

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

When students have to leave their primary language at the school gates, they also leave a part of their cultural identity behind. (Agirdag, 2009, p 21)

This highlights the fact that, apart from the need to value and nurture our Indigenous languages as they are ...*a unique and integral part of Australia's linguistic heritage and as such have the potential to enrich Australian society as a whole and assist in developing respect and understanding between Aboriginal Australians and others.* (Aboriginal Languages of WA, p 3), there are other compelling imperatives.

Connecting home and school

Orhan Agirdag points out in *All Languages Welcomed Here*, (2009) page 21, that '*Cultural discontinuity between students' home-based and school-based experiences can have a negative effect on their academic performance, well-being, and sense of belonging at school. The larger the gap between these two experiences, the greater the disadvantage of cultural discontinuity (Gay, 2000).*

As Cummins (2001) noted, "To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child" (p. 19). Therefore, educators must try to close the gap between language learners' identities, which are intricately tied to language, and the school culture.'

Agirdag also says that the '*... presence of students' home languages in school not only affirms language learners' identities, but also reduces linguistic barriers, opening doors for educators to build improved relationships with the learners' families and communities.'*

This notion has been reinforced through other research, '*It is only with one foot placed squarely, securely within the known, the familiar, that the child can place the other foot in the beyond'* Lindfors, 1991, p. 282).

Research such as this indicates that it is vital for student's first language to be recognised, valued and accepted if optimal academic progress is to be achieved.

Well-being and academic performance

The Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages also claims that language learning is valuable as it ... '*extends students' understanding of themselves, their own heritage and identities, and their sense of connectedness to others through reflection on their experiences and those of others (Dot point 17 p. 9)*'.

It continues to outline the benefits of language learning and, in a section on the learning of Australian Languages, it refers to the policy document, '*Indigenous languages – A national approach*' that underscores several beneficial actions:

- c. Working with Languages to Close the Gap: In areas where Indigenous languages are being spoken fully and passed on, making sure that government recognises and works with these languages in its agenda to Close the Gap.*
- d. Strengthening Pride in Identity and Culture: To restore the use of rarely spoken or unspoken Indigenous languages to the extent that the current language environment allows.*

e. Supporting Indigenous Language Programs in Schools: To support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools.
(Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2009)

With reference to the well-being of Aboriginal students, it needs to be noted that a recent survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics highlights the importance of language learning, particularly the maintenance of first language. It maintains that Aboriginal students between the age of 15 and 24 who speak a traditional language are less likely to indulge in risky alcohol consumption than those who don't.

From this it is clear that maintenance of first language is vital to student's well-being and subsequent academic/work place/social achievement.

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

Terminology

At this point there is a need to clarify the meaning of some terminology. For example: Indigenous Communities. Is this just used to refer to remote or rural communities and exclusive of non-Aboriginal residents or is it used, as we interpret it in its broader sense, inclusive of urban Indigenous communities. Also, when we use the term Indigenous languages, in relation to the Western Australian Curriculum, this is inclusive of Aboriginal English and Kriol. This is an important issue as, while the emphasis is on developing proficiency in Standard Australian English [SAE]), it is imperative that they be recognized, valued and used, in a bi-cultural approach, as instruments of further learning if identity and culture are to be strengthened in users of these as a first language.

A bi-cultural approach

An example of this bicultural approach can be found in Western Australia in one of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) courses for senior secondary students, the English as an Additional Language or Dialect course. This course is designed to meet the specific linguistic, cultural and educational needs of students learning SAE as an additional language or dialect.

In the rationale of this course it states that, '...There are also unifying features that have been identified by research into the learning of an additional language or dialect, one of which is that learning will be enhanced when the student's first language/dialect is valued and maintained. A first language is the vehicle for transmitting culture. It influences ways of thinking and shapes world views. As such it should be used as the basis for the learning of additional languages or dialects and its continued use encouraged as appropriate for audience and purpose'.

