



Submission from the Board of Studies NSW to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs regarding the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

The Board of Studies has had a long-term commitment to the development of curriculum to support the teaching of Aboriginal languages in NSW schools. It has employed a small staff of linguistically trained teachers to support the implementation of the NSW *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus*.¹ Consequently it has developed a deep knowledge of the issues, and in particular the positive educational outcomes of effective Aboriginal language programs in schools.

The positive educational outcomes resulting from effective Aboriginal languages programs in schools

In NSW none of the remaining Aboriginal languages is spoken as a first language. Aboriginal students in this state not only want but also need to know as much as possible about who they are and what is special about their heritage. For over two centuries they have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that their language and culture are of no importance. Sadly, educators were one of the groups who discouraged the use of Aboriginal languages, denying Aboriginal people access to the medium through which they connect to their families, their culture and their identity.

Aboriginal languages should be taught in schools for all the same reasons that any language should be taught in schools, including the well-documented cognitive, literacy and intercultural benefits.² In NSW a growing number of students study an Aboriginal language as their mandatory language component of the School Certificate following a syllabus that is based on an equivalent framework to that used for French, Chinese and all the other languages K–10 syllabuses. This sends a clear message to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that Aboriginal languages are real languages that are studied as school subjects by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students³ at exactly the same level as other languages.

¹ NSW Board of Studies 2004, *Aboriginal Languages K – 10 Syllabus*.

² For example, see ACARA (2011) *Draft Shape Paper of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*.

³ The decision on who may study the language is a community decision in NSW schools.

The positive impact on strengthening student identity

The role of language in strengthening student identity is arguably even more important in situations where the language is endangered, as most Australian Languages are.

‘Descendants of speakers will not be learning the language so that they can order a meal in a restaurant or ask directions to the railway station. They will want to know what is special about their heritage.’ *Marianne Mithun*⁴

The Quality Teaching Framework is based on an analysis of the strategies utilised by effective teachers and has been adopted by NSW Department of Education and Communities schools. One of three major dimensions of this framework is ‘significance’. Learning has to be significant and relevant to students, incorporating their cultural knowledge.

As both Noel Pearson, lawyer and leader of Cape York Partnerships, and Martin Nakata, Director of Indigenous Academic Programs, University of Technology, Sydney, argue, a student’s sense of identity must include, but not be limited to, Aboriginal cultural identity. In Nakata’s words, ‘English literacy and understanding the world beyond our communities, is as critically important for our future survival as understanding our traditional pathways.’⁵

Yet, even now, many people, including school teachers, are unaware that there are many different Aboriginal languages and that these are grammatically complex and semantically rich. Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their languages in school in the past,⁶ and were thus subject to a form of oppression which became internalised. They came to believe the dominant group’s view that there was something wrong with their language and culture. Teaching Aboriginal languages in schools is a way to publically and correctly acknowledge that Aboriginal languages are of equal status to any other language and worthy of study. Learning an Aboriginal language in an effective, high quality school language program provides all students with all the academic benefits of any language program, including literacy and numeracy skills.

Research reported on by Peshkin has shown that issues such as cultural discontinuity are more likely to explain student low levels of performance than is the issue of access to funding.⁷ Governments in some jurisdictions have established educational policies that have had the effect of diminishing the influence of cultural practices and norms held by Indigenous students. Reyhner has shown that in many cases, Indigenous students had become involuntary minorities within the school system where educational school-based learning has revolved around the culture of the dominant population at the expense of their own language and culture.⁸

⁴ 2007, ‘Linguistics in the face of language endangerment’ in *Language Endangerment and Endangered Languages: Linguistics and Anthropological Studies with Special Emphasis on the Languages and Cultures of the Andean-Amazonian Border Area*, W.L. Wetzels (ed), Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Leiden, pp.15-34.

⁵ Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training 2006, *What Works. The Work Program: Core issues 3*, http://www.whatworks.edu.au/upload/1250830886867_file_3Literacy.pdf.

⁶ <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-language>

⁷ Peshkin, A 1997, *Places of memory: Whiteman's schools and Native American communities*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

⁸ Reyhner, J 2001, ‘Family, community and school impacts on American Indian and Alaska Native student's success’, literature review presented at 32nd Annual National Indian Education Association Annual Convention 2001, accessed 12 September 2006, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/Family.html>

It has also been argued that, ‘to reverse the widespread pattern of educational failure, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators need to reinforce the cultural identities of the students, actively collaborate with parents, and integrate, wherever possible, both standard and vernacular varieties of cognitively complex language into classroom practices.’⁹ However, research has shown in situations where there is strong support for the local language literacy programs, there has also been some ambivalence amongst people about having their ‘language, history and culture being taught within the school environment.’¹⁰ This sentiment has been regularly heard in Indigenous communities in Australia but when effective, culturally sensitive programs are established these initial concerns are allayed.

