Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities 2011

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Natalie O'Connor and I have been living and working in central Australia since 2006 as a youth arts/community development worker in Yuendumu, Alice Springs and on various other communities on Warlpiri and APY lands. I am making this submission as an individual and am not representing any organisation that I work for.

For the past two years I have been working with InCite Youth Arts Inc. and the Warlpiri Youth Diversionary Aboriginal Corporation (formerly known as the Mt Theo Program) to run a cultural transference project, 'Southern Ngalia' Dance Camps (Southern Warlpiri Dance Camps). This project supports senior women and girls/young women in Yuendumu to hold four-day camps out on country so as the young women/girls can learn the songs and dances of their culture and maintain and build healthy inter-generational relationships. The project was started after senior women expressed concern that the young women were not receiving enough opportunities to engage in ceremony, thereby reducing the social and emotional benefits that maintaining a strong culture entails for both young and senior women.

During the camps it became apparent that although the young women were singing and dancing and benefiting from the experience, they were not able to fully engage in the ceremony as they do not understand much of the 'old person's Warlpiri' dialect that is used in ceremony (despite being fluent 'everyday Warlpiri' language' speakers). Some young women requested that the elder women teach them the 'Old Warlpiri' so that they can fully access their cultural heritage. We discussed the ways in which the middle-aged ladies have learnt, and are still learning, the old dialect from the elders. They stated that they learn by listening to them over and over again in ceremony. Unless opportunities for young people to engage in ceremonies with elders increase, and language preservation becomes a priority, it is likely that this important knowledge will be lost.

Although it may be culturally inappropriate to learn sensitive ceremonial information in schools, in terms of maintaining 'everyday' Warlpiri language, (given the increasing

influx of competing mainstream discourses post-colonisation) it is unrealistic to expect it to be continued in its current strength into the future without including it in formal education. Also, building on students' strengths (curriculum in the classroom that uses scaffolding within its pedagogies, i.e., teaching which bases the unknown on the known – second language based on first language) is widely promoted by educators as providing the basis for successful second language acquisition. Given that many of these young women are no longer attending school (approx 14, 15 years old), it is worrying to think that their skills are diminishing in both first and second languages.

I believe the young women's interest in learning the old dialect demonstrates the importance that many young Warlpiri women still attach to their culture and language. In relation to the Inquiry's interest in '*Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language',* I would argue that utilizing the first language and culture of students, as well as enlisting the authority that elders hold in relation to young people, is an important tool available for supporting engagement in education. The 2009 NT Government directive which made it compulsory for all schools to deliver at least the first four hours of the school day in English, leaving only the last hour for classes to teach Indigenous culture and language effectively shuts down this mode of engagement.

Targeted ESL and bilingual programs support teachers to encourage their students to bring their particular cultural knowledge and language forms into the classroom to compare with Standard Australian English forms. Educators Bevan and Shillinglaw proclaim that if remote Indigenous students are to learn to function successfully in both local and mainstream cultures, then teaching students the value of both linguistic systems, and how they can be utilized in differing circumstances ('Code switching'), is necessary.[1] As bilingual advocate Christine Nicholls states, this is the predominant ideology of Bilingual Education, not to privilege local languages over English, but have the two languages 'walking side by side'.

Bilingual education also supports the creation of employment and meaningful work for Aboriginal Teachers and Teacher's Aids. With the majority of the teaching being delivered in English, this effectively means teachers who are not highly fluent in

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[1] Bevan, C, Shilinglaw, D, *'Literacy Learning: the Middle Years,'* Volume 18 Number 2 June 2010, p.1

English would be required to work as Aids or Interpreters rather than holding the main teaching positions within the classroom. It may be argued that this not only erodes the self-esteem and position of authority of the local teachers with the children and the community, but in a situation where children are already being taught that English is superior to their first language, (through the privileging of English over traditional languages in the classroom) viewing the respected elders as holding secondary status within their classrooms may mentor to the children that their teachers, culture, and eventually themselves, are inferior.

Also, it is commonly stated within the communities, media and Education department that the constant high turnover of non-local teachers is detrimental to routine and consistency in schools. It is therefore imperative that local teachers who will remain living and working in their communities are properly valued and supported to remain teaching and to attract others to the profession.

As heritage, world-views, and knowledge are contained within linguistic practices, to lose them at the present rate (from approximately 250 languages at the time of British colonization, at least one language has been lost per year), is to impoverish not only the communities from which they emerge but the wider social fabric of mainstream Australia and the world; which interacts, learns from and is created by and through this knowledge. Bilingual programs enable the right for Aboriginal people to determine how their children should be educated "with the role of non-Aboriginals becoming more consultative in nature i.e. more consultative than directive."[2]

The short history of Bilingual Education and Research in the Northern Territory has already developed a multitude of rich learning and teaching methodologies to address the educational disparity that exists between remote Indigenous students and mainstream students. I believe it is time to reinvestigate these methodologies and reinstate bilingual education.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on these issues,

Natalie O'Connor

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[2] O'Grady and Hale, Nicholls, in C, 'Death by a Thousand Cuts: Indigenous Language Bilingual Education Programmes in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1972 -1998', The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, p. 164 Ibid, p. 161