It then provides an explanation of Aboriginal English. *'What is Aboriginal English? Aboriginal English has been defined as "... a range of varieties of English spoken by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and some others in close contact with them which differ in systematic ways from Standard Australian English at all levels of linguistic structure and which are used for distinctive speech acts, speech events and genres" (p.19 Malcolm, 1995).*

In the past, Aboriginal English was stigmatised by many speakers of SAE, and indeed by some Aboriginal English speakers themselves. It is now widely understood that it is a marker of Indigenous identity and is a distinct dialect of English such as Singlish and Manglish. (Curriculum Council, EALD Syllabus, 2007)

Assessment/monitoring: cultural bias

With reference to Closing the Gap the learning of SAE by many Aboriginal students must be viewed in the context of additional language or dialect learning. The assumption, therefore, that a first language pathway and continuum of progress can be used to make judgements about these students' achievement in SAE is inappropriate. These students are on a second or additional language learning pathway and a progress map such as the West Australian EAL/EAD Progress Map needs to be used to assess their level of proficiency in SAE. It is for this reason also that tests such as NAPLAN do not provide a valid picture of the situation and in fact can act as a deterrent to progress in the learning of SAE as it encourages a 'deficit' rather than a 'difference' view.

Malcolm, (2011) p 197, claims that it is possible to ... *develop more contextually realistic approaches in which test bias against Indigenous students is reduced by translating test language into the language of the Indigenous learner, using interpreters in administering tests, identifying and replacing biased test items, and, where necessary, abandoning standardised language assessment in favour of 'alternative assessment methodology' based on language sampling. Where ESL Bandscales or progress maps are being used to follow the path of students' learning, they can be adjusted to show the distinctive developmental patterns of learners of Standard English as a second dialect, as has been done by Turnbull (1999) and Buist et al. (2002) in northern Australian contexts.*

The use of alternative progress maps not only acknowledges prior knowledge and current abilities, but can act as a bridge towards mainstream SAE progress maps. This is an effective way of closing the gap.

Unfortunately the term 'closing the gap' also carries the implication of a deficit notion rather than the celebration of being able to operate proficiently within and across cultures and languages.

It is imperative that all languages spoken by Indigenous peoples as a first language be recognised, respected, and their continuation encouraged - not just for their value as a language but as a marker of identity.

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

Recent research indicates that the earlier a child begins to develop pre literacy skills the more likely they are to develop good literacy skills and habits. The points raised in relation to the first term of reference are just as viable for early learning as they are for subsequent learning – in fact a little more important because if the cultural difference between home and school is great it can undermine identity and self esteem at an early age and impact on general 'well-being'.

As Beverley Clark says: *there is real concern that if children do not fully acquire their first language, they may have difficulty later in becoming fully literate and academically proficient in the second language (Collier, 1992, 1995a; Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1981,1991; Collier & Thomas, 1995). The interactive relationship between language and cognitive growth is important. Preserving and strengthening the home language supports the continuity of cognitive growth.*

With regard to early education, this is also when children are at their most curious. With Aboriginal languages, there is a valuable opportunity to engage a new generation of learners and future teachers. This is essential to the maintenance of these languages.

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

Second or additional

In relation to this term of reference it needs to be noted that, for many students, Standard Australian English will be an additional language and not just a second one. Therefore there is a recommendation that this terminology 'an additional language' be adopted as this recognises the other language skills and knowledge that the students bring to the learning context. It also implicitly identifies the need for educational programs to aim for developing 'additive' bilinguals and not 'subtractive' bilinguals.

Evidence of improvement

In WA some regional/remote communities are experiencing improved outcomes for older students through implementing an integrated, bi-cultural approach using programs developed by the Curriculum Council and the Department of Education. These programs take a bicultural approach that includes, where possible, the teaching of the community language, not only as a vehicle for improving literacy but as a WACE course that counts towards graduation. There is also anecdotal evidence available (from an outer Metropolitan school) that indicates that this approach has significantly improved attendance and engagement and thus the overall well-being of some students who were previously totally disengaged.

In the primary schools, where teachers are using the WA ESL/ESD WA Progress Map to guide their teaching/learning/assessment programs there is also evidence of improved outcomes. These programs are able to focus on the real needs of the students as indicated by the use of appropriate assessment and monitoring materials.

Students themselves have indicated the need for the inclusion of a recognition of language and culture in the curriculum. This was indicated by responses to interviews carried out during a survey of Aboriginal student perceptions of senior secondary schooling conducted by the Curriculum Council (2008). Many students interviewed indicated a strong desire for language and culture to be included in the curriculum. Where they were included the students were very positive.

