House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
18th September 2011

Dear Dr Dacre,

The Language Perspectives Group of the Northern Indigenous School Support Unit, Department of Education in Queensland is pleased to make this submission to the *Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*.

Our group works in the complex Indigenous language situations across Queensland, researching vernacular language varieties spoken in Indigenous communities and second language acquisition in classrooms of Standard Australian English (SAE). We support teachers of Indigenous students with language backgrounds other than SAE through professional development in the form of workshops, in-class modelling and resources. We also provide linguistic and language teaching expertise to schools trialling and implementing traditional Indigenous language programs.

We have been selected for the carriage of significant projects about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learning English as a Second Language or Dialect variety (ESL/D), such as Bridging the Language Gap and Understanding Children's Languages Project (aka. Strong Communities – Standard Australian English).

We hope that the following submission proves informative for the Committee's deliberations. Our group would welcome the opportunity to provide additional evidence to you.

Yours sincerely

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LANGUAGE PERSPECTIVES GROUP, NORTHERN INDIGENOUS SCHOOLING SUPPORT UNIT

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

SUMMARY

Traditional Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander languages provide connection to country and identity for Indigenous Australians. It is imperative that schools recognise languages of place through protocols such as welcome to country, acknowledgement of traditional owners etc. Benefits for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander students learning their traditional Indigenous language in schools include:-

- strengthening their cultural identity,
- including Indigenous aspirations in the school curriculum,
- building their cultural and personal resilience,
- respecting their distinctive heritage as first peoples
- making meaningful links with community
- promoting Reconciliation through redressing past wrongs of suppressing Indigenous languages

Contact language varieties also indicate where Indigenous people hail from, and they are also languages of identity (albeit in a different manner from the traditional languages). Benefits of giving attention & recognition of language varieties such as Yumplatok or Yarrie Lingo include:

- acknowledging that students have a full and proper language, not just sub-standard English;
- understanding that contact languages have a partial lexical overlap with the target standard language, so students speaking these languages require particular English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D) approaches;
- making meaningful links with community members

The term "Indigenous Languages" is ambiguous: It is often not clear whether it is inclusive of contact language varieties spoken by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Attention to the actual language situations in remote Indigenous communities is long overdue. It needs to be recognised that language data often does not reflect true linguistic situation often where language shift has occurred. Correct language data would highlight the need for services in first language, and would highlight the need for second language approaches to teaching Standard Australian English (SAE) to second/subsequent learners of English in schools and the wider community.

Indigenous languages can contribute to Closing the Gap & strengthening Indigenous language & culture. However, policy makers need to distinguish between Indigenous languages spoken fluently as first languages of a community (including traditional and contact language varieties), and heritage languages, i.e. traditional languages, regardless of fluency and consideration needs to be given to:

i. Indigenous languages (i.e. traditional & contact varieties) spoken as a first language:

- respect for the like-language competence of local Indigenous people, and promoting this as an employment selection criterion for positions requiring effective communication with local populace;

- awareness of the need for language services for effective communication such as interpreters, like-language speakers etc, especially for National Partnerships such as Service delivery to rural & remote Indigenous communities;

ii. Traditional Indigenous languages:

- Acknowledgement of rightful place as only languages indigenous to Australia: belonging to the lands of distinctive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups;
- Promotion of well-being, pride and engagement particularly beneficial to health and education outcomes;
- Link between employment & income generation through the creative arts, such as painting, between land, language and identity, also increasingy as an authenticating device (i.e. naming artist's language group, or artwork in language)

INTRODUCTION

Language Perspectives Group, Northern Indigenous Schooling Support Unit

The Language Perspectives Group (LPG) is part of the Northern Indigenous Schooling Support Unit, DET (Qld) and has carriage across Queensland of all aspects of supporting schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are learners of English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D). In order to accomplish this, the LPG has undertaken much research into Indigenous students' everyday language varieties (vernaculars) and into their classroom-based second language acquisition. The group also supports schools which are implementing traditional language programs. The LPG consists of educators, with primary, secondary and tertiary experience, ESL and language teachers and linguists.

The LPG conducts on-the-ground projects in schools and their communities, involving:

- describing and building awareness about the language varieties other than Standard Australian English (SAE) which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students acquire as their first language(s);
- training teachers to support their Indigenous ESL learners, through in-class modelling and co-planning, resource development and writing and delivering professional development;
- undertaking and collaborating in formal research into Indigenous vernacular (i.e. everyday spoken) languages, acquisition of English as a Second Language/Dialect by Indigenous students, approaches to teacher training, including preservice;
- operationalising significant projects in these areas, such as the current DEEWR-funded *Bridging the Language Gap* project;
- providing language teaching and linguistic expertise for developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language programs in schools.

