

Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Affairs

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Dr. Samantha Disbray, September 2011



Summary

This submission addresses 4 points in the inquiry's Terms of Reference:

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

Six Recommendations, and then a discussion of the Terms of Reference follow this summary.

The discussion sections draws primarily on the context of school settings in the Northern Territory, and there is a particular focus on settings where children still speak Indigenous languages as a first language. However, it has bearing the role and future of Indigenous Languages and English language in schools more broadly.

While out of school, community-based language projects offer new and important language teaching and learning opportunities, which may be linked to in-school programs (e.g. Junior Rangers programs; career pathways from school-based Language and Culture Programs to Land and Sea Management Programs), these are not discussed in this submission (see Submission 2.0 Fogarty and Kral).

The discussion considers Indigenous Languages in Education from the following perspectives:

- (i) Indigenous leadership, aspirations and collaboration with schools, policy makers are central to improving education delivery and outcomes.
- (ii) Indigenous children, their families and communities, along with teaching professionals, policy frameworks and resourcing must all be taken into account in understanding and improving education delivery and outcomes.
- (iii) The remaining Indigenous languages still acquired by children as a first language are under immense threat, as speakers face great pressure to switch to English. Only decisive and strategic action can prevent irreversible language shift and loss.

These perspectives stem from my experience living and working as linguist in Alice Springs since 1997. I have worked as an adult educator teaching English and own language literacy and linguistics, as community linguist working with language speakers to develop language resources, and as a researcher of Indigenous children's language¹ (2004-2008). In this research I worked largely with communities, where a Traditional Indigenous Language children no longer learn their ancestral language fully, and where a new contact language has emerged as the language used by the community for everyday communication. Most recently (2008-2011) as the regional linguist for NT DET, supporting Indigenous language and English language teaching and learning in Central Australia.

¹ (<http://linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/research/projects/ACLA/>)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Commonwealth government should actively pursue the Recommendations (3.1-3.7) made by the Social Justice Commissioner in the 2009 Social Justice Report to develop the National Indigenous Languages Policy.
2. In particular, Recommendation 3.7, to '[c]ommence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's Constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in future' should be acted upon.
3. The Commonwealth government should work with state and Territory education agencies, to encourage active support to Indigenous aspirations for language in schools programs, providing adequate, skilled support for these. Recognizing the differing language situations across Australia and language learning needs, Indigenous language in schools programs would include:
 - a. development of and support for programs suited to students whose first language(s) include (an) Indigenous Languages (First language as medium of instruction or Bilingual programs);
 - b. development of and support for programs suited to students whose first language is not an Indigenous language (language maintenance or revival programs).
 - c. a solid policy and resourcing framework developed in each jurisdiction to ensure the long-term sustainability of programs, as an integral part of education delivery. This may best be regulated by an Indigenous Languages Centre, as raised in the Federal policy *Indigenous Languages- A National Approach* (2009).
4. Expand and improve adult education training opportunities to develop a sustainable workforce for the teaching of Indigenous languages and cultures. This will require that communities, community and Tertiary Training providers, school and Education departments work together to provide the most suitable training opportunities for Indigenous teachers. Course pre-requisites and English language and literacy outcomes may require review, to ensure that Indigenous staff are not excluded from accessing training and employment in teaching own language.
5. Improve teacher education courses, in the areas of language and culture awareness, Teaching English as an Additional Language methodology and bilingualism, develop and expand, on-going professional learning opportunities to teachers working with Indigenous students.
6. Encourage and support Education Departments to improve recruitment and placement practices and provide high-quality, on-going professional development in the areas of language and culture awareness and Teaching English as an Additional Language methodology, including great cross-border resource and expertise sharing.

DISCUSSION: Terms of Reference

1.0 National benefits of giving attention and recognition to Australian Indigenous languages include:

- National reconciliation and harmony, by respecting Indigenous Australians as First Australians, and their languages as the first languages of Australia.
- Indigenous Australian Languages and Cultures have faced enormous pressures since settlement by Europeans. Explicit and coordinated attention and recognition will support these important and unique languages and cultures to be maintained into the future.
- Recognition that for many communities, the maintenance and restoration of language is essential for maintaining a connection, or reconnecting to culture and identity, and for community well-being.
- For first language, Indigenous-language speaking communities, the fostering and use of Indigenous language in education, and community engagement is crucial to effective and positive education, employment and communication outcomes.