The strong link between authentic, high quality language learning and student engagement with schooling

In addition to the usual benefits of learning any language, Aboriginal students have the opportunity to reclaim their languages and their cultural heritage. Non-Aboriginal students discover more about their local Aboriginal language and culture through learning the language, a way that is far more potent since it is authentically learning culture, not merely learning about culture.

A pilot research project by the University of Wollongong and the NSW Board of Studies, *Aboriginal Languages Research: Impact of Learning an Aboriginal Language on Primary School Students’ Literacy in English*¹¹ indicates that learning an Aboriginal language enhances students’ English literacy. There is anecdotal evidence too, that Aboriginal languages programs lead to increased attendance and lower rates of detention.

Further evidence is to be found in the study *Rural Outcomes of Schooling Research Project Report*.¹² This study examined characteristic strategies of rural schools that performed at a higher level than others in state-wide tests.

A significant number of researchers have identified the enormous value of schools developing teaching and learning programs that centre on the inclusion of culturally connected community knowledge with quality teaching practices.¹³ Young has noted that despite the attempts to shift thinking on teaching Indigenous students, school reform and teachers’ ideological beliefs about marginalised students remain largely unchanged.¹⁴ A consequence of these attitudes can be to lower teacher expectations of students and a strong

⁹ McLaughlin, D 1992, *When literacy empowers: Navajo language in print*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

¹⁰ Reyhner, J 2001, ‘Family, community and school impacts on American Indian and Alaska Native student’s success’

¹¹ 2008, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1132&context=edupapers>

¹² NSW Department of Education and Training 2010, *Rural Outcomes of Schooling Research Report*, Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate, accessed 1 September 2010, http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/learning/emsad/rural-outcomes/rural_outcomes.pdf

¹³ Ladson-Billings, G 1995, ‘Towards a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy,’ in *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), pp. 465-491; Gay, G 2002, ‘Preparing for culturally responsive teaching’ in *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, pp. 106-116; Howard, T C 2003, ‘Culturally relevant pedagogy: Ingredients for critical teacher reflection,’ in *Theory into Practice*, 42(3), pp. 195-202.

¹⁴ Young, E 2010, ‘Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice’ in *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(3), pp. 248-260.

correlating belief in deficit thinking about parents and their communities. Often, this is accompanied by lower levels of professional engagement. Many Indigenous commentators have noted that deficit thinking is underpinned by notions of cultural deficiency which constantly locate underprivileged and minority communities in a normative epistemology. The culture and knowledge systems of these communities are looked down upon.¹⁵

Experience has shown that as schools engage with communities in developing effective teaching and learning programs, these notions are fundamentally challenged by the social and cultural engagement that underpins school and community partnerships. Teachers have reported a real shift in their own and their colleagues' understanding of the aspirations, needs and cultures of their students through this process and a commensurate shift in teachers' professional engagement with students and community knowledge.¹⁶

Aboriginal languages education is a key factor in long-term school and community partnership and engagement

School and community partnership and engagement is generally recognised as central to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁷

Those who are currently implementing successful Aboriginal Languages programs testify to the importance of genuine community partnership and engagement. In NSW, it has always been explicit that community consultation is crucial at all stages of program development and implementation.¹⁸ While some school personnel regard consultation, and the need to show consultation, as unnecessary political correctness, others have seen it as a welcome opportunity to build genuine and mutually respectful relationships between the school and the community.

Sobel and Kuglar's research on building successful school and community projects has noted the significance of school programs that acknowledge the importance of the cultural differences between teachers and students.¹⁹ They argue that schools need to achieve a greater understanding of the cultural histories that communities bring with them from their home country, as in many cases there appeared to be little understanding of the importance of parent involvement in their child's education.

It has been noted that it is critical for schools to understand that parents can play a key role in improving the educational outcomes of students,²⁰ but to achieve this with parents who come

¹⁵ Yosso, T 2006, 'Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion on community cultural capital' in *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song*, A. Dixson & C. Rousseau (eds), Routledge, NY, pp. 167-189.

¹⁶ Board of Studies NSW & NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc 2008, *The Journey's Just Begun: Enhancing schools' capacity to partner Aboriginal communities to improve student learning* (handbook and DVD), <http://ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/go/partnerships>

¹⁷ See, for example, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014.