The particular contribution which the LPG can offer this Inquiry is its considerable 'on the ground' expertise. Because members of this group are 'there' in classrooms, with the teachers, in the schools, and working in urban, rural and remote communities across Queensland, they are aware of fundamental issues that are pivotal to language learning in Indigenous communities.

The group would like to assist the Inquiry in what are truly complex matters. We hope that our expertise, which is based on partnerships with, and input from Indigenous teachers, community members and students, as well as school administration, teachers and teaching assistants, will serve as an informative and useful contribution.

General Statement

The LPG has found that there needs to be three strands to any considerations of language learning in Indigenous communities in Queensland at this point in history (i.e. as a result of very considerable language contact and shift in language use):

i. the vernacular – the everyday spoken variety used throughout the speech community as the lingua franca, or common language of communication, which throughout much of Queensland are creoles and related varieties caused by language contact;

ii. the traditional language(s) of the community, including the language of place (if different to i), as is the case in almost all areas of Queensland), as well as the traditional language groups from other areas which people living locally might belong to;

iii. Standard Australian English (SAE), the frequency with which it is spoken in the community, and the levels of proficiency which have been acquired by local people.

All three strands are operative for most language matters in Indigenous communities in Queensland, as the following examples illustrate:-

Awareness that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in a given community are speaking the local contact language variety (i.e. creole or related variety) as their first language is essential for understanding that they are ESL/D learners. Without such awareness, incoming professionals, such as teachers, could mistakenly believe, for instance, that they have speech-language impairments or cognitive deficits. (Such incidents have, unfortunately, actually occurred). An awareness of language contact phenomena and varieties is critical precisely because current data sources such as Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data and school enrolment information regularly do not reflect Indigenous students' true language backgrounds. Due to widespread language contact and language shift processes, creoles and related varieties are the "Indigenous languages" (see discussion in 1) most commonly spoken in Queensland. These varieties are not prestigious, however, and are often stigmatised simply as sub-standard English. In many contexts, the local contact language variety has no standardised nomenclature, so data collection in such circumstances is not straightforward which often results in gross inaccuracies.

On the other hand, were a school intending to implement a traditional Indigenous language program, it would be important to understand that the community had experienced a language shift to a contact language variety. This assists with understanding the local language situation – the depth of language shift processes and the degree of traditional language loss, which determine the numbers of speakers available and the extent to which students would have any access to their traditional language(s). Planners with an understanding of language contact would be alert to the possibility that the creole or related variety might have an admixture of local or regional traditional language vocabulary which students are already familiar with, and

that some structures in the creole or related variety might even mirror those of the traditional language and so might provide a useful building block for teaching.

From the experiences of the LPG, if any of these "language strands" are overlooked in discussions and advocacy in regard to Indigenous languages, this can lead to vast misunderstandings of relevant language factors. The group has found it useful to conceptualise the strands through the framework of *3 Way Strong*, as found in the DET Queensland's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement* (2011):

3 way strong builds on the phrase '2 way strong', which is used to describe the desire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow deep and strong understandings of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. *3 way strong* includes the language perspective.

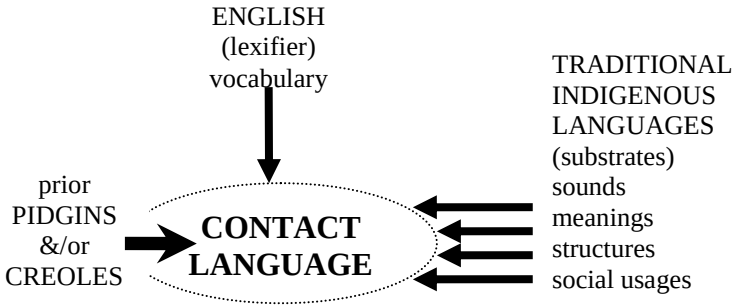
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages need to be recognised, valued and supported in schools, and in developing relationships with families and communities. Initiatives that develop culture and language have been found to be significant factors in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation, attendance and achievement in schools.

The framework states that DET schools will:

- Recognise and value the language varieties which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are using for their 'everyday' talk.
- Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in learning and achieving in schools by teaching SAE explicitly, actively and meaningfully.
- Support children's access to their heritage by maintaining, learning or researching their traditional languages and cultures (DET 2011).

