

18 - 8 - 2011

House of Representatives Standing Committee  
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Dear Committee Members

My name is Ruth Lipscombe, I worked in the Northern Territory, principally as a Reading Advisor, Deputy Principal of Shepherdson and Yirara Colleges and as a Field Officer for Aboriginal Education [Commonwealth] in Queensland's Cape York region.

This letter is written in support of the limited available funding being committed to maintaining the 'mother tongue' of the small number of viable languages which still exist.

Trevor Stockley, a gifted Aboriginal language teacher, refers to these as intergenerational languages. He has a valuable chapter in 'Re-Awakening Languages' which committee members should refer to

I have selected several items in the terms of reference to comment on. [REDACTED]

## Terms of Reference

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

- assists children, learning in their first language to gain more benefit from their 'cultural heritage' ie their language 'carries' Aboriginal world view.
- enables children to more fully participate in all formal/informal learning situations.
- enables them to meaningfully explore 'real' purposes of language use.
- facilitates continuous/closer connection to own people/culture/heritage.
- enhances self esteem, identity, emotional development and social ease.
- children have a much better chance of reaching their full learning potential in their first/mother tongue.
- easier to learn/be taught the appropriate situations for using 'particular' language eg addressing Elders.
- childrens needs [emotional/academic/spiritual/social] are more easily met.

- Children are more likely to be actively involved in learning.
- easier to correct mistakes made as children move closer to controlling their language use.
- it is more likely children will feel more confident in using their mother tongue.
- because the mother tongue is more likely to meet interests/needs there is an added motivation to use language. ie more meaningful opportunities.
- teachers of mother tongue are much more likely to 'interact' with children rather than talk at them.
- more likely to take more language 'risks'.

## The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

Easier for

- meaningful, purposeful language use
- asking for/giving information in appropriate situations
- expressing feelings, intentions, needs/wants
- following advice, instructions & directions where culturally appropriate
- use in play, teasing, imagining, questioning (?) describing, comparing (?) idle talk, food, games, negotiating, teaching younger siblings, squabbling
- children to choose the timing of 'learning' attempts
- allowing children meaningful experiments and approximations
- children to learn meaning before form
- avoidance of inhibition of natural language

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

- value Aboriginal teachers who are confident about their abilities
  - respect the priorities the Aboriginal teachers put on their teaching programmes
  - recognise that goals/pathways to learning may not match established Western expectations
  - allow teaching to be done in mother tongue until children have "learnt how to learn"
  - explore the concept of 'concentrated language encounters in mother tongue.
  - stop compartmentalising subjects
- Spiral learning      NOT      Boxed learning



Maths	Lang
Scienc	History

- recognise/respect the child's unique experiences and the knowledge which has come from those experiences.
- acknowledge their preferred modes of learning - real-life, repetition, contextualised etc [Dr Stephen Harris - Two Way Learning]
- allow children to do/see things before they can talk about them [Beth Graham in numerous teaching manuals - still extremely relevant]

- teachers need to examine their instructional styles and look at becoming a participant/member of the group, rather than an instructor, if they are not a local Indigenous teacher
- must consciously plan for opportunities for children to learn i.e. real, not manufactured opportunities eg watching the barge land 'goods' for the store
- cohesiveness must be in the Aboriginal context
- provide 'all day' opportunities for children to verbalise, preferably in the mother tongue - no more 'silent' classrooms
- provide opportunities for groups, individuals, mixed ages, relatives, Elders, visitors, other dialect/language speakers to interact
- learning must be two way
- provide situations where children can initiate spontaneous language
- the social environment must be conducive to children feeling at ease/comfortable

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

- it provides learners with options
- assists/enables contact with 'outsiders' ie people who are not local
- it is the language of government, business, law, science etc
- it is the most commonly used language of Australia
- it is used in most employment situations and training for employment
- almost exclusively used by the mass media in Australia
- it is a major international language.