous Catholic Community schools) is a necessary and socioculturally appropriate outcome of schooling in Australia. A limited command of Standard Australian English will restrict those students' education and employment prospects. The ability to function effectively in Standard Australian English is of critical importance if young people are to successfully complete their schooling, exercise choice about what they do in life beyond school, participate fully in the economic and social development of their communities and become global citizens. All educational jurisdictions must be committed to providing quality language education for students in Indigenous communities. Learning language well results in important benefits, not only for the students but for the wider Australian community as well.



These benefits include

- cultural and educational enrichment;
- enhanced employment and career prospects;
- better social cohesion and communication across cultures; and
- strengthened linguistic and cultural resources in the community.

Competency in all modes of standard Australian English language is pivotal to successful participation in contemporary Australian society. In the MCEETYA document, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (2006)* the point is strongly made that ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve age and peer-appropriate levels of English language competency is one of the most important and effective ways of assisting them to broaden their life choices and options.

### **Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second or additional language**

The work of preeminent academics in the field of bilingual education such as Cummins (2001), as well as the findings of numerous reports such as the UNESCO(2010) *Education for All* report, attest to the fact that acknowledging and supporting the development of students' first languages leads to improved educational outcomes for Indigenous children. Speakers of Indigenous languages need explicit, ESL-informed pedagogies to ensure that they acquire full proficiency in Standard Australian English.

It is a fundamental right of *all* students to be taught how to communicate effectively in Standard Australian English, to understand how the English language works and to be given access to the cultural understandings it carries. However, students in Indigenous communities can and should be taught English at the same time as being supported in the development of their understanding of and competence in their local culture and language.

## **The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous Languages.**

In the case of students for whom English is an additional language, retaining and developing their competency as users of their first language or languages ensures that they can operate confidently and with a grounded sense of identity, in both of the language worlds of which they are part. The use of students' first language in well-organised Indigenous language and culture programs yields psychological, cultural, social and educational benefits. Well implemented Indigenous language and culture programs that aim to improve student learning outcomes in both languages promote a strong sense of identity and increase the level of Indigenous community engagement in schools. Our aim must be to enable students in Indigenous communities to achieve proficiency in Standard Australian English, while acknowledging and supporting academic development in and through students' vernacular languages, where appropriate.

The implications for students' self esteem when their home languages are not acknowledged or valued in the classroom is identified by Dodson (2010) when he asserts that, "...the use of a particular language as the language of instruction in a classroom conveys to the learner both a practical and symbolic sense of supremacy. It suggests that the language of instruction is the language of status and the vernacular ..... is inferior." (p. 2)

Using meta-analysis to analyse the results of 17 studies published in 1985 or later, Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass (2005) conclude that bilingual education programs are effective in promoting academic achievement, and that sound educational policy should permit and even encourage the development and implementation of bilingual education programs.

## **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages.**

### **The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.**

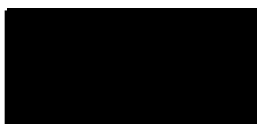
The use of both Indigenous languages and Standard Australian English in the curriculum of Indigenous community schools enables our students to strengthen their heritage language and their unique identity as Indigenous Australians, and to learn English in order to move easily between traditional, contemporary and mainstream Australian cultures. However, a major issue around the issue of Indigenous languages is the loose and imprecise use of the term 'bilingual education'.

There continues to be a high level of polarised debate about bilingual education, in the absence of a collective and agreed understanding about what roles we are expecting particular Indigenous languages to play in bilingual schools. There needs to be a wider conversation around the multi modal potential of Indigenous languages, rather than focusing primarily on the academically - driven debate about the merits and benefits of using Indigenous languages as the initial vehicles for teaching literacy skills. For every bit of evidence posited in favour of particular bilingual literacy models, an equally cogent counter argument can be found. A strong case can also be mounted for the efficacy of using Indigenous languages as naturalistic oral mediums of instruction for teaching Indigenous language and culture and for embedding cognitive and conceptual understandings about them. Of greatest concern is the fact that it is largely non-Indigenous academics who dominate the landscape around theorising on the area of Bilingual literacy. Their viewpoints are, "...couched in terms imposed by a Western discourse about non-Western cultures. Europeans in education continually 'read back' versions of white discourse about Aborigines to Aboriginal people themselves." (McConvell 1991, p.21). Until and unless we find a way to get an unfiltered and unmediated viewpoint from the Indigenous communities themselves about what *they* mean by language and culture in their schools, we are on dangerous ground.

If there is a clear and unambiguous message from Indigenous communities that they want their local language and culture to have an active role in the life of the school, we have a duty to support them. From a social justice perspective, every language has an inherent cultural value. In the case of Indigenous languages, they enable the users of those languages to put Eurocentric world views into some kind of personal perspective. It is therefore essential to maintain them and to recognise their peace-inducing, prejudice-reducing potential. Acquiring English must not lead to a loss of the mother tongue. The connection between language and cultural identity is critical. Loss of language and loss of cultural identity are intertwined

In deciding on the role that a particular Indigenous language should play in the school it is imperative that there is comprehensive and careful negotiation with the Indigenous community which the school serves. It also requires an understanding of language use in the community as well as protocols related to ownership of the language. The Indigenous Languages and Culture (ILC) component of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) specifically addresses language maintenance and language revitalisation situations. Not all of the NTCF outcomes are relevant for all schools and they will not be attained by all children of the same age. The school and the community need to collaboratively choose the outcomes that are relevant for their school, to develop a school-based curriculum. The Bilingual model adopted by any given school should, therefore, demonstrate a commitment to programs and learning activities which reflect the espoused views of the community.

Yours Sincerely



**Mark Lucas**

EDUCATION OFFICER - CURRICULUM  
Catholic Education Diocese of Darwin  
PO Box 219 Berrimah NT 0828



Authorised by Mr Michael Avery.  
Director of Catholic Education  
Diocese of Darwin

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[www.ceont.catholic.edu.au](http://www.ceont.catholic.edu.au)

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