As will already be apparent, from the LPG's submission to the Inquiry thus far, reference will be constantly made to the following terms
<u>Standard Australian English</u> (SAE) – the (relatively) standardised language variety used throughout Australia in education, media and government-funded services.
<u>Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander</u> languages – the languages belonging to this continent that are – or have been – spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout the Australian mainland, on Tasmania and in the Torres Strait.
<u>Contact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language varieties</u> – the linguistic varieties created by contact between traditional Indigenous languages and English (plus, often, other pidgins and creoles). In such language contact situations, there is typically a lexifier or "word-donor" language from which a large percentage of the vocabulary is sourced: English, the colonial language, in Australia. The traditional Indigenous languages have influenced the ways in which such items are pronounced (phonology), the meanings attached to such items (semantics), the structures in which such items are placed (morpho-syntax) and the ways these items are used socially (pragmatics).

Figure 1. Patterns of linguistic influences on Australian contact language varieties

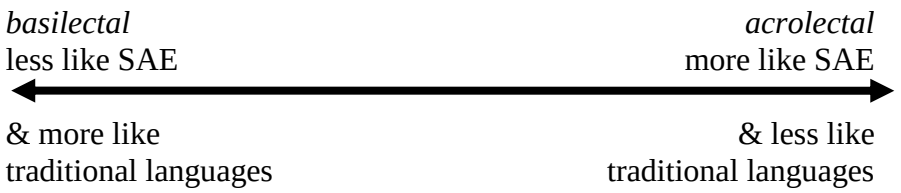


Under particular language contact conditions, a pidgin – a contact variety not yet a first language of a speech community – spreads and/or develops when new social circumstances reinforce the need for a new common language. As the usefulness of the new pidgin expands, so do its linguistic resources. If the expanded pidgin becomes used very frequently by the speech community, then it will be acquired as a first language, at which point it is called a creole. Although creoles are linguistically full languages, they are often perceived to be corrupted forms of the socially prestigious and dominant lexifier. Depending on educational awareness and social values and attitudes, creoles may not be acknowledged or even named.

Mixed Language – a particular kind of contact language variety: creoles with a significant admixture of a specific traditional Indigenous language, for example Gurindji Kriol, Light Warlpiri etc.

Dialects – generally defined as mutually comprehensible varieties, but in descriptions of some Australian contact language varieties (e.g. Aboriginal English) the term ‘dialect’ also refers to Aboriginal speech varieties which are not as distant from SAE as creoles, but which may still be the cause of significant miscommunications and misunderstandings.

Figure 2. Range of contact language varieties



Each contact language variety is spoken in a range of “styles” or “registers”, extending from less like SAE (basilect) to more like SAE (acrolect), due to the continued contact and influence from the prestigious and dominant lexifier language. Those varieties that are most akin to SAE are found at the acrolectal end of this range and are most likely to be termed “dialects” (see www.languageperspectives.org.au).

In relation to this Inquiry's terms of reference, the LPG is currently more involved in some areas, and less so in others. This is a response, then, to some of the pertinent issues relating to language learning in communities.

SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO THE INQUIRY'S TERMS OF REFERENCE GUIDELINES

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

We strongly acknowledge the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages, by which we mean both

- "traditional" Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, which have been in place on their respective lands since time immemorial, and which may continue to be spoken fluently, known by older generations only, included as vocabulary items in local Indigenous speech varieties etc &
- 'contact' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, which have been caused by historical language contact between speakers of English and Indigenous languages, and which are spoken as the everyday language variety in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and almost exclusively by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

We feel there is a need for clarification about what is meant by the term Indigenous languages, particularly in relation to the contact language varieties that have been created in and/or have spread throughout many Indigenous communities. A recent ABS report, for instance, links speaking an Indigenous language to well-being (ABS 29 April 2011). Moreover, the 2006 MCEETYA report states that 'the home language of Indigenous students 'not only carries the culture of Indigenous students but also encapsulates their identity'. (MCEETYA 2006 17). MCEETYA also stated that:

> Most Indigenous students are not native speakers of standard Australian English. Their home language is usually Aboriginal English, a creole, one or more Indigenous languages or any combination of these (MCEETYA 2006 17).