¹⁸ Board of Studies NSW 2004, *Aboriginal Languages Syllabus*, p.5.

¹⁹ Sobel, A and Kugler, E G 2007, 'Building partnerships with immigrant parents' in *Educational Leadership* 64(6).

²⁰ Goos, M 2004, 'Home, school and community partnerships to support children's numeracy' in *APMC* 9(4), pp. 18-20; Anderson-Butcher, D, Stetler, E G, & Midle, T 2006, 'A Case for expanded school-community partnerships in support of positive youth development,' in *Children & Schools*, 28(3), pp. 155-164; Biddulph, F, Biddulph, J, & Biddulph, C 2003, *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand: Best Evidence Synthesis*, New Zealand Ministry of Education, Wellington, NZ.

from cultural minorities, schools must reach out to parents in ways that acknowledge their cultures and languages. This is essential if collaborative engagement between schools and their wider communities is to be developed and maintained.²¹

Consulting with the Aboriginal community can be challenging, not least because it is often difficult to ascertain who 'the community' is.²² However it is essential to start to develop and build relationships, with the help of local Aboriginal people and peak community bodies such as the NSW AECG and local Lands Councils, which can be introduced to the school by Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers or Aboriginal Education Officers.

Introducing an Aboriginal language into the school is a particularly good opportunity to develop a relationship with members and leaders within the local Aboriginal community(ies), provided the school is genuinely prepared to listen to and accept community views. One of the main reasons why Aboriginal people are sometimes opposed to Aboriginal languages being taught is because of past experiences when non-Indigenous people have tried to take control of what is, essentially, community business. However the rewards are significant if a school works with members of the local community to help them meet their aspirations and enable their children to learn and revive their own language.

Characteristics that underpin effective Aboriginal Languages programs in schools

Language learning is inextricably linked to a curriculum that is culturally connected

All language learning is cultural learning. To learn English is not only to acquire a vocabulary and grammatical rules but also to learn the culture of the English-speaking world. In the case of first language speakers, much of this learning is unconscious, the cultural rules seem to be 'common sense'. Second language learners of English quickly learn the importance of using 'please' and 'thank you' if they do not wish to be regarded as rude, since such terms are not universal. In many languages it is acceptable to say what would translate directly into English as commands, 'Give me a coffee!' or 'Shut the door!' So, when we learn another language we must also learn the social and cultural rules of the society. We can of course learn much about other people and cultures through second-hand accounts, but it is through learning their language that we start to really be able to empathise fully with people from another culture.

For Indigenous communities, these cultural mores have been situated in a deeper tension that has implicitly positioned the knowledge of the dominant culture in a superior and privileged position.²³ When considering the role that schools can potentially play in being more responsive to community aspirations, it needs to be noted that schools have historically played a key role in undervaluing or ignoring Indigenous knowledge within the curriculum. Indigenous knowledge, especially that associated with culture and language, has been

²¹ Jeynes, W 2007, 'The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis' in *Urban Education*, 42(1), pp. 82-110.

²² Cowlishaw, G 2010, 'Mythologising Culture' in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*.

²³ Lareau, A 1989, *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education*, Falmer Press, London.

consistently marginalised by both mainstream curriculum and pedagogic practice, and has been regarded as under-theorised and lacking in higher order knowledge production.²⁴

Curricular

In NSW, the inextricable interconnection between language and culture is explicit and recognised in all languages syllabuses, including Aboriginal Languages. Students do not learn a language in a cultural vacuum, but in a context that ensures that, in the case of Aboriginal Languages, students will ‘gain an appreciation of the interdependence of land, language and culture.’²⁵

Effective and substantial language education is at the root of culturally responsive curriculum

Ladson-Billings defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy that is specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment.²⁶ She argued that this rests on three interlocking propositions. These are that students must experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence and develop a critical consciousness through which they are enabled to situate themselves as successful inhabitants within their own cultures as well as within the broader social order. Most commentators have noted that culturally relevant teaching requires that students are able to maintain and reinforce their cultural integrity in an environment of high expectations and where the student’s culture is used as a vehicle for learning.²⁷

Learning the language is the most immediate way to do this and it is important that this be done through effective, substantial language programs taught by well-trained teams. Learning to sing translations of familiar songs such as, ‘Head and shoulders, knees and toes’ in an Aboriginal language is often a safe starting point for teacher and student. Yet it is important to move on, developing resources and skills to enable both students and teachers and community to build their familiarity with the unique cultural knowledge manifested in their language and to grow that language knowledge in ways that are both culturally appropriate and responsive to the reality of a rapidly changing world.

