

Dear Dr Anna Dacre

I noticed by accident while Googling Barack Obama's speech to parliament your inquiry into Indigenous language learning and was suprised to see that this is not a settled issue, that is, that Indigenous children particularly in communities where native language is used, are not being taught to read and write in their own language before being asked to master english. I thought it was well established that young children learn literacy best if they commence reading and writing in the language used in the home. I also understand that this principle is recognised by various sections of the United Nations.

In the early 1980's I had the privelage of living in a remote Aboriginal community and came to appreciate something of the complex relationship of language - identity - land and spirit of the people as I struggled to learn their language and thought patterns. People told me they wanted to be able to work in two worlds - side by side, and that they wanted their little ones to learn to read and write their mother tounge first then english so they could do business with the wider world.

The community leaders invited the then Secretary for the Department of Education to visit and discuss the proposal of extending the bilingual program that a neighbouring community had developed into their own community. It was with shock and dismay that I sat and watched this Official tell the community that there was no way that they would have a bilingual program at their school while he was the Departmental Secretary.

I remember the mood in the room changing and one by one the people left frustrated and deeply disapointed. The dreams that the people had for their school were extinguished.

I was ashamed to be of european decent.

Thirty years have passed and I can only guess at the changes that have taken place in that community. What I now know is that a healthy vibrant community comes from having citizens who feel empowered, encouraged and have a sense of control over their future.

Australia is not a 'poor' country so it is not a matter resources that prevents Indigenous children commencing school with their own language it is a matter of the colonel attitude that still exists that is the problem, might I say requires yet another inquiry.

I wish your efforts well and I hope to see or hear of vibrant bilingual education available wherever parents want this for their children.

Kind regards

Ron Coster

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