

Submission to the Inquiry "Language learning in Indigenous communities"

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SUMMARY

This submission addresses the following terms of reference:

- The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
- Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language
- The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages, and
- The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.

Questions addressed:

How to ensure that remote communities who so wish have the professional, intellectual and financial support to help children keep speaking their traditional languages?

How to ensure that Education Departments continuously, systematically and effectively support the place of Indigenous languages, and the needs of first language speakers of Indigenous languages, in the curriculum from early childhood through high school?

How to ensure that high standards of achievement in Indigenous languages are expected and achieved?

How to ensure that communities, government departments and funding agencies have access to, and apply, the considerable research on methods for Indigenous language maintenance and on best practice for teaching child speakers of minority languages in schools?

How to ensure that the maintenance of Indigenous languages is not fragmented by artificial funding barriers between what are deemed school projects, and what are deemed community-based projects?

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Affirm the right of Indigenous children to be taught in their home language, and to develop and enrich it at school (Article 14 section 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples)

Recommendation 2: Support and encourage State Education Departments to properly resource systematic teaching through Indigenous languages where these are the first language of the children.

Recommendation 3: Support and encourage State Education Departments to properly resource teaching English as an Additional Language in schools where standard English is not the home language of children.

Recommendation 4: Support research which develops an understanding of Indigenous children's stages in learning English, so that testing of English language mastery can be diagnostic and reliable.

Recommendation 5: Support projects which together with communities, develop measures of fluency and strength of Indigenous children's mastery of their home languages, so that these can be systematically strengthened and developed in language programs, during school and out of school, and so that school language programs can be accountable in the same way that the schools are accountable for English literacy and numeracy development.

Recommendation 6: Support the development, resourcing and running of high school courses for speakers of Indigenous languages.

Recommendation 7: Support the development, resourcing and running of tertiary award and non-award courses for speakers and learners of Indigenous languages.

Recommendation 8: Review the distribution of funds to ensure that communities where traditional languages are still spoken gain access to funds for language maintenance, and to break down the artificial barrier between school and community projects.

Recommendation 9: Introduce expert review into the allocation of funds, and ensure that the review advice is passed on to the applicants.

BACKGROUND

The needs of communities where children still speak Indigenous languages are very different from those of communities where children speak English, but their parents want them to learn their heritage languages.

I focus here on languages which are still spoken by children, and not on the revival or reclamation of languages.

Maintenance of Indigenous languages begins with children who speak the languages. Language shift is very rapid in Indigenous communities. In the last 20 years, a number of communities have seen young children shift from speaking traditional languages to speaking creoles and mixed languages. In the mid-2000s, researchers from the University of Melbourne, University of Sydney and I began a child language acquisition project in several remote communities (Lajamanu, Yakanarra, Kalkaringi, Tennant Creek, and more recently, Murray Downs), some of which we had been told still had children speaking Indigenous languages. In each community we found that they were speaking mixed languages, and so that the traditional languages were ceasing to be languages of everyday talk (Simpson and Wigglesworth 2008).

There is no need for this shift. Communities can be stably multilingual; they can use both traditional languages and English in everyday talk. However, in remote communities, children see that little value is placed on Indigenous languages in all domains of life dominated by English-speakers - schools, shops, courts, clinics, social service agencies. The more that Indigenous people participate in these domains, the greater the pressure on them to switch to using English. Interpreters are rarely used by English monolinguals.

SCHOOLING

School occupies the major part of children's most productive waking hours.

Primary School

Children starting school who speak a traditional language or a creole need an introduction to school and school subjects from people who speak their language. Otherwise they won't understand what is happening in the classroom, and they probably won't learn standard English effectively. They need to be taught English explicitly as an additional language (EAL). Both the EAL teaching and the explanations in the traditional languages/creoles need to be systematic. The latter requires deep and sustained professional development of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and teaching assistants - in team teaching, and in developing a standardised way of explaining school ideas (literacy, numeracy, science) in the traditional languages/creoles.

Despite these clear needs, most children in remote communities enter schools where the classroom language is standard English, but they have no access to trained EAL teachers. Very few children in remote communities have systematic introduction to schooling through the medium of a language they understand.

