

**DATE:** 19<sup>th</sup> August

**TO:** Committee Secretary  
 House of Representatives Standing Committee on  
 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs  
 PO Box 6021  
 Parliament House  
 CANBERRA ACT 2600

**FROM:** Dr Mary Laughren, Honorary Research Consultant, The University of Queensland

**RE: Submission to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities**

I welcome this opportunity to make a submission to your important Inquiry. Since 1975 when I was appointed to the position of Senior Research Officer (linguist) with the NT Division of the Department of Education and sent to support the incipient bilingual Warlpiri-English program in Yuendumu School, and later in other Warlpiri community schools such as Willowra (from 1976), Lajamanu (from 1981) and Nyirrpi (late 1980's), I have been involved in education in Warlpiri community schools. From 1990-93 I was also responsible for giving linguistic support to Luritja and Pitjantjatjara-English programs in Papunya, Docker River and Areyonga. While lecturing in linguistics at The University of Queensland from mid 1993 to 2009, I maintained a program of linguistic research taking me regularly to Warlpiri communities where I continued to attend and engage in the work of the "Warlpiri Triangle" meetings of Warlpiri teachers, teacher-linguists and/or principals held annually in a Warlpiri community to set the parameters of the Warlpiri language and culture in school programs, develop curricula, teaching skills and classroom materials. Since 2000 I have also documented the Waanyi language (south of the Gulf of Carpentaria) with some of the few remaining speakers, and have supported attempts by Waanyi organisations to teach their language to Waanyi children attending Doomadgee (Qld) school, by compiling and making available a dictionary of the language in both hard copy and electronically accessible forms.

I take this opportunity to share some of my thinking about Indigenous languages in relation to education as it applies in remote indigenous communities in the NT. I will do this by addressing some of the focus areas set out for this Inquiry.

**• The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

The notion of "indigenous language" is a complex one, since it may range from a traditional (or heritage) language, to a variety of English, and may include new 'mixed languages' such as *Light Warlpiri* (O'Shannessy 2005) or *Gurindji-Kriol* (Meakins & McConvell 2005), or a creole mainly lexified from English but with a typical Australian Aboriginal language phonology and grammar.

Language is one of the main markers of a particular group, as well as being the vehicle for in-group inter-communication. People typically have a strong emotional link to their language, and speaking (and or writing) it well is highly prized. However, in the contact situation in Australia between non-indigenous institutions, indigenous people are often bombarded with the message that their language and culture is worthless, useless and in

fact an impediment to progress to be eliminated.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, I have seen the increasing dysfunctionality of many traditional Aboriginal communities (settled after WW2) revealed by long term unresolved conflicts between families, extreme risk-taking by young people involving alcohol abuse, petrol-sniffing, sexual promiscuity, self harm (including suicide). One element of this is often the breakdown in communication between elders and youth, to some extent reflected in very different ways of talking within groups, elders speaking among themselves the traditional language, while young people speak a 'mixed' language based on creole, English and their heritage language. In conversation between the generations, speakers on both sides make concessions by using a mixture of English and the traditional language (i.e., code-switching). While the generation born before the establishment of settlements retains its pride in being members of a distinct indigenous group (e.g., Warlpiri) and speaking their ancestral language, as do their children and grandchildren, subsequent generations are perhaps more sensitive to outside values and perceptions and so project another image which involves a more 'contemporary' way of speaking and acting.

The **benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages** will emerge as I address the following topics.

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

Where they were properly resourced and supported at the local school level and from the higher echelons of Department of Education (NT), the bilingual school programs produced children who could read and write both English and their local indigenous language fluently by the end of primary school. Many of these children have been able, as adults, to find meaningful employment in their communities, and have continued to develop their knowledge and skills, which not only enriches their lives, but very importantly, the lives of their children and grandchildren.

