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To: House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

I would like to submit the following evidence to the inquiry, addressing in particular the issues of:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening indigenous identity and culture
- The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

In the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, we specialise in research on multilingualism in schools and communities. In line with research findings from other countries, our studies show that it is of crucial importance for children to be able to draw on their first or heritage language to enhance their learning and to build their cultural identities and self-esteem. I shall first comment on studies from the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Wales, and then on the results of a study we conducted with children of Bangladeshi heritage in East London schools (Charmian Kenner, Eve Gregory, Mahera Ruby and Salman Al-Azami, Bilingual learning for second and third generation children. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 21 (2), 120-137, 2008).

The long-term positive effects of bilingual learning have been demonstrated by research in the USA (Thomas and Collier, 2002), which compared outcomes for bilingual children in early-exit, late-exit and two-way bilingual programmes with the results obtained by children whose mother tongue was English. For two-way programmes, in which, for example, children of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking origin study together in both languages, performance in English outstripped that of monolingual English speakers. A study of literacy practices at bilingual schools in Texas (Pérez, 2004) showed how learning was aided by students making connections between their languages and literacies and using knowledge of one language to solve linguistic difficulties in the other. Other US researchers have also

found that bilingual education results in above-average levels of academic proficiency and positive attitudes to the languages involved (Christian, 1996; Freeman, 1998; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Potowski, 2007). French/English education in Canada (Swain, 1998) and Welsh/English in Wales (Williams et al, 1996) have shown similarly positive results, as have programmes in Māori/English and Samoan/English in New Zealand (May et al, 2004; Tuafuti and McCaffery, 2005). The crucial role of the mainstream school in supporting mother tongue maintenance has been revealed in research conducted with second and third generation Spanish-speaking children in Miami (Eilers, Pearson and Cobo-Lewis, 2006). Although these children live in a community where their mother tongue is regularly used in the business and social infrastructure, they are losing their Spanish competence unless they are also schooled in Spanish.

Our recent study set out to investigate how second and third generation British Bangladeshi children at primary schools in East London, where English is usually the only language in the classroom, would respond to using Bengali as well as English for learning. The participant children, aged from seven to eleven, were also studying Bengali at after-school community language classes. Through action research with mainstream and community language class teachers, bilingual literacy and numeracy tasks were devised and carried out with pupils aged seven to eleven in two East London primary schools. The bilingual activities were videorecorded and analysed qualitatively to identify the strategies used.

The following cognitive and cultural benefits of bilingual learning have been highlighted by researchers in a variety of contexts, and were also found to apply in our study: conceptual transfer, enriched understanding through translation, metalinguistic awareness, bicultural knowledge and building bilingual learner identities. I shall discuss each of these aspects below.

Conceptual transfer

Conceptual transfer involves the understanding of a concept in one language being used to help understand a similar concept encountered in another language. Lemberger (2002) gives examples from a US secondary school science class, in which some pupils had Russian as a first language and received support from a Russian/English bilingual teacher. Learning occurred rapidly as students were able to connect existing knowledge in Russian with new vocabulary in English. Cummins (1984) has used the ‘dual iceberg’ metaphor to suggest that transfer between languages occurs below the surface at a deep cognitive level, whilst separate use of the two languages is observable above the surface. In our study, children were able to reach a better understanding of literary metaphors and mathematical concepts when they were able to discuss their ideas in Bengali as well as English.

Enriched understanding through translation

Transfer does not always occur through a direct one-to-one correspondence of concepts in each language, but often requires *translation and interpretation*. Looking at children and their teacher in an Italian/French bilingual classroom, Moore (2002) shows how they moved between the idea of ‘grano’ in Italian and ‘graine’ in French. Whilst these concepts are related, they are not exact equivalents (‘grano’ means grains of rice or wheat, whereas ‘graine’ means seeds). Meanings therefore had to be negotiated through bilingual talk, with the teacher explaining that ‘graine’

corresponds more closely to 'seme' in Italian. Moore suggests that code-switching brings attention to semantic differences and becomes an active part in the learning experience, leading to 'enriched conceptualisation'. Our study showed that children were stimulated to think more deeply when using both their languages to explore meanings that were linked but did not correspond exactly.

Metalinguistic awareness

A theme running throughout classroom research is the enhancement of metalinguistic skills through bilingual learning. The use of more than one language to investigate the same material encourages children to compare the vocabulary and structures involved, thus *increasing knowledge about how language works*. For example, Edwards et al (2000) found that bilingual multimedia storybooks prompted pupils in South Wales to generate hypotheses about word order and pronoun use in Welsh and English. According to Vygotsky (1962), reflection on different linguistic systems can aid the development of children's thinking. John-Steiner (1985) points to the possible benefits for children who are learning bilingually. Children in our study consolidated their metalinguistic knowledge through explicit discussion of differences between language structure in Bengali and English.

Bicultural knowledge

Another potential advantage of learning bilingually is the opportunity to draw on cultural understandings built up in one language when working with texts or practices in another language, thus *linking new material to familiar worlds*. Martin-Jones and Saxena (2003) discuss how a bilingual assistant in a Northwest England primary school helped children understand how weighing scales worked, by explaining in Panjabi and showing how the equipment related to the practice of measuring out flour in fistfuls when making chapattis. Panjabi was also used when storyreading, to 'anchor the world of the storybook' to children's home experiences. The second and third generation children in our study were growing up bicultural. As well as having experiences and interests developed through English in mainstream school, they felt an emotional involvement with their Bangladeshi origins. Bilingual activities gave children the chance to use, but importantly also to extend, the range of their bicultural knowledge.

Building bilingual learner identities

Finally, language is linked with *cultural identity*, and the increased self-esteem generated by bilingual learning can support educational achievement (Cummins, 1996, 2006). These social and emotional aspects are key to children's self-concept as learners (Matthews, 2005). Our study demonstrated that second and third generation children's involvement in bilingual processes in mainstream school had a positive effect on the construction of their learner identities. Teachers were impressed by children's response to bilingual learning. One commented that the project had meant 'seeing the children in a different way', since children felt empowered when demonstrating their knowledge in Bengali. Teachers now understood their pupils' identities more fully. As one put it, the children 'have so much life outside of school – school is only part of their life'. Another said of Bengali 'It's part of who they are'. Teachers gained a fuller understanding of the importance of bilingual learning during the project, as encapsulated in one teacher's comment: 'Any child that has more than one language, it makes them more confident and they can apply those skills to another language'.

The above findings are all equally relevant to the educational experience of children from an Indigenous language background growing up in Australia. It is very important to provide bilingual education in which children can use mother tongue as well as English for their learning. This will increase educational achievement and also have enormous benefits for children's bicultural identity development.

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