Even in those schools where in the past bilingual programs have run, there has been little attempt to work out sensible standards of attainment. How much English could a child learner be reasonably expected to have learned by age 7? What level of vocabulary and complexity of sentence structure should they have attained in their traditional language? The Yolngu teacher-linguist, the late Dr Marika, called for the establishment of assessment of proficiency in Indigenous languages on a par with national proficiency testing for English literacy and language skills (Marika 1998). Her call went unheard. But the need remains. Unless there are recognised standards of achievement, school classes in Indigenous languages will not be accountable, and there will be courses that are not only inadequate but also actively damaging.

The final problem is administrative. Indigenous children have a right to be taught in their home language, and to develop and enrich it at school (Article 14 section 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Australia has adopted). Presently, in many states, it is up to the Principal of a school to decide to what extent traditional languages may be involved in the classroom. This should not be the sole determinant. This right needs to be acknowledged and supported.

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High School

When it comes to high school, there is even less room for Indigenous languages. There has been very little research into what would be appropriate courses for high school age students fluent in traditional languages, let alone in developing methods and resources. Some state high school curriculums so far recognise the

different needs for separate curricula of background speakers of languages such as Chinese at high school as opposed to learners of Chinese. This recognition derives from the obvious advantage in HSC Chinese examinations of high school students who have spoken Chinese since birth compared with students who start learning Chinese at high school. We need the same recognition and support for speakers of Indigenous languages compared with learners of Indigenous languages.

Recommendation 6: Support the development, resourcing and running of high school courses for speakers of Indigenous languages.

UNIVERSITY

There are very few courses in Indigenous languages at tertiary level. These are the only ones I know of.

- *fluent speakers of Indigenous languages*

The Centre for Australian Languages and Linguistics (CALL) of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education (BIITE) offers courses aimed at these students, but only for those from the NT or who move to the NT.

- *learners of Indigenous languages that are still spoken by children*
introductory courses in Yolngu Matha at Charles Darwin University
non award summer courses in Pitjantjatjara at the University of South Australia

- *learners of reconstructed Indigenous languages*
award and non-award summer courses in Gamilaraay at the University of Sydney
award and non-award summer courses in Gaurna at the University of Sydney

Thus there is little opportunity for people going to work on communities where languages are still spoken to learn the languages formally. There is also little opportunity for Indigenous people outside the NT who want to do tertiary work on their languages unless they enrol in BIITE.

Recommendation 7: Support the development, resourcing and running of tertiary award and non-award courses for speakers and learners of Indigenous languages.

FUNDING

The present model of funding work on maintaining and developing Indigenous languages is fragmented - some work is funded through State education departments, some through State Departments of Aboriginal Affairs, some through AIATSIS grants, some through ARC funding, and some through MILR.

Access to funding is mostly restricted to urban and rural communities with access to organisations able to hold money and people who can write grant applications. This model favours communities with members with high levels of English literacy. This in turns means that most grant applications come from communities where Indigenous languages are not spoken by children. Most

projects supported by MILR are revival language projects, not projects for the maintenance of languages still spoken by children.

The only semi-systematic work on Indigenous language strengthening and maintenance in remote areas was the work done by the NT Education Department linguists and teacher-linguists, by Catholic Education teacher linguists, by the BIITE CALL team, and, in the past, by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. They provided professional support and funds for Indigenous language enrichment and maintenance. The abandonment of the bilingual education programs in the NT by the NT Education Department, and by Catholic Education, has meant the loss of all this support for at least 12 communities and outstations of those communities. The support was lost earlier in SA for the 5 communities on the APY Lands. The communities have mostly not had the resources to apply to MILR for replacement funding. This has been made more difficult by the fact that in many remote communities schools are the only obvious centre for language and literacy work, but MILR does not fund work in schools.

Funding for language maintenance has not been subject to the level of expert review that funding for research is subject to. Nor have the outcomes been scrutinized as closely. This has resulted in some projects and organisations receiving funding which they have not been able to use to best advantage. This has been tightened up in recent years, but the problem is structural. The lack of expert review means that many projects and centres don't get the advice they need to ensure that the project does not fail for some obvious reason.

Recommendation 8: Review the distribution of funds to ensure that communities where traditional languages are still spoken gain access to funds for language maintenance, and to break down the artificial barrier between school and community projects.

Recommendation 9: Introduce expert review into the allocation of funds, and ensure that the review advice is passed on to the applicants.

REFERENCES

Marika, R. (1998). The 1998 Wentworth Lecture. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Canberra.
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