Such benefits have been posited in reports commissioned by the Australian Government regarding Indigenous Australian Languages. These include the *2009 Social Justice Report* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2009) *Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools A Way Forward* (Purdie et al. 2008) and the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). The Federal government recognizes these benefits, articulating them the policy *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* (Australian Government, 2009²). While such reports and the policy response sets a stage to giving attention and recognition to Australian Indigenous languages, Australia lacks an adequate policy framework.

A National Indigenous languages framework must be enshrined in a formal recognition of Indigenous Language Rights. The 2009 Social Justice Report identifies Article 13 of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, 2007*³, which Australia has endorsed, as a basis for the development of policy and action for supporting Indigenous languages. The Social Justice Report makes seven recommendations to the Commonwealth government to accomplish this (Recommendations 3.1-3.7: p. 105). The following recommendations are made here:

² <http://www.arts.gov.au/topics/indigenous-arts/indigenous-languages-national-approach> Viewed 11/9/2011

³ Article 13 of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* states that:

1. Indigenous peoples have a right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

(<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>) Viewed 22/8/2011)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Commonwealth government should actively pursue the Recommendations (3.1-3.7) made by the Social Justice Commissioner in the 2009 Social Justice Report to develop the National Indigenous Languages Policy.
2. In particular, Recommendation 3.7, to '[c]ommence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's Constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in future' should be acted upon.

1.1 Local and specific contribution of Indigenous languages to the inclusion of Indigenous languages in early education

- Children spend a very considerable proportion of their time in school, in the most formative time of their development. This has an impact on the opportunity that they have to develop strong first language skills. The provision of strong first language programs contributes to their bi- and multi-lingual development and thereby, **the maintenance of a continuing community of speakers. Not supporting first language in schools guarantees the loss of the remaining Australian Indigenous languages.**
- The Menzie's School of Health review (Silburn, Nutton, MacKenzie, Landrigan 2011; pp.33-37) provides strong evidence for the **need for the use of first language in early childhood learning settings for long-term educational success.**
- The Menzie's School of Health review also found that **successful programs supported community aspirations for their children's education and development**, and as such were culturally inclusive and culturally responsive, and involved family and community strongly in education settings (pp.33-37).
- The Menzie's School of Health review of international literature on early language development found that in settings where children must learn a second language (not in instances of familial or simultaneous Bi- multi-lingual development), **first language skills must be well established before instruction in a second language** (2011; 31). The review praises the NT Mobile Early Childhood Service, a program supporting remote, community-based pre-school programs. Language nests, early childhood learning programs, lead by community members to provide children with age-appropriate, play-based learning, with a focus on language development, are proposed in the 2005 National Indigenous Languages Survey report, "for all language categories (strong, endangered, and no longer spoken)" (116). This proposal is taken up in the Federal government policy *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*.

- With respect to the NT Bilingual/Two-Way Programs, the Menzie’s School of Health review found ‘consistent evidence that some NT bilingual education programs have been comparatively effective in **improving student academic results**’ (26). As language development continues in all children to, and beyond, the teenage years, first language instruction and support must continue beyond early, preschool programs.

1.2 Local and specific contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture and Education outcomes

- Through Language and Culture programs in schools, **children see adults** from their own family and community **working and taking active leading roles** in the school.
- **Children see their own Language and Culture as relevant to school learning and valued** in a largely non-Indigenous setting.
- In some settings, for example in the case of Kurna (Amery 2010), schools can play an integral role in the **community revitalization of Indigenous languages**.
- Language and Culture programs lead **to increased confidence, and professional understanding and engagement on the part of Indigenous staff and local community members**. As regional linguist I have regularly facilitated Language and Culture workshops, with approximately 6 language groups, including the Warlpiri Triangle, from 20 Central Australian schools, over a number of years. Participation by Indigenous staff and community members is active, and people consistently expressed and demonstrated their deep commitment to the importance of education generally for their children and community, and for their local Language and Culture program.
- Attention and recognition of Indigenous Languages in schools, through the active and on-going high quality support of language programs provides **leadership roles for Indigenous staff and meaningful professional learning for Indigenous staff**. In the NT, a great number of the Indigenous adults in urban and particularly remote communities, who have attained qualifications and had long, stable work histories, have done so within the education sector. Historically, it has provided a sphere for meaningful and respected training and participation, where Indigenous skill and knowledge plays a crucial role.
- Language and Culture programs (and the previous NT Bilingual and Two-Way programs) provide opportunities for **collaboration between Indigenous staff and non-Indigenous staff**, where two-way learning between adults as peer learners can genuinely take place. The importance of fostering supportive professional teams cannot be underestimated. One of the various losses the cessation of the NT Bilingual/Two-Way programs caused is the loss of ‘Learning Together’s’. These were an integral forum for in-school and whole-of-school professional learning bringing all school staff together on usually a fortnightly basis. Individual or teams of staff shared their expertise, often on cross-linguistic or cross-cultural topics. These included

topics such as teaching maths using L1, or teaching English using songs. These sessions brought staff into professional and collegial conversations, developed learning for all, and placed Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge on equal footing.