Similarly, MCEECDYA's (2011) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* notes in regard to Literacy and Numeracy that:

> Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not speak Standard Australian English as their first language. Their home language is often Aboriginal English, a creole, or one or more Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages, or any combination of these. In addition many parents and relatives may not speak Standard Australian English at home (MCEECDYA 2011 19)

And the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* also emphasises the links between recognition and validation of language and identity, well being and learning outcomes:

> A sense of cultural and linguistic identity, and the active recognition and validation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages by schools, is critical to student wellbeing and success at school. There are strong links between well being and learning outcomes! (MCEECDYA 2011 12).

If we accept that the home language encapsulates the identity of our students, and that speaking an Indigenous language is linked to identity, well-being and success at school, then it should be a matter of grave concern if the languages our Indigenous students are speaking be excluded from recognition. If we exclude the languages which Indigenous students are speaking, are we not to some extent excluding these students and hindering their potential for success at school?

In our experience there is much confusion about the language backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who speak contact language varieties. This exists at many levels and needs to be clarified in order to ensure accurate data, to have correct understandings of current language situations and to be able to implement evidence-based practice.

The confusion is well illustrated at the level of classification and this has profound implications, for instance, for the delivery of education policy in schools. A recent ABS release defines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as:

> those languages classified in the Australian Indigenous Languages group of the Australian Standard Classification of Languages. They exclude Oceanian Pidgins and Creoles and 'Aboriginal English'. See also 'Main language spoken at home' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011: glossary)
> .

In the ASCL list of Australian Indigenous languages (8000s group) there are languages whose codes could refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contact varieties, such as Aboriginal Englishes, Kriol, Torres Strait Creole and mixed languages such as Gurindji Kriol. From the criteria above, it could be assumed that the ABS has included them all except the Aboriginal English 8998 code…Or have they? What is the reference to Oceanic Pidgins and Creoles exactly? Is it really the intention to exclude those language varieties listed at codes from 9400 from this statement about Australian Indigenous languages? (We would ask who would have thought they would be included anyway, since the 8000s are meant to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including contact varieties, such as pidgins and creoles). Is it the intention to use the statement as an umbrella term to refer to any pidgins, creoles and Aboriginal Englishes (i.e. contact language varieties) spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and exclude them? (…albeit by reference to codes we would not associate them with). In any event, Aboriginal English certainly seems to be excluded, but it is not clear why this should be so at such a general level of classification.

At certain times and in certain places, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have ended up described erroneously as speakers of Oceanic Pidgins and Creoles when they have written pidgin or creole on their census form. Certainly with labels recorded such as Aussie Pidgin and Pidgin English etc, it is difficult to see how they could be distinguished clearly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epithets for their contact language varieties, which would be found, we would have assumed, in the 8000s.

As can be seen by the murkiness of the discussion above, it is very difficult to ascertain which languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are referred to by the expression "Indigenous Languages". In all discussions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' languages, therefore, there is a need for clarity.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are becoming more highly esteemed and are gaining a place in the discourse of education. There is increasing interest in maintaining, reviving and/or researching traditional Indigenous languages. In Queensland there is now a trialling of the Queensland Studies Authority's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and Cultures* syllabus. The LPG has actively lobbied for the official materials to support traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in schools, such as the new syllabus. The lack of educational focus on - and public esteem for - contact language varieties spoken by Indigenous students, families and communities continues to concern us.

As many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's "vernaculars" (or everyday spoken language varieties) are contact language varieties, such as creoles and other related varieties, their lives are, by definition, largely carried out in these language varieties. So, while we support and applaud the system support for traditional Indigenous languages, we are also worried by the difficulties around gaining reliable systemic recognition for the contact language varieties, particularly in the Queensland context where these are much more widely spoken than traditional languages. The place of traditional languages has become clear due to recognition of, for example, Land Tenure in legislation, and even discussions of Northern Territory Bilingual Education programs in the media.

Similarly, the country's movement towards Reconciliation, with the urge to redress the past wrongs that have caused traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to become threatened, has probably raised the profile of traditional Indigenous languages in the public mind.

We feel that general references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Languages tend to be equated with traditional languages and that contact languages tend to be left out. We repeat that we applaud the support for traditional Indigenous languages and note that the *Education Action Plan 2010-2014* calls for National collaborative action on the implementation of the Australian government's 'National Indigenous Language Policy' by the formation of a national panel of experts framing the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages (MCEECDYA 2011 14). Whilst we would

assure the Inquiry that this is a positive stance, we would urge the Inquiry to consider the place of the contact language varieties spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The widespread use of contact languages adds a very complex, extra dimension to education and other services, which needs to be drawn out, rather than being lost in generic references and/or references to traditional languages. For example, in the face of references to use of English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D) tools to assess on-entry language skills of Indigenous students, at a deep level the issue arises about what is the language the student *is* speaking. Similarly second language pedagogies, which are effective in classrooms with students speaking contact languages in remote areas, need to be teased out from generic second language pedagogies which are effective in the urban SAE immersion language situations experienced by speakers of clearly differentiated overseas languages. By silencing the issue of vernacular contact languages, we will continue to struggle to provide appropriate and effective approaches for Indigenous language situations.

