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Submission No. 133

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.

In making this submission to the Standing Committee we honour and respect the Turrbal and Jagera peoples whose land we meet on today. We recognise and respect that any discussion about language learning in Indigenous communities cannot ignore the context of Tradition connections to land and language.

Brief history of the Murri School (AIICS)

The Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School (AIICS) was established in 1986. The AIICS celebrates 25 years of providing quality schooling to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the greater Brisbane region.

The establishment of the school was not just motivated solely by how poorly Indigenous students were performing in mainstream schools. It was also based on an understanding by parents and community leaders that self knowledge, cultural beliefs and practices were an integral part of the whole development of children – of their academic, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing.

Our submission addresses two (2) terms of reference of this inquiry and they are;

Terms of Reference 4. Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second Language:

The majority of our students speak a form of Aboriginal English. Some of our students have parents or careproviders that speak either an Australian Indigenous language in their home setting or speak a language other than standard Australian English (SAE).

We submit that forms of Aboriginal English are yet to be given the important recognition they deserve within education policy and practice and especially in terms of national and state testing of literacy and numeracy. Aboriginal English is the first language, or home language, of many Aboriginal children throughout the whole of Australia. In subtle ways this language, a distinctively Aboriginal kind of English, is a powerful vehicle for the expression of Aboriginal identity and cultural heritage. In linguistic terms, the differences between Aboriginal English and other kinds of English are dialectal differences. Aboriginal English is, strictly speaking, a dialect of English.

Through policy and practise within our school Aboriginal English is not considered an imperfect attempt to learn standard Australian English. We recognise Aboriginal English as complex and coherent language system which is the result of clever use of the resources of English to express Aboriginal conceptual distinctions.

The AIICS recognises and respects the role that bilingual education and programs have played in maintaining the home languages of Traditional language communities. However, we believe that more attention needs to be placed on Aboriginal English and specifically how it can be utilised in student instruction to better prepare Indigenous students to become literate and orally proficient in standard Australian English as well as meaningfully connect to their traditional languages and people.

Our school does not teach a Traditional Aboriginal language because of the complexities relating to the cultural diversity within our school community. Unlike remote communities where languages are often owned and connected to local language and land jurisdictions our school community is much more complex whereby connections to land and language are wide and varied due to the history of Aboriginal dispossession and relocation. However, it must be highlighted that there is a strong desire by many parents and students within our school community to reconnect with their own traditional land and languages.

Terms of Reference 5. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.

The AIICS has long recognised the education benefits of ensuring English language competency as critical to achieving both academic and life skills for our students.

The school as part of its underpinning philosophy works tirelessly to address this disadvantage and we continue to have our success stories. In 2010 efforts were made though to change the nature of the learning culture within the school with an increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Half of the school day now has a focus on these two areas of the curriculum. Many children when they first enrol with us are some years behind their peers and as a consequence require greater support.

AIICS: NAPLAN results for Years 3, 5 and 7 and 9 in 2010

The school has long argued that results such as these do not give a true picture of individual children, particularly in our context. To explain: students may join our community at the beginning of any school year and as mentioned previously, often join us with a skill base not consistent with their age group. It is not possible to bridge gaps of up to seven years in a few months. That is not to say however, that individual students may have made significant gains. For further details about AIICS, please see: *My School* website http://www.myschool.edu.au/

AIICS: Literacy & numeracy. Auditory impacts on learning:

The AIICS has long recognised the importance of speech language pathology in terms of addressing and formulating standard Australian English literacy and numeracy instruction for our students. Tests are undertaken by Australian Hearing and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Medical Centre (ATSICHS). Throughout the year all primary school students would have been tested at least twice, if there are any concerns then they would be checked again then referred onto a GP. High School Students are either referred by staff, parents or GP. This year we have had the opportunity to receive assistance from Education Queensland– Hearing Impairment Advisor who has supported us with setting up an Amplifier in the Grade 2/3 class, hearing aides for students and professional development for staff.

Speech Therapy: In partnership with the University of Queensland a clinic runs from March – June and then from August – October. There were at least 15 students who attend these sessions.

Recommendations

1. That greater attention is given within Indigenous education policy and programs to the role that Aboriginal styles of English plays in the literacy and language skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
2. That urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities be given more opportunity to engage in programs that provide meaningful connection to traditional languages. We believe this will provide a much needed link between home and school, language and identity, academic achievement and wellbeing.
3. That preservice teacher education in Australia address the theory and practice relating to the English language use (Aboriginal English) by urban Indigenous students and the importance this plays in their connection to their traditional languages, their academic achievement and the maintenance of their distinct cultural identity as first nations peoples.

We thank the committee for inviting us to submit to this important forum.

Ms. Philomena Downey (Principal).....

Mr. Victor Hart (Board of Directors) .....

Our Children
Our Cultures
Our Futures

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