

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees

September-October, 2012

Teaching and learning - maximising our investment in Australian schools

A Submission from:

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TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE AUSTRALIAN INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY OF THE COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS

A related submission regarding teaching and learning in the small, two-campus school on the Indian Ocean Territory of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has been submitted by WATESOL (Westralian Association Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), for which I was a consultant.

This submission is my own.

THE SUBMISSION

ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF THE ENQUIRY:

(a) the effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools

For the Cocos Malay-speaking children of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, there is certainly a reduced chance of them realising their personal potentials because their two-campus school is not sufficiently valuing, nor fully incorporating, their home language into the school's philosophy or curriculum. Children are discouraged from speaking their first language – at school and at home. Parents are urged to speak English to their children. The children's challenges with English are often blamed on their home language. When one's language is denigrated as "gobbledegook" or "a quaint oral dialect" (which it is not) by monolingual, monocultural teachers, then one's very identity is being challenged. When tiny children are

given no credit for the language skills and the local knowledge that they bring to school, they are rendered mute and knowledge-poor.

Yet – this very school is supposed to be operating a full **bilingual education** programme; a programme which was agreed between the local leadership, the WA Education Department and the Commonwealth Government in a landmark policy document signed in 1989. It has long been shown that the better all learners know their first language, the easier it is for them to transfer their life-learning to a new language. This is a fundamental aspect of all UNESCO's education programmes and language-teaching curricula in most multilingual countries.

In 1984, when the Cocos Malay people voted to integrate with Australia, many culturally respectful promises were made by the Australian government in the UN General Assembly. Several of these have since been broken. (See: SBS TV's "Dateline" programme, 7 August, 2012.)

(b) the structure and governance of school administration - local and central - and its impact on teaching and learning

The islands are entangled in a complex web of various levels of administration, but they are "off the political, economic and educational radar" at the same time. Education on Cocos is a Commonwealth responsibility, but the two-campus school is completely run by the WA Education Department. The Commonwealth "pays the bills". The parents do not have a vote at State level, and detailed questions asked about educational matters in the WA parliament have been deemed "a Commonwealth matter". The Commonwealth, at the same time, has also taken the view that the daily operation of the schools is "a State matter".

There is a Parents and Citizens association, but there is little genuinely consultative dialogue about the details of teaching and learning between parents and teachers. Very few teachers speak Malay/Indonesian or have a background in linguistics or experience teaching in multilingual environments. Very few, if any, of the teachers are fully qualified in ESL methodology.

P. & C. meetings stress the importance of English, English, English. As the school is operating on two campuses, one on each of the two inhabited islands, any meetings with groups of parents are fleeting – as at least one party has to depart early to "catch the ferry home". The teachers live on one island and the Malay community (80% of the population) lives on the other.

There is also a "cultural gap" between the mainland Australian residents and the local Malay population. Just because "no one complains" does not mean that the Cocos Malay people are necessarily happy with everything that is happening around them. Sensitive and sincere Malay-language mediated conversations will reveal quite a degree of dissatisfaction with many aspects of island governance, including school and adult education.

The absence of an on-island Administrator and a distant, distracted Canberra bureaucracy means that there is no daily on-island **vision** for the Territory, and no clear agenda for the **localisation** of employment opportunities. The high hopes of 1984 have been left far behind.

(c) the influence of family members in supporting the rights of children to receive a quality education

Very few Cocos Malay adults have any idea of their, or their children's, full human rights as Australian citizens. There is precious little adult education and many of the adults are semi- or non-literate. Many are not literate in English, but Malay is not recognised as an official language in the Territory.

Federal election days in the Malay community on Home Island are sorry events to witness, as very few Cocos Malay adults know what they need to do on these days. It doesn't help that the islands have been placed in the Lingiari federal electorate of the Northern Territory, or that the lengthy voting papers contain names and parties that may have no interest in, or even knowledge of, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (e.g. The Australian Sex Party).

In 2009, the Australian Human Rights Commission found that the school's punishment of children for speaking Malay breached the youngsters' human rights. Similar bans in the Shire Council office also had to end after the practice was exposed in *The Australian* newspaper (see references at the end of this submission).

(d) the adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment

The two campuses of the Cocos Islands District High School are very well resourced – with materials and staff-student ratios. They have internet connections and satellite television. They are two of the best-equipped school campuses in Western Australia.

