

Submission to the
SENATE INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING

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I have proved the efficacy of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction when children start school and of teaching literacy in the mother tongue, both as an end in itself and as the foundation for literacy in English.

INTRODUCTION

After training and teaching in NSW I took charge of the school at Ernabella Mission in the APY Lands in South Australia from 1955 until 1961 and then opened a school in the newly established community of Fregon, also in The Lands, and taught there until 1963.

In both schools it was mission policy for education to begin in the mother tongue, Pitjantjatjara. To this end, Aboriginal women taught the lower primary children in this language. I gave lessons in oral English as a foreign language. Children learned to read and write first in Pitjantjatjara and when they had achieved a reasonable standard in this, they moved to the upper primary where the medium of instruction was English, they continued oral English and began lessons in English literacy.

THE BENEFITS OF GIVING ATTENTION AND RECOGNITION TO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Recognition of the Indigenous language in schools, when it is the language of the home, makes possible the engagement of children with the learning situation. They sense that, because their language is valued, their culture is valued and therefore they are valued. Their self-worth is enhanced and this enables them to move into life in Australian society with an unselfconscious confidence.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES TO CLOSING THE GAP AND STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND CULTURE

In schools where the Indigenous language is the medium of instruction, where children learn to write the words they speak, the experience is meaningful and they quickly feel a sense of achievement. This enables them to commit successfully to the education scene, move on through their school years with confidence and anticipate employment and involvement with the wider community.

There will be no gap.

Of all the students who came through this school system on the APY lands, on graduation all girls were able to find employment: cleaning; cooking; in the arts; in the clinic; in childcare or crafts. A number of the boys became stockmen on neighbouring stations, and then, when they had achieved adult status, a number were employed on the communities as gardeners, fencers, shearers, worked on the boring plant, in building construction and maintenance, dug wells, erected windmills, troughs, sheepyards...

There was no gap.

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF INCLUDING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN EARLY EDUCATION

If the Indigenous language is the medium of instruction when children first start school they instantly comprehend what is happening; experience no feelings of alienation; can confidently identify with tasks and goals. They learn easily and soon experience a satisfying sense of achievement; their learning is immediately relevant; they are happy to take charge of their progress; they make good decisions. When the time comes for literacy in English they have an enabling confidence that allows them early success.

Without this positive start it is almost impossible for children to find schooling relevant and to dedicate their childhood to the education system.

MEASURES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN THOSE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES WHERE ENGLISH IS A SECOND LANGUAGE

1. Immediately instigate teacher training and employment of Indigenous speakers
2. Produce, and otherwise procure, reading matter in the Indigenous language
3. Employ teacher aides who speak the Indigenous language
4. Train mainstream teachers in the use of teacher aides as assistants in the teaching of lower primary classes
5. Introduce the Indigenous language as the medium of instruction in the lower primary school using teacher aides
6. Introduce literacy in the Indigenous language in the lower primary school
7. Invite all school students to become literate in their mother tongue
8. Encourage teachers from the mainstream to become literate in the Indigenous language
9. Set up adult education classes where members of the community can learn literacy in the Indigenous language
10. It should not be permitted for English speaking teachers to use fragments of the Indigenous language when speaking to the children or to use the schoolroom as venue for practising their use of the vernacular.

I suggest that ideally, instruction in English literacy begin at the age of about 8 years, but this must depend on the child having reached a reasonable standard in literacy in the vernacular. It will be obvious that any unnecessary delay in the introduction of the study of English literacy and spoken English, will be detrimental to a child's general education.

THE EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL BENEFITS OF ENSURING ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCY AMONGST INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The primary goal of all Australian schools must be competency in spoken and written English because these are essential for full participation in Australian life. They also open the door to higher education and vocational opportunities.

One major reason for the teaching of literacy in the vernacular in the early years is that, along with lessons in oral English, it will provide a foundation for the acquisition of English literacy. Children who are already literate in their own language approach literacy in English with a confidence, enthusiasm, competence and understanding that enable them to be quickly successful.

English language competency builds a confidence in Australian Indigenous people that enables them to approach participation in the mainstream community positively.

Fluency in spoken English oils the wheels of human interaction in social life and in the workplace. The earlier children can achieve it the easier their lives will be.

Indigenous people will be able to take control of their lives in mainstream society only if they are able to negotiate and explain their needs unselfconsciously in English.

[I am unable to comment on interpreting and translation services; revitalisation of Indigenous languages; or Government policies.]

CONCLUSION

Children dance into schools where they are greeted in the language they know. They become instantly engaged: are eager to participate in all that is happening. They delight in the discovery of books with pictures and stories of their world. They return happily each new day for more new experiences. They are comfortable; they belong; they are accepted, and so are their language and culture; nothing needs be left outside the door; everything that is themselves can be embraced by learning.

Literacy in the mother tongue is the right of every child. To this day I know grandmothers whose level of literacy in English and Pitjantjatjara is higher than that of their grandchildren who have never even learned to read their own language.