2. The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

The benefits of the use, maintenance and strengthening of children's *first languages* in education is undoubted and supported by a large body of research (e.g. Grimes 2009; August and Shanahan 2008; Datta 2007; Collier, 1992; Cummins, 1978, 1980). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken as children's first languages, therefore, could make an unequivocal contribution to these children's performances in schools.

There is much confusion, however, about whether the term "Indigenous languages" includes all Indigenous languages, i.e. traditional and contact varieties, or just traditional – the latter being the more common usage (see section 1 above). The research finds positive educational outcomes for the use of children's *first languages* in schooling, regardless of the kind of language they have acquired (i.e. traditional or contact variety).

Not only can Indigenous children benefit directly from first language instruction, or first-language support in-class, many other improvements relating to Closing the Gap reform agendas can be involved:-

- increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous adults as like-language speakers where communication to local language speakers is included in workplace position descriptions;

- ameliorating participation and engagement by Indigenous community members in schools, such as school attendance, through increased valuing of local skill sets, inclusion of local culture and language etc;

- addressing attitudinal and affective issues, such as whether Indigenous students see sufficient local role models in education, relate to the educational material presented etc;

- building Indigenous students' self-esteem and own cultural identity is clearly necessary, as measures towards Closing the Gap concerning the educational and health disadvantage are required on account of Australia's invasion and colonisation history;

- learning/using traditional Indigenous languages can promote some economic outcomes, such as authenticating artworks (referring to artist's language group has become common practice), adding depth to tourism ventures (tours of country, bush tucker experiences etc).

- promoting students' and their community's identity and culture can lead to economic opportunities (e.g. in music, art, dance, tourism) in locations where income generation is extremely limited;

- recognising cultural capital opens possibilities for communities to exercise some control over their economic choices;

- de-stigmatising, acknowledging and celebrating contact language varieties for their expressive power is important for breaking down communication barriers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recognition of the major role that contact language varieties are playing in communication for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at an everyday, community level is critical. It is vital that as a nation we do not further silence and alienate Indigenous voices in this country. In order to move the National Indigenous Reform Agenda forward, this "strand" of the Indigenous language situation needs to be included in our considerations.

3. The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

"Indigenous languages" might be taken to mean…

i. traditional Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander languages only;

ii. all language varieties spoken exclusively or primarily by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speech communities, i.e. both traditional and contact languages.

There are clear benefits of using young Indigenous children's first languages (L1s), either traditional or contact varieties:

- These are their strongest languages, the languages through which they fluently communicate and optimally comprehend.
- Use of young Indigenous children's L1s promotes linguistic and cultural continuity between home/community and the early childhood setting.
- Support for children's L1s requires like-language staff, which in turn supports young Indigenous children with linguistic and cultural role models in education contexts.

There are also clear benefits for including traditional Indigenous languages in early childhood education:-

- Recognition for local traditional owners, their country and language group – and consequent engagement from the community due to the respect afforded to them;
- "Two-way" Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs including Indigenous and non-Indigenous content, provide a concrete place for Indigenous knowledge which ensures that Indigenous children and their families feel that schooling will reflect their culture and identity;
- Loss of traditional language is a heartfelt matter, so providing youngsters with exposure gives a purposeful reason for cooperation between ECE setting and the community;
- Language Nests, as developed in New Zealand, have been promoted as programs able to reinvigorate weaker languages which have only older speakers, by bringing them together with the younger generation.

The *Understanding Children's Languages Project* (UCLAP), part of DEEWR's *Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, 2007-8*, outlined the importance of including both Indigenous children's first, fluent language (often a contact language variety in the Queensland context) as well as their traditional heritage language in early childhood programmes.

Foundations for Success (DETA, 2008) also promotes continuing Indigenous children's first languages, the languages they have hitherto communicated through, whilst developing SAE in parallel.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* also emphasises the responsibility of schools to create respectful and safe environments.