- Through thorough planning, **Indigenous Cultural knowledge and language can be integrated into other areas of learning**, building links between knowledge systems and maximizing learning. Examples of this include teaching maths concepts through Indigenous Language Culture programs (eg. patterns and spatial representations, using animal tracks, tree and leaf sizes, flora distributions), science outcomes through Indigenous ecological knowledge (animal distributions, water sources, land forms, ecologies). Such approaches are taken in many NT Indigenous Language and Culture programs, on a local basis, but should be further supported and developed.

In the NT, and as in most Australian jurisdictions (Purdie et al. 2008) systematic and on-going support from Language and Culture programs is not guaranteed or embedded in a sustainable model. In the NT for instance, decisions about staffing, resource allocation and the on-going support for Language and Culture programs are left to individual school Principals, who may see the Language and Culture program as exclusively the interest and responsibility of the Indigenous staff and community, rather than an integral and strengthening element of the school as a whole. Principals are rarely long-term staff members of remote schools, however, their support or non-Support of Language and Culture programs is often the most decisive factor in a programs' success. This problem is perpetuated in the new NT DET policy (Literacy Framework for Students with English as an Additional Language, 2011).

A very small number of specialist language support staff are employed in Education Departments, which makes adequate on-going support and a comprehensive consolidation of programs and resources impossible. This leaves planning, programming, resource production, assessment, program evaluation and advocacy to an often small and untrained Indigenous teaching staff, severely threatening program sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

3. Work with state and Territory education agencies, to encourage active support to Indigenous aspirations for language in schools programs, providing adequate, skilled support for these. Recognizing the differing language situations across Australia and language learning needs, Indigenous language in schools programs must include:
 - a. development of and support for programs suited to students whose first language(s) include (an) Indigenous Languages (First language as medium of instruction or Bilingual programs). This includes the professional development of staff, in particular a new generation of teachers, the development of curriculum, in particular for the middle and senior years;

- b. development of and support for programs suited to students whose first language is not an Indigenous language (language maintenance or revival programs). This also required support for staff recruitment, up-skilling, resource and curriculum development.
 - c. a solid policy and resourcing framework developed in each jurisdiction to ensure the long-term sustainability of programs, as an integral part of education delivery. This may best be regulated by an Indigenous Languages Centre, as raised in the Federal policy *Indigenous Languages- A National Approach* (2009)
4. Expand and improve adult education training opportunities to develop a sustainable workforce for the teaching of Indigenous languages and cultures. This will require that communities, community and Tertiary Training providers, school and Education departments work together to provide the most suitable training opportunities for Indigenous teachers. Course pre-requisites and English language and literacy outcomes may require review, to ensure that Indigenous staff are not excluded from gaining and accessing training and employment in teaching own language.

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

As discussed above, student's first language is crucial to success in education outcomes in second language learning settings, particularly where the second language is used as the language of instruction, for all or most of the school program.

Research has shown the need for strong first language foundations, the importance of **mother-tongue instruction** to support students to:

- develop learning skills and behaviours
- learn new concepts
- and to learn new skills, for instance literacy.

In addition, recognition of children's first language (Traditional or newly emerged contact language, such as varieties of Kriol, Aboriginal Englishes) and/or heritage language is important for developing and delivering culturally inclusive and culturally responsive schooling.

While the importance of first language and community language is recognized in the literature and in reports, Education departments tend to be reactive to particular results, such as poor NAPLAN data. Their response is rather than to look communities or at research, and develop to long-term strategies, is to place an ever-greater emphasis on English language and literacy teaching in school, at an ever-earlier age. This is true of the Northern Territory, despite the Menzie's school of Health August 2011 review, which apparently underpins the Department's policy, and which finds that "[t]he "time-on-task" research demonstrates convincingly that more time on English instruction does not correlate with student outcomes" (Silburn et al. 2011; 40).