The introduction of bilingual education programs by the Whitlam government, continued under the Fraser government and under subsequent NT administrations until 2008 led to a remarkable explosion of creativity and energy in schools and communities in Aboriginal communities. Interaction between school and community was the order of the day. Hundreds of books written by local people and illustrated by local artists were produced, many inspired by stories and information supplied by respected elders. Local news sheets were produced, poets and song-writers emerged in the communities to produce materials that children were eager to learn and could relate to. The subject matter of these locally produced school materials ranged from traditional stories, local history, environmental knowledge (flora, fauna, land forms, seasons, weather etc.), local portraits, mathematics, kinship systems, contemporary life and current news. As new technologies emerged they were eagerly taken up by indigenous literacy workers and teachers.

One of the perhaps unforeseen outcomes of the early bilingual language programs was that many of the local indigenous teaching assistants elected to engage in further study in order to become trained teachers through Batchelor Institute's teacher education programs. Similarly many of the literacy workers who wrote, illustrated, created language materials (readers, books, charts, games, videos etc) also opted to gain more skills through programs run out of the Batchelor Institute. These people have formed the backbone of Warlpiri education in the Warlpiri community schools, for example.

Some left education for other jobs which required many of the same skills, especially in bilingual literacy and ability to translate between languages and cultures.

Unfortunately, because of changes to the Batchelor Institute education programs, and also perhaps because of the poor quality of institutional support given to the bilingual education programs in the schools, including the diminishing number of teaching assistants employed, there are no Warlpiri school graduates opting to engage in teacher education, so that when the current trained Warlpiri teachers (now in their 50's) retire, they will not be replaced by trained Warlpiri teachers; rather they will be replaced by non-indigenous teachers which brings us back to the situation I found in 1975. Although many of us, including the Warlpiri teachers, have been signalling this for many years, I have not been able to detect any planning by the education department in the NT to overcome this sad state of affairs. (I am told that this situation is fairly general across the NT.)

Bilingual education prepared students to take on a range of job opportunities in their communities such as documenting the art works produced and sold through local Art Centres and acting as liaison persons between artists and non-indigenous centre coordinators, curators and clients. The very successful ranger programs also draw on the skills of those trained to read and write their indigenous language as well as English, and who have a good knowledge of their local environment. In fact many of the upcoming artists graduated from bilingual education programs.

Similarly, employment opportunities in the health centres are better filled by local people who can speak the local language as well as English and who can provide informational materials in both English and the local language. Some of the most competent health workers were former literacy workers and teaching assistants, literate in Warlpiri and English.

Another area of employment in indigenous communities open to students educated bilingually and biculturally is in media – local radio, film and DVD production, see examples at <http://www.pawmedia.com.au>. There is a group of very talented young people (men and women) in communities such as Yuendumu and Lajamanu who are engaged in the production of short films of all sorts which involve local themes and language. These skills, along with their ability to speak and write both Warlpiri and English has led to very meaningful employment and to a fulfilling way of life that does not involve dependence on alcohol or other drugs. Their films are widely distributed, e.g. on UTUBE, some distributed commercially.

Another striking facet of life on remote indigenous communities is the existence of many musical bands in which mainly young men play a range of musical genres on European instruments. These young men are remarkable for their creativity, composing the lyrics, most often in their local language, but also in English, or a mixture of languages. Many of these bands have been professionally recorded and CDs of their music is commercially distributed through organisations such as CAAMA music, PAWmedia, Skinnyfish Records etc. The presentation of CDs includes covers and booklets with the song titles and lyrics. Graduates of genuine bilingual education programs with bilingual literacy are the ones capable of producing these CDs.

A lot of research is carried out in remote indigenous communities by academics from diverse discipline areas. The bilingual education programs gave students the tools to engage meaningfully with many of these researchers and to find interesting employment with them. In some cases this has led to other educational and employment possibilities,

including an interest in further study and carrying out serious research in partnership with others.

In late July 2011, in collaboration with anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski (pictured), I showed Lajamanu people aged from 8 to 80 how they could access research materials (video and audio recordings photographs and field notes) collected by the anthropologist since 1979, from a password protected website ([www.odsas.fr](http://www.odsas.fr)). Middle-aged and young people entered the site confidently and added their annotations in Warlpiri and English, using computers in Warnayaka Arts Centre and Lajamanu Knowledge Centre.