Those involved in teaching and supporting the teaching of languages that are incompletely known and documented face unique challenges. One of the biggest challenges is simultaneously building the skills and confidence of teachers and students while rebuilding the language. This necessitates working sensitively to bring together local community members, people with skills in languages pedagogy, linguists with skills in language reconstruction, classroom teachers, members of the school executive and, in many cases, funding bodies. While some may consider the role of schools and school systems is to teach the language, not to participate in language revival, the reality is that these are not independent activities. It is through teaching and learning a language that it comes alive

²⁴ McCarthy, C, Giardina, M, Harewood, S, & Park, J K 2005, ‘Contesting culture: Identity and curriculum dilemma in the age of globalization, postcolonialism, and multiplicity’ in *Race, identity, and representation in education*, 2nd edn, C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G. Dimitriadis & N. Dolby (eds), Routledge, New York, pp. 153-165.

²⁵ *Aboriginal Languages Syllabus*, p.15.

²⁶ Ladson-Billings, G 1995, ‘But that’s just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy,’ in *Theory into Practice* 34(3), pp.159-165; Ladson-Billings, G. 1995, ‘Towards a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy,’ in *American Educational Research Journal* 32(3), pp. 465-491.

²⁷ Wlodkowski, R, & Ginsberg, M 1995, ‘A Framework for culturally responsive teaching’ in *Educational Leadership*, 53(1), pp.17-21; Castagno, A & Brayboy, B 2008, ‘Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature’ in *Review of Educational Research* 78, pp. 941-993.

again, but in order to teach and learn a language, it is often necessary to draw together community members and linguists with specialised skills in language reconstruction, to help (re)develop the language. Without coordination, school programs often reach a plateau if they do not support language work that enables Aboriginal community language teachers to extend their own skills in the language. At the same time community-based language projects are not sustainable if they do not engage people with professional skills in language reclamation and language pedagogy, ultimately leading to expanded employment opportunities for local community members.

Language effectiveness is best supported by consistent, coherent and ongoing education, commencing as early as possible

It is well-established that effective language programs are those which begin when children are young and particularly receptive to new language experiences. According to the Australian Language and Literature Council language should be part of the core curriculum in primary school.²⁸

The development of the NSW languages syllabuses is based on the understanding that language learning is a cumulative, continuous, coherent acquisition of knowledge and skills in the target language. Sustained exposure to language learning is crucial. Sporadic or interrupted delivery may limit the pedagogical benefits of language learning. For this reason, Aboriginal Languages programs need to be part of the regular ongoing school curriculum. As languages programs are not currently part of the core curriculum for primary schools, they tend to be contingent on whether they are prioritised by the school and whether funding and expertise is available.

Effective languages education requires ongoing support that incorporates teaching and learning planning and strategies, language resources, ongoing training and development

It is essential that any language program is well-planned, well-resourced and taught by professionally trained teachers who have access to ongoing professional development. Aboriginal languages in NSW are no longer spoken ‘right through’²⁹ as a first language and only recently have any been recorded in written form. For this reason, the human and material resources that are available are very limited compared with those for other languages more widely taught in schools.

It is therefore essential for Aboriginal language teaching in NSW to be fully and strategically supported. It is vital that Aboriginal people who aspire to teach their languages are given the training and support to enable them to do so effectively. To support the implementation of the NSW Aboriginal languages syllabus, officers from the Board of Studies, in collaboration with others professionally involved in supporting Aboriginal languages programs have worked over several years with a number of communities to help build their capacity to maintain sustainable language programs in their schools. This has been achieved through ongoing professional development workshops, developing and publishing teaching programs in several NSW languages, and helping to facilitate ongoing support from people with appropriate skills and expertise.

²⁸ 1996.

²⁹ ‘Right-through’ is a term often used by Aboriginal people to refer to native-speaker competence in a language.

It is necessary for the long-term sustainability of programs that the teachers of each language are members of that language community. At present, in order to develop both the language skills and the teaching skills necessary to take full responsibility for developing and maintaining effective language programs, there is a need for Aboriginal community language teachers to have support from non-Indigenous people, as there are insufficient Aboriginal people with the necessary skills and experience. Many need the help of people with expertise in language-teaching pedagogy to develop school programs and help them to develop the necessary skills to deliver them. In those cases where the only available written resources in the language are in the form of inaccessibly dense academic linguistic texts, linguists are needed with the appropriate skills to ‘translate’ a comprehensive, accurate and detailed descriptive grammar of the language (which is what linguists are expected to produce when they ‘document’ a language) into a much-simplified text, which can be used by a skilled language teacher to develop teaching and/or learning materials in that language.