BUT - they have next-to-no resources to support Malay-language culture or classroom teaching in a bilingual programme, AND the English-language resources they have are far more suited to mother-tongue learners of the language than to second-language learners.

(e) factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers (in the Australian education system)

I will apply this criterion to just the Cocos (Keeling) Island schools.

There needs to be a completely new approach to staffing these two small schools. Western Australia does not have sufficient teachers with the special skills that these children need and deserve. As a minimum, all Cocos teachers need to have full ESL qualifications. Anyone teaching Malay children all day also needs to be proficient in the Malay/Indonesian language.

The early years teachers of Malay children need to be able to teach **in Malay**, and secondary-level Indonesian Language teachers need to be able to extend the students' language skills into the fields of literature and cultural studies. These teachers' language skills and educational backgrounds need to be native or native-like Indonesian (or Malaysian).

Such a requirement may need overseas teacher recruitment and overseas procurement of teaching materials. Cocos Malay people who are qualified teachers should be appointed to the schools.

Appointees should all be placed on limited-term contracts. These should be renewable with the authority of the leaders of the Cocos Malay community. The 1989 *Education Policy* for the islands spelled this out clearly, but it has not been followed at all. There is currently no consultation with the community about staffing the two small schools.

Teachers at the all-Malay Home Island campus of the school should reside on Home Island. Accommodation is provided there for the doctor and nursing staff. Why not the teachers? Eighty percent of the population are Cocos Malay, and they almost all live on Home Island.

The WA education system now allows for the designation of government schools as “public independent schools”, which permits them increased staffing autonomy and greater self-management by their principals and school councils. This might be a possibility in the case of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands school, however, the Cocos Malay parent community would have little knowledge of this possible opportunity for change.

(f) other related matters

Renowned European educators, linguists and regular UNESCO consultants, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (managing editors of the *Hydra* book listed below), have publicly expressed their astonishment at the “colonial mindset” that is in operation in the schools on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Their collective experience in multilingual education is unrivaled.

Their views were openly expressed at the recent ACTA (Australian Council of TESOL Associations) International Conference in Cairns (3-5 July, 2012). ACTA has recently issued its own statement on the issue (see below).

I respectfully refer the committees to the following resources:

Further reading/viewing:

Bunce, P. (1988) *The Cocos (Keeling) Islands: Australian Atolls in the Indian Ocean*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press.

Bunce, P. (2009) “Cocos Islands: the view from Asia”, *Crikey*, 7 September. Available at: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/09/07/cocos-islands-the-view-from-asia/>.

Bunce, P. (2012). “Out of sight, out of mind - and out of line: Language Education in the Australian Indian Ocean Territory of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.” In Rapatahana, V. and Bunce, P. (eds) *English Language As Hydra – Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. [Series Editor, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas; Foreword, Robert Phillipson]

SBS Television (2012). *Dateline*: “The Cocos Malaise”. Broadcast on 7 August. Website, transcript and video available at: <http://www.sbs.com.au/dateline/story/about/id/601512/n/The-Cocos-Malaise>.

An excellent series of articles by Paige Taylor of *The Australian* in 2009:

- Taylor, P. (2009) "Crime in paradise lost in translation", *The Australian*, 17 August. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/crime-in-paradise-lost-in-translation/story-e6frg6no-1225762523784>.
- Taylor, P. (2009). "Officials blamed for Cocos despair". *The Australian*, 20 August. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/officials-blamed-for-cocos-despair/story-e6frg6no-1225764165962>.
- Taylor, P. (2009). "Lost in transition". *The Australian*, 1 September. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/lost-in-transition/story-e6frg6z6-1225768109174>.
- Taylor, P. (2009). "Cocos language crusader Alan Medous sacked". *The Australian*, 9 October. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/cocos-language-crusader-alan-medous-sacked/story-e6frg6n6-1225784618687>.

Australian Council of TESOL Associations – Statement on Cocos Education, 2012

"ACTA actively supports the structured learning of the Cocos Malay language (the home language of the students) in the Territory of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands' schools. ACTA also recommends the appointment of experienced and qualified Language, EALD and trained local teachers to these schools with a view to further developing the Cocos community's bilingual strengths."

This submission is respectfully submitted for the committees' consideration.

Dr Pauline Bunce

14 October, 2012