An older woman who has worked since 1980's at Lajamanu School and who has long championed Warlpiri language and culture inclusion in the school curriculum worked for 3 hours on 3 days to transcribe 3 lengthy Warlpiri texts spoken by her late parents. Other people dictated the Warlpiri audio texts they were particularly interested in to add to the documentation. Over four days we had a non-stop stream of Warlpiri people asking to see and listen to the material relating to their older relations. This is the sort of material that people relate to and are motivated to read and learn about. Unfortunately the Education Department has decided that such materials are to be marginalized in their school programs.

While the former bilingual Warlpiri program provided Warlpiri language and literacy classes each school day, since the introduction of first four hours of teaching in English by the NT government, children are only allowed 30 minutes of Warlpiri instruction per week, held in the afternoon. This sends a very negative message to the children and their families of the value the NT government places on their Warlpiri language and culture. Children currently attending the school will possibly not be able to sit down and transcribe a Warlpiri text, because they were never given the opportunity to learn to read and write their own language during their school years.

I believe that this sort of negative, denigrating message may be a contributing factor, among others, to the negative feelings of self worth seen in some dangerous and antisocial youth behaviour, including suicide.

• **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

Having been able to observe first hand the effects of having children in early education taught by teachers and/or teaching assistants who speak the language of the children and who belong to the children's community and family groups and to compare with classes in which children are taught exclusively by English-only speaking outsiders, I can make the following observations about the actual benefits:

1. The passage between home and school is natural and non-threatening.
2. Children are able to understand all that is said to them and so retain their natural confidence and enthusiasm for learning.
3. Children can express themselves freely, so one finds lively happy classrooms, as opposed to classrooms in which 90% of the talk comes from the English-speaking non-indigenous teacher. Young children exposed to hours of continuous English get very tired, and tend to opt out, either by failing to pay attention in class or by irregular attendance at school.
4. Children are meaningfully exposed to writing in their language from pre-school, through being read stories from books or charts, learning to sing and act out songs that may also be written on boards, and other forms of play which involve language and which extend the children's vocabulary and their ability to listen and speak in

public.

5. Children's learning in all areas of knowledge is not held back by their inability to understand or speak English.
6. English can be introduced gradually so that it is taught in a meaningful and attention holding way, in chunks of time that are digestible for young children.
7. The use of their own home language in early education sends a strong message to the children that their community's language and culture is respected in the school and that it is worth making an effort to teach and extend children's knowledge of their own language and culture alongside the wider English-speaking culture.
8. Where use of the home language is encouraged, parents and grandparents and other carers feel comfortable in coming into the school or preschool and in engaging with the young children and their teachers in the learning experiences.

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

Drawing on my 36 years of contact with such communities I offer the following proposals:

1. Education Department personnel must genuinely engage with communities and display respect for the community hosting a school, by showing respect for local staff employed in the school, for community elders and institutions and for the language and culture of the community.
2. Draw on the strengths and interests of the community, e.g., artists selling their art on the national and international markets, musicians in the many talented and creative bands, local sporting teams (e.g, AFL teams), young film-makers, local ranger programs etc. Invite these community groups into the school and devise curricula around these areas of genuine interest and engagement. Stop all the 'gap' and 'deficit' rhetoric and replace it with positive recognition of the many and varied creative talents found in communities.
3. Convert the jail-like schools currently seen in some communities into more open welcoming places. These send a clear message to the community (including the children) that local people and their values, language and culture are not welcome. These sorts of schools are deeply resented and resisted by local people, indigenous and non-indigenous.
4. Reintroduce properly resourced bilingual/bicultural education programs with a linguist, teacher-linguist, literacy workers, local teachers, and include a genuine program of training and orientation on how to support such programs for non-local teachers.
5. Bring back some equivalent of the 'School Inspector' to ensure that school principals support bilingual programs, that teachers are actually teaching and are getting adequate support, and that children are really learning.
6. Cease the rhetoric about punishing parents of children not coming to school, and instead examine critically what is going on in the schools that leads to children not attending (as well as events in communities that may prevent children from attending regularly). Why do so few European parents elect to send their children to schools on remote Aboriginal communities?
7. Invest in the local teachers and teaching assistants by once again providing on-going further education and a realistic career path for them, so that they may qualify as fully trained teachers and educational administrators. Given the amazingly high turnover of non-local teachers and principals in remote community schools, stability is mainly

provided by the local teachers some of whom have worked in the schools for over 20 years. However, these local teaching staff tend to be sidelined and often not involved in decision-making as new white staff arrive and take over.<sup>1</sup> Local staff in some Warlpiri communities often express to me their frustration and feelings of alienation from the school they have worked in for decades, and their feelings of powerlessness to change things. They just sit and wait until the principal or other staff leave (as they know they will) and hope for someone better to turn up in the staffing lottery.