> Schools need to embrace diversity and explicitly value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages and cultures to enable students to feel culturally safe at school (MCEECDYA 2011 16).

Once again, we need to distinguish between the languages the children speak fluently as their first languages, and those traditional Indigenous languages which constitute their rightful cultural heritage, but which they might not speak fluently. The advantages of utilizing their first and fluent languages are communicative in nature. The advantages of incorporating traditional languages are cultural and resilience-building in nature. Where young children are fluent speakers of their traditional languages this distinction does not apply. However, widespread language shift through most of Queensland means that young Indigenous children on communities mostly speak contact language varieties.

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

The most important measure in Indigenous communities where English is a second language is to teach Standard Australian English (SAE), and this is not always a given in current measures to improve educational outcomes. There is confusion in the idea

that teaching the English curriculum is the same as teaching the language. The English curriculum is written for those who have English already and who will do the literacy activities with English that the curriculum producers would like students to do, e.g. using young children's literature to study narratives and understand characters. The confusion over the English curriculum and English language teaching is related to the current muddle over the difference between literacy and language. Literacy can be done in many languages. In those vast numbers of languages that we are unable to speak, we are not good at doing literacy tasks, e.g. using Roman script in Polish or Italian does not mean that you can read the language.

However, despite the fact that the English curriculum is not a curriculum for teaching the English language for second language students, and the fact that English literacy tasks must rest on underlying knowledge of the English language, where is the systemic guidance for teachers K-10 in the form of an ESL/D syllabus or curriculum?

There are important contextual issues in remote communities where there is little on-time in English. Rather than an urban context where students are immersed in English, in remote communities where there is no apparent need to actively use English it is more the context of a foreign country where English is learnt as a Foreign rather than Second Language. It is important to recognise that there are particularly processes for teaching English as a Foreign Language all over the world.

We feel that it is time to sort through the range of language teaching methodologies and the curricula being presented. There are critical questions that need to be asked, given that these documents are written in English:

- Should the curricula be taught through the student's own language?
- If the people who write the curricula in English expect it to be done in English, does it have to be done in English?
- Should we teach it in the language of the students and gradually teach them what we want them to know in English? We need to be aware that the bilingual methods (of which there are many) are 'tricky'. Advocacy for use of bilingual methods with students who speak contact languages is less popular than advocacy for use of bilingual methods with students who speak traditional languages.
- Should we be teaching the students through the language they do not know and if we do, will we not need a very special kind of approach which familiarises the language at the same time as the matter being taught, and then insert literacy skills into that (literacy being a slightly different thing)? If we use the English only model: i.e. teach students in a language they do not know, we will need ways to do it?

We need to carefully tease apart what apart what are the agendas and what are the values underlying them; we need also to sort out the practicalities in terms of the knowledge and capacity of school staff.

These comments serve as an introduction to significant and deep questions about provision of quality education in communities. The Language Perspectives Group is undertaking extensive materials development, research and capacity development and would appreciate the opportunity to present its work to the Inquiry.

Recommendations:

1. That all references to "Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander languages" indicate clearly whether these are exclusively "traditional" or whether "contact" varieties are included;

2. That the contact language varieties caused by a history of invasion, colonisation, removal and segregation, be recognised as part of a reconciliation and social justice process;

3. That public awareness campaigns, including for government departments and service providers, be undertaken to explain Indigenous language situations, and the need for differentiated educational responses for traditional languages (maintenance, revival, retrieval), as well as the origins and current status of contact language varieties (such as Kriol, Yumplatok, Yarrie Lingo etc);

4. That traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages be supported as a focus for study at the school, VET and tertiary levels, in a manner appropriate to the state of the particular language (i.e. strong, endangered etc);

5. That all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (i.e. traditional and contact varieties) spoken as first languages by students be recognised as their most efficient medium of communication that should be supported in educational contexts, particularly at least until a proficient level of Standard Australian English is acquired.

6. That education aims to maintain students' first languages and to add proficiency in SAE and access to traditional language, if it is not the first language.

7. That educational approaches/programs be required to acknowledge and engage with Indigenous students' language backgrounds and language learning needs.

8. That teacher pre-service training and in-service training be available for understanding Indigenous students' language backgrounds, and for teaching English as a Second Language/Dialect aimed at nurturing multi-lingual Indigenous children.

9. That like-language speakers be employed in all positions involving communication with local people, including teacher assistance positions at schools.

10. That mechanisms need to be developed at school, VET and tertiary levels for recognising fluency/proficiency in Indigenous languages (including contact varieties).

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