



CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE

1st September 2011

Dr Anna Dacre
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
House of Representatives, Parliament House
PO Box 6021
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr Dacre

After consultation with the Director of Catholic Schools Dr Anne Wenham, Assistant Director of Education Dr Paul Thornton, Education Consultant Mr Michael Mullaly and myself, we have developed a response to present to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs regarding the Committee's enquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities with particular focus on:


- 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
- The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities
- Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services
- The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages
- The effectiveness of the commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering it's objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments

I have been working with the Catholic Education Office in the Lismore Diocese for the past seventeen years as the Indigenous Education Officer. My work involves addressing Indigenous education and issues effecting Indigenous students in mainstream classrooms. My role also involves contributing to the vision of Catholic Education in the Diocese by providing assistance to Indigenous students, parents, teachers and Indigenous Education Workers in the Lismore Diocesan schools.

Currently we have 393 primary and 653 secondary Indigenous students within 45 of our 47 schools within the Diocese. The diocese employs 7 Indigenous Teachers, 9 Indigenous Education Workers undertaking teacher training, 5 Indigenous Education Workers undertaking TAFE teacher assistant's training, 43 Indigenous Education Workers within our schools, 2 Indigenous staff employed as ICT staff and myself.

One school in our Diocese, St Mary's Primary School in Bowraville, has implemented an Indigenous language curriculum for the past 8 years. This program has proved successful in improving student's literacy and numeracy skills along with pride and confidence within the students themselves and the wider community.

Yours faithfully


Doreen Flanders
Indigenous Education Officer

Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Terms of reference

The Committee will inquire into and report on Indigenous languages in Australia, with a particular focus on:

• The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Generally, Indigenous languages have complex grammar and syntax and large vocabularies that reflect the cultures, experiences and traditions of Indigenous communities. They contain words and concepts that cannot easily be translated into English and often do not have words for English terms.

Indigenous languages as we know were traditionally spoken and not written, and linguists endeavouring to write them down have faced difficulties with spelling and pronunciation. The majority of languages, for example, contain sounds that do not occur in English.

Aboriginal people have in the past often seen the education system as alien to their own cultural aspirations. Use of local languages in schools, at least at a signage level can at the least mitigate against the perception that schools and Aboriginality are in opposition. And at the most, through carefully constructed local language courses, provision of local material such as Dreaming stories, and recognition of local Aboriginal story places, engender a pride that encourages Goori children to own and participate in school systems.

In terms of what can be achieved at a school or education office level in the East Coast of Australia where English is the first language:

Recognition can be at the level of inviting those who are able to give a welcome to country or other speeches at appropriate times such as NAIDOC, Sorry Day and school assemblies etc.

Knowing this, teachers of the language in local communities are rallying to pass on the language to the young ones who are showing they are very much interested in language in general. These language knowledge holders are seeing the pride and joy that young people have in their Indigenous language and it gives them great joy in passing on the language on.

A student's knowledge and use of their home language is a huge source of pride and motivation. It goes a long way to reinforcing their identity and their pride in who they are as an Aboriginal person. A student's wellbeing is 70% of the educational process. If you don't get that right the best teachers in the world will fail.

• **The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

Language plays an important role in the continuation of culture and identity and promotion of resilient communities.

Languages can further these aims, but **unless there is a serious attempt to:**

- ▶ give accreditation to trainee teachers for pursuing studies through recognised training providers in language such as Murrumbidgee Language Centre or Sydney University, or
- ▶ provide opportunities, with pay, for educators, particularly Indigenous teachers to be in-service by recognised institutions so that they can make this part of their career path;
- ▶ give a viable time opportunity within the school curricula to make Aboriginal language learning as a possible option in the same way as we the provision for foreign language courses. **If not talk of closing the gap and strengthening culture will be hollow and the death of our languages assured.**



At the same time it is recognised that Indigenous language areas are not ready yet to provide such teacher training and in-service. This issue is one that may not be able to be addressed by school systems

• **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

Providing children with a good start in the early years can have a long lasting effect on the rest of their lives. This early stage can open up opportunities for the future, giving them a better understanding of what is Standard Australian English.

On the mid-north coast, at least in the Gumbaynggirr area, language has been used for years in pre-schools. The earlier Gooori children are shown education is their property the more they are likely to remain involved. Language is an instant way into this. Early childhood is a time too when parents, not just their children, can be easily involved.

Education providers have a responsibility to recognise and promote the place of Indigenous Australians as the nation's first people who have enriched modern Australian culture with their culture and languages. A national Australian culture is inconceivable without Indigenous cultures and languages.