8. Earmark school support positions as local, e.g., school bus driver, cleaners, yardsmen/women. When I arrived in Yuendumu in 1975 and Willowra in 1976 all school support positions were held by local people. Today they are mostly held by non-local people. The presence of local people in these school positions is another important element in the education scene – it demonstrates to children that the school does contribute to the community and the community to the school on something like equal social and economic terms.
9. Set up genuine community based School Councils with representatives from other institutions on communities which employ or engage with young people, as well as representatives of teaching staff. Meetings should be chaired by School Council Chair, not run by Principal. School Councils should be involved in teaching, curriculum, discipline, staffing decisions etc.
10. Over the years I have seen the difference a good principal who engages with the community and school staff and who makes sure that children are really learning can make. I would invest heavily to engage and retain good quality principals who would be given clear criteria to guide them, including responsibility for ongoing career development of local staff.
11. Relieve school principals and teachers of the mostly silly bureaucratic tasks that have been loaded on them, and allow them to devote at least 95% of their time, talents and efforts to teaching.
12. Set up an adult-education service (as used to exist) in communities that is independent of the schools, but which works in cooperation with them where appropriate. This service would work in collaboration with existing youth services, Centrelink, Shires, educational providers (e.g., Batchelor, CDU, NT Library etc) to ensure that the potential for ongoing education and training and employment support is provided.
13. Ensure that all teachers in remote indigenous schools have some training in teaching English as a second language and are given on-going professional support.
14. Ensure funding to NT Library to ensure that the services it provides to communities function, and grow.

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

All agree that children graduating from schools in indigenous communities should graduate with a high standard of spoken and written English. Without it, graduates will be severely restricted in their employment possibilities and wider life choices.

- **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages.**

The funding provided to some of the Indigenous Language Resource Centres has

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<sup>1</sup> A young woman who had worked in the Lajamanu school told me (August 2011) that only half the number of local people work in the school compared to 4 years ago.

permitted some excellent language and culture documentation to take place as well as venues for the transfer of traditional knowledge to young children, and the professional development of indigenous workers. It is important that these programs be regularly audited to make sure that they are functioning well, to provide guidance and support, and to help resolve any detected problems or short-comings. The most prolific and productive centres I have observed have a good working relationship between indigenous community leaders and centre coordinators, trained linguists and indigenous staff.

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

At present in remote communities in the NT remote communities there seems to be a real conflict of policy with respect to Aboriginal languages and culture, so that while many government services are supporting the maintenance and/or revitalisation of language, and are plugging into local language competence to achieve educational goals, some of the schools – depending on the local principal and white teaching staff – have used the “4 hours of English only every morning” decree to minimize or even eliminate the local language content and to marginalise local teaching staff. Some school programs seem to have been reduced to English literacy plus some arithmetic – with little time given to other school subjects, possibly in a bid to get children trained up for NAPLAN tests. Is it any wonder that school attendance has dropped considerably since this regime has been in place? From the Tiwi Islands to the desert, one hears upset elders who have been told that their language and culture is no longer allowed in schools expressing their hurt. Community engagement is vital to school success in all communities, especially those with the limited economic and social possibilities facing remote Aboriginal communities, but too many schools have become more like whitefella fortresses surrounded by people waiting for them to fall. Government would do well to try to funnel funding into local initiatives and institutions, such as the Mt Theo program in Warlpiri communities, local creches, Media organisations, Art Centres, Ranger Programs, Church groups and work with relevant Land Councils in their community development efforts, and also to support Batchelor Institute and like providers of Adult Education, to overcome the educational disadvantages.

References:

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- O’Shannessy, C. 2005. Light Warlpiri - a new language. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (1) 31-57