A question I always ask of groups of teachers is how many speak a second or third language, and how well. Overwhelming, teacher cohorts, tend to be monolingual, and so have little understanding of language learning and of bilingualism. This is always concerning, given the teaching setting that they will be working in. In many Indigenous education settings in Australia, the successful outcome of education is the development of a bilingual (or bi-dialectal, or multilingual) person. This is the case whether the community is taught formally in the school or not. When students come to a school speaking languages other than English, and we should trust that this language base will be built on, and not destroyed, and that second language (English) will also flourish. The outcome, whether we are teaching in a first language or not, will be a bilingual person. It is important that teachers understand this outcome.

In the remainder of this discussion, I will discuss the need for greater understanding for first and second language issues by teaching staff.

2. 1 Benefits to Non-Indigenous staff of giving attention and recognition Indigenous languages

- **Attention and recognition to Australian Indigenous languages increases confidence and professional understanding among non-Indigenous and non-local Indigenous staff teaching staff.** As regional Linguist, I delivered, and co-delivered with Indigenous colleagues, a range of professional learning sessions on Indigenous languages in education. These forums included new teacher induction, group school conferences, ESL network meetings of Alice Springs and Tennant Creek based staff, workshops for the Graduate Certificate in Teaching English as Second (or additional) Language (Charles Darwin University).

Valuable insights non-Indigenous staff have reported included:

- knowing the name(s) of local language(s);
 - learning about the history of the region and its language(s);
 - having access to language learning resources and to cultural awareness materials;
 - learning some language themselves, and the experience of learning this from an Indigenous person.
 - Instruction of specific differences between their students' first language(s) and English (e.g. sound differences between English and Pitjantjatjara; differences in narrative structure in Wumpurrarni English and English).
- Professional development which provides non-Indigenous teaching staff **insight into specific differences between the Indigenous language(s) and English** allows them better understandings the learning journey, which their students, as English language learners, must take. In line with this, the review by the Menzie's School of Health found "[h]ighly competent teachers of English need to be able to explicitly teach for the differences in children's L1 and English at the phonological, morphological, syntax, semantic and socio-cultural levels" (Menzie's School of Health 2011: 38).

Full professional development programs on comparative language awareness have been developed for some Indigenous contact languages (Kimberly Kriol and Aboriginal English in WA), and on a local level for Traditional Indigenous Languages in the NT. For such professional learning to be effective, it needs to be systematic and on-going (see Oliver, Rochecouste, Vanderford, Grote, 2011). In the NT at least, further development of professional development is required. While these benefits are recognized in the research literature and in education departments, due to time and resourcing pressures, professional learning about Indigenous language are not available to staff in an on-going and systematic way.

2.2 Well trained teachers for Indigenous education settings

Many Indigenous students speak Standard Australian English as a first Language. However, in many settings Standard Australian English is an additional language or dialect. For second language teaching to be informed, expert and effective, teachers need to have been trained specifically in Teaching English as an Additional Language/Dialect. Drawing on my experience of the Northern Territory Education Department, some teachers are recruited with high-level skills, and others manage to develop these and perform very well. However, at a systematic level, appropriate recruitment and support for teaching staff are not in-built.

Specialist training and experience is not an essential requirement of teachers selected to work in NT schools with Indigenous students. In addition, secondary trained teachers are frequently posted to teach primary school students. Pre-school classes may be taught by a teacher, who does not have specialist training in Early-childhood. Finally, where teachers they enter service without the appropriate training, there are few opportunities for training and on-going support in second language teaching⁴. Yet, in-service teachers, particularly in the first couple of years of teaching will best succeed with on-going professional development, to understand the specific language learning needs of Indigenous students (Oliver et al. 2011).

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Improve teacher education courses, in the areas of language and culture awareness and Teaching English as an Additional Language methodology, and provide dedicated, on-going professional learning to teachers working with Indigenous students.
6. Encourage and support Education Departments to improve recruitment and placement practices and to provide high-quality, on-going professional development in the areas of language and culture awareness and Teaching English as an Additional Language methodology, including great cross-border resource and expertise sharing.

⁴ In 2010 Charles Darwin University redeveloped the Graduate Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language (in Indigenous settings), however, access to this program is limited.

References

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Silburn, S, G. Nutton, J. McKenzie and M. Landrigan. 2011 *Early years English language acquisition and instructional approaches for Aboriginal students with home languages other than English: A systematic review of the Australian and international literature*. The Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health. Darwin, NT.