Education systems also have a very real responsibility to maintain, revitalise and rebuild Aboriginal languages as historically schools played a large and very active role in the near extinguishing of traditional languages in Australia.

Schools with Indigenous students, have long faced the problem of the perception by Indigenous families that education was actually an act of assimilation imposing, European culture, while at the same time eradicating traditional culture. Student attendance and engagement problems can be traced back to this perception and the associated feeling of not belonging. Including Indigenous language in the school

curriculum contributes to the Indigenous students' social and emotional wellbeing by developing their sense of self (being) and their connectedness to the school (belonging). The provision of language teachers from the local community provide realistic and achievable role models (becoming).

By strengthening students' wellbeing and sense of cultural pride and identity through delivering Indigenous Language Programs, the school improves students' and their families perception of education and their disposition to learning contributes greatly to improved learning outcomes and closing the gap.

• Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

Not able to comment.

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

English competency is of a huge benefit to Indigenous communities. All Australian workplaces, jobs and careers revolve around the English language and numeracy. Today's numeracy, unlike in past times, requires a great grasp of the English language as the question format is based on a good working knowledge of English.

A good English knowledge competency leads to better jobs, leads to better pay, leads to better health, housing and all-round quality of life.

• Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

The wider use of Indigenous language interpreters would help to break down communication barriers and build strong relationship between many Indigenous Australians, governments and service providers.

Service providers need to:

- increase their awareness of the need for Indigenous language interpreters
- train staff to work with interpreters and develop comprehensive policies on their use
- build their engagement with interpreter services and include the costs associated with training interpreters into new policy initiatives
- remove the barriers to recruiting interpreters

Improving the use of interpreters is critical to achieving a better relationship between governments and Indigenous Australians.

The implications for Indigenous people who do not have access to interpreters when needed are significant and may have adverse consequences. Consider for a moment the enormity of not being able to understand your tenancy agreement, contribute to important decisions about programs in communities or take up opportunities to which you are entitled.

Government agencies and service providers have an obligation to establish policies and provide services that meet the needs of all Australians particularly remote Indigenous communities.

Until agencies, service providers and Indigenous Australians are able to effectively communicate with each other, many Indigenous Australians whose first language is not English, and who in many respects are already seriously disadvantaged, will be at risk of further hardship.

• The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages,

Whilst the language is still spoken by a small group of older language speakers within the communities these language programmes aim to extend the use of the language into the younger generations of speakers.

The Programs assist the revival and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as living systems of knowledge shared by communities and passed down from generation to generation. As a result of the program, the use of Indigenous languages in a range of fields and media has increased.

Program funding supports the recording and transcription of Indigenous languages, the development of language teaching materials such as dictionaries and wordlists, CDs of songs in language and the development of databases and supportive links between language organisations.

The program supports the sustainable development of an active network of community-based Indigenous language centres and language organisations, language projects and policy initiatives.

In places such as the Mid-North-Coast and the Gamilaraay-Yuwaalaraay areas of NSW, there is a productive community activity in language revival (e.g. the present Gathang revival). However unless there is genuine school, TAFE and University support, the viability of such revivals will be precarious. In consequence, the Australian heritage of Indigenous languages, through stories, songs and artistic culture will be seriously compromised and relegated to a symbolic status – much as the thylacine exists only on the Tasmanian coat of arms.

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

The Australian Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, forms the foundation of all Indigenous education programs. It sets out 21 long-term national goals in Indigenous education. One goal is to develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

In the last year the Northern Territory Government has made it mandatory for the first 4 hours of schooling to be in English. It is known that one NT has had a whole of community participation in the school conducted primarily in Aboriginal language. Now, far from owning and enabling education, the community has been ostracised. It is arguable that first being competent in one's own language actually helps in education into English!

"I don't understand why the minister made that determination and why the current minister is continuing to push it. There was more evidence to support bilingual education than there was against it. There is a national trend around the world to retain Indigenous languages. This is a real step backwards. Bilingual education is based on helping children become proficient in their first tongue before learning English. There is no proof that English only will result in better literacy results," Buckskin said (Prof Peter Buckskin).

Patrick McConvell, an expert on Aboriginal languages who has spent five years living in remote Aboriginal communities, co-wrote a discussion paper for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that reviews the NT's approach to dismantling bilingual education.

He said children in communities like Yirrkala needed to be taught literacy in a language they could understand before it was taught to them in English. "I don't think saying 'teach them English from day one will make things better. My prediction is that it will make them worse," he said.

McConvell, now at the Australian National University, said poor NAPLAN results in the NT should not be blamed on bilingual education, and bilingual schools were not performing worse than other schools.