For example, in one school the students explained that they studied a traditional language and that it provided them with an opportunity to learn more about their culture and themselves. *As I learn the language I learn more about myself.* The opportunity to learn their own culture was further consolidated by the inclusion of Aboriginal culture into the curriculum and the provision of excursions for students to experience cultural events and activities in their local community. *You get to learn more about who you are. I'm learning about who I am.*

In another school where language and culture were ignored the student said ... *It's stressful ... You just have to kind of fit in.*

Where boarding school was provided as an option the response was ...*it's hard to be away from my family.*

In response to NAIDOC celebrations ... *why can't we have NAIDOC week all year. You know they think Aboriginal culture should be the same and celebrated the whole year round.*

In general ... *I would have liked to have learned the language so I can understand some people a lot better. I liked to know what people are saying when I pass them on the street.*

(Curriculum Council, 2008)

The above indicates that what is needed to improve education outcomes is a bi-cultural approach using appropriate programs and employing the BEST teachers who are trained to teach EALD students.

The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities

With reference to the Curriculum Council survey (2008) – students interviewed indicated that they have the same aspirations as every other student in WA. These of course are dependent upon having SAE language competence (as well as competence in first language/s) but there also needs to be recognition of the potential of these students.

It is a matter of social justice and equity that all students are able to make informed choices and follow pathways to match their aspirations through appropriate educational opportunities, offered by the school, as well as developing SAE competence. Students interviewed in the survey expressed concern that they were unable to follow certain pathways because of the assumption that their English wasn't good enough and therefore they weren't clever enough to pursue certain pathways.

Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

While recognising that there are services available it is necessary to improve these to ensure that the service is available in the areas of education, health, justice and social services in the same way for Aboriginal language speakers that they are for speakers of many immigrant languages.

The additional issue of many Aboriginal people being speakers of Aboriginal English should also be included and addressed. For them there is a need for a cultural interpreting service that has strong skills in the use of Aboriginal English and the cultural conceptual differences that exist between Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

As indicated previously, the Curriculum Council survey (2008) showed that, where a bicultural approach has been adopted in the school, or an Aboriginal language has been taught, there has been increased attendance, engagement and achievement, not to mention improved well-being, by Aboriginal students.

The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.

McKay (2011) pp 21 & 22, maintains that we '*...have already noted the increase in policy specifically targeting Indigenous languages, both at state and national levels in Australia over the past couple of decades. None of this policy development is as well integrated or comprehensive as the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987). What is also apparent is that actual implementation does not often live up to the promise of the policies that have been drawn up and is potentially the victim of political pressure, ignorance and expedience. An even more serious issue is the fact that the 'invisible language policy' favouring Standard Australian English is everywhere in evidence in Australia, undermining many of the policy statements favouring Indigenous languages, as cogently argued by Truscott and Malcolm (2010).*

According to Veykont, (2002) '*...schools are being used as a vehicle to impose English on children and to strip away native languages and cultural identities*'.

Policy will never be effective unless it is translated into the use of good, viable and appropriate materials, such as the sample integrated literacy and numeracy WACE programs, that have been developed in WA for the Years 10, 11 and 12 students and the ESL/ESD progress maps, referred to earlier. These will enable teachers to improve educational outcomes for students as they progress through their primary and secondary education and allow them to ultimately follow a path way that will lead to secondary graduation.

They foster the development of language and culture so that this will not only develop general 'well-being' as articulated in the *Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014* but lead to the maintenance of traditional languages while also focussing on the development of proficiency in literacy and numeracy in SAE.

Policy and practice is required that responds to Noel Pearson's vision. *We do need economically and socially sustainable lives; but it is our cultural link with the past – a link that would break without language – that makes our lives spiritually sustainable as members of a conquered people. What we need more than anything else is to*

see that our tongues are not dying languages spoken only in a few homes but languages with a future: growing, officially recognised languages of Australia.

What is required is not just policy but action based on implementing appropriate strategies, such as a bi-cultural approach for Indigenous students, that will not only revitalise and maintain Indigenous languages and create respect for all but will strengthen identity, well-being and academic outcomes. It is only in this way that Noel's vision will be achieved.

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