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Australian parliamentary inquiry in language learning in Indigenous communities.

This submission in language learning in Australian Indigenous communities is being made on behalf of the Voice for Justice World Forum. The main focus of our response is to address the importance of maintaining Indigenous languages from an international and human rights perspective and to consider the best models of bilingualism that enable Indigenous people to not only share and maintain the richness of their own cultural identities but also to be fully participant in the societies from which they are too frequently marginalized.

Voice for Justice is a global community organization whose mission is to prevent acts of injustice, and to actively seek and ensure justice against any action of an individual, group or entity deemed illegal, unfair or discriminatory. Voice for Justice firmly believes that justice delayed is justice denied. Our members live in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia.

This response on behalf of Voice for Justice World Forum, UK, acknowledges the devastating affect that colonization has had in displacing and marginalizing the languages and culture of Indigenous Australians. It is within this context that we want to address the wrongs of the past and focus on the international responsibility to maintain Indigenous languages and their foundational links in sustaining and protecting language and cultural knowledge.

The main terms of reference that we will be referring to are as part of our submission are:

1. The benefits of giving attention to Indigenous languages
2. Their role in closing the gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
3. The benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
4. Measures to improve education outcomes in Indigenous communities where English is an additional language

1: The benefits of giving attention to Indigenous languages from a human rights perspective:

Under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the importance of maintaining Indigenous cultural heritages is summarized in the following:

- Affirming the right for Indigenous people to be respected in regards to their diversity and the richness of their cultural heritages and be free from discrimination of any kind (points 2-3)
- Recognizing that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development for economic and social progress and self determination (points 7-11).

In regards to human right issues for language preservation and maintenance this is outlined in articles 13 and 14 that state:

Article 13:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article 14:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

The international responsibility in securing and preserving Indigenous languages in line with human right conventions is clear. These same rights are also represented in the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

'In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.' (Article 30)

In accordance with these conventions, we need to consider the best pathways for bilingualism, language maintenance and additional language learning that not only protects the right of Indigenous peoples but also secures pathways for reconciliation, sustainability and social inclusion. Within this context, we would like to draw attention to research that establishes the most effective pedagogical practices that secure the strongest models of bilingual proficiency.

2-3: The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture and the benefits of including Indigenous languages in education:

Two main forms of bilingual learning that are widely acknowledged internationally are additive and subtractive forms of bilingualism. Additive bilingualism identifies the learning of a second language (L2) without the loss of first language (L1) and cultural identity. In comparison, the subtractive model of bilingualism identifies when learning an additional language (L2) results in the loss of L1 and diminishes cultural ties (Cummins, 2000). Various research studies also show that once a language ceases to be spoken it is more difficult to be restored and remain connected to the same linguistic community (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Kenner, C., Gregory, E., Ruby, M, 2007). Additive models of bilingualism also show that maintaining L1 enhances student's ability to achieve age appropriate outcomes by maintaining cognitive development in both languages and achieving deeper levels of cognition and language proficiency (Baker, 2006; Cummins, 2001). When L1 and L2 develop alongside each other students not only develop a greater meta-linguistic awareness of the structures and differences in both languages but also a greater capacity for critical analysis and transference (NALDIC 2009). This greater linguistic multiplicity not only holds the key in raising academic achievement, but also empowers students to reflect, evaluate and operate more powerfully between and within their different linguistic and cultural frames of reference.

It is important to note that by not supporting both languages to proficiency, students run the risk of becoming semi-literate rather than fully literate (NALDIC 2009; Kenner, et al 2007). These findings are particularly pertinent, not only for Australian Indigenous people, but also indigenous peoples across the globe, who have similarly been displaced and find themselves socially and economically excluded and in situations of abject poverty (UNESCO, 2003).

The neurological benefits of bilingualism add another factor to the advantages of bilingual learning and education that also reinforces the advantages of additive bilingualism. This research reveals '*that children raised bilingually may actually be "smarter" than their monolingual peers*' and '*that bilingual children can perform certain cognitive tasks more accurately than monolinguals*' (Mc Coy, 2003).

Within this context, the responsibility of securing language maintenance to provide the most effective pathways for additional language acquisition cannot be ignored. The benefits of being a fully proficient bilingual, not only closes the gap in intercultural communication but also lays the foundations for academic achievement and establishing secure vocational pathways.

4-5: Measures to improve education outcomes in Indigenous communities where English is an additional language *and* educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.

In achieving strong forms of bilingualism, it is also important to consider how long it takes to become fully proficient in an additional language. Cummins (2001 & 2008) makes the distinction between two different kinds of additional language learning proficiency in BICS and CALP. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) defines surface level language that is needed to develop day to day social forms of communication. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in comparison defines deeper level language proficiency, needed to access the academic demands of abstract, evaluative and analytical communication. While many L2 learners develop BICS within two years, it takes between 5-7 years for a child to be working at the same levels as native speakers in regards to academic language and achievement.

In considering if L1 and L2 learning should only be maintained during the early years of education, we would like to draw your attention to the importance of these findings in sustaining language maintenance programmes into later years of education so that students maintain a high level of proficiency in L1 and L2. This not only provides the opportunity to support continued cognitive development and a rich interchange of cultural knowledge but also strengthens community cohesion for sustained academic and vocational opportunities.

Another issue that we are aware is currently being considered in Australia, is whether the role of maintaining Indigenous languages should be the domain of Indigenous communities outside of school or the role of schools. From the above, we would emphasize the importance of supporting L1 and L2 simultaneously as a dynamic part of schooling as well as within communities, not only because this constitutes best ESL practice, but also because this represents best practice for securing strong home-school partnerships as a basis for life-long learning.

Finally, we would like to point out the importance of intergenerational learning, for strong language learning beyond short term objectives. Intergenerational exchanges between students, parents and grandparents not only secure deeper family and community connections but also enable strong foundations for sustainability from one generation to the next. This in turn empowers communities in the shared responsibility in the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child.

We hope that this inquiry helps to secure strong foundations not only to address the wrongs of the past but also to establish clear pathways for Indigenous Australians to have a strong voice and stake hold in Australia society and internationally.

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