School language learning must be in a context of high expectations

School language learning must be in a context of high expectations, both in terms of syllabus standards, and the expectations of the student. In NSW, the Aboriginal languages K–10 syllabus is currently based on exactly the same framework as all other NSW language syllabuses. Consequently, there is the expectation that, if a student studies, say, Wiradjuri in secondary school as the mandatory language component of the School Certificate, they will have reached a comparable standard with a student who has studied French or Indonesian.

It is also vital for there to be high expectations of the students and the teachers. In the past, Aboriginal language programs were sometimes seen as opportunities to learn a few songs in language and draw some pictures of boomerangs and dilly bags. Even when the language being learned is a reclamation language, it can still be taught in a way that leads to students meeting the same outcomes as in any other language program. It is well-known that language learning enhances cognitive and literacy skills, and this applies to Aboriginal languages just as much as any other language.³⁰

There has sometimes been a tendency for Aboriginal people to have low expectations of Aboriginal students, often a manifestation of internalised oppression. Interestingly these low expectations have been disproved in the context of at least one community language group. Gumbaynggirr people initially did not want non-Indigenous students to learn the language, for fear that they would shame the Gumbaynggirr students by outperforming them. In fact, for timetabling reasons, the community policy on who could learn the language was changed, and the feared outcome did not eventuate.³¹

Simply stated, students require high quality educational programs that are based on well-constructed, sequenced and coherent language programs that are well-resourced and based on quality pedagogic practices. This is challenging but experience has demonstrated that these matters can be addressed in a range of programs that address the issues of school curriculum development and quality pedagogic practices.

³⁰ See *Draft Shape Paper of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*.

³¹ Muurrbay Aboriginal Languages and Culture Cooperative, personal communication.

Acknowledgement of language learning as a core curriculum offering builds community trust and support of the program

The development of an educational program incorporating a high quality Indigenous language curriculum component provides significant levels of educational validity through the community engagement and extensive Indigenous knowledge that is embedded with it. While there is an argument for the development of high quality Indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum, an Indigenous languages program provides the opportunity for extensive and coherent learning of Indigenous knowledge.

When Aboriginal languages are a recognised and valued part of the curriculum, not an optional extra, the community can start to trust that this is something that will not be abandoned lightly. There are many cases where community members have devoted years of effort to developing their own skills in the local language, producing resources and teaching, often for little payment, only to see the program disappear because of a change of classroom teacher or school principal. This is particularly dispiriting for the Aboriginal people who typically remain in their community year after year, while school personnel tend to move on quite regularly.

Aboriginal languages development needs the support of strong national and state policy and strategic plans. The prominent place of Australian Languages in the Australian Curriculum is significant in putting this policy into action.

NSW has had an Aboriginal Languages Policy and Aboriginal Languages syllabus for several years. With the inclusion of Australian Languages (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages) in the Australian Curriculum, Aboriginal Languages will take a more prominent role in education nationally. With years of experience in developing, implementing and supporting the *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus* across NSW, the Board of Studies is cognisant of the need for strong national policy and strategy to support Australian Languages education.

Experience in the development and implementation of the state policy through the *NSW Aboriginal Languages K – 10 Syllabus* has clearly demonstrated that the long-term survival of Australia's Indigenous languages cannot occur without concurrent strategic action in the area of language revitalisation, community language learning, teacher training, resource development and language research. Lessons learnt from the many programs in which the Board has been involved include the need for high-level support from regional and local school leaders, and the need for schools to enter into long-term educational partnerships with parents and Aboriginal community members. It has been demonstrated that advocacy at the highest level, leading to the establishment of a quality sustainable language program, is essential before Aboriginal communities will really embrace the school.

Success can be measured when students are able to work with the language to participate in developing, manipulating and using language in a range of environments. This is an achievable and realistic outcome if government and their agencies work closely with Aboriginal people in promoting innovative engagement in meaningful, culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy.

The speakers and descendants of speakers of Australian Languages naturally, and rightly, want to have community control over their languages. Language educators want to ensure that languages are taught in ways that are effective and pedagogically sound. Linguists often want to ensure that the integrity and authenticity of the traditional languages is maintained. Education administrators want programs to be cost. Negotiating the sometimes conflicting, though generally justifiable, agendas of the various stakeholders to achieve outcomes that are acceptable to all involved is essential, but requires time, skill and effort. If there is a genuine commitment to the ancient and unique languages that are endemic to this continent alone, then Australian Languages education needs to be skilfully and strategically supported and resourced effectively.