House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities Questionnaire

Yipirinya School Response

August 2011

1. What are the languages spoken in your community?

At Yipirinya School numerous Indigenous languages are spoken, Central and Eastern Arrernte, Western Arrernte, Luritja/ Warlpiri, Anmatjere, Pertame, and Pitjantjatjara. Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English are also spoken.

2. How well are they spoken by children, adults and elders?

Children at the school usually speak language at home, and attend language classes in their mother tongue at school. Several of our teachers are fluent language speakers, as are our Council Members, and the families of the children attending the school.

3. Describe your group and project:

Why was it important to start up?

In the 1970's the town camp elders wanted a school of their own. They felt that the Government Schools did not properly cater for their children because traditional Languages and Culture were ignored and because their children felt that they were outsiders and were frequently teased. The elders wanted a school where Indigenous Languages and Culture were prominent, where there was a strong Aboriginal presence and where their children felt comfortable.

How long have you been running?

In 1978 the Yipirinya School Council was formed and in 1979 the first classes were started in the town camps. In 1981 the Council applied for registration of the School but this was originally rejected. After an appeal to the Supreme Court the School was finally registered in September 1983. The site in Lovegrove Drive was offered in 1984 and the School moved to Tangentyere Council until the first stage of building was completed in September 1988 and the second stage by November 1989. The organisation has been running for 33 years.

What age group(s) are you working with?

The school provides childcare for children aged 2-3 years, a preschool for 4-5 year olds, and transition through to secondary classes catering for children aged 6-16 years.

How many people are involved?

The school has enrolments of approximately 200, and there are approximately 50 staff employed.

4. What activities do you do to record or encourage the use of languages, including local languages?

The School teaches four Central Desert Indigenous languages (Central and Eastern Arrernte, Western Arrernte, Luritja and Warlpiri). The students' families choose one of these languages and the students then attend one Language and Culture lesson each day.
They learn to read and write in their first language. In addition each Language Group has a cultural excursion every term where the students travel to a local area and learn about their culture and land from Indigenous elders. They also have one week-long visit to homeland each year.
Furthermore, the School produces its own big readers and classroom texts for each of the four local Aboriginal languages, and also produces appropriate activity and work sheets in language for the students. The School shares many of its printed literature resources with schools in remote communities.

i) How are local schools involved?

Yipirinya is, of course, itself a school as well as a community. Other local schools are not really involved although we do on request occasionally share resources.

ii) What help do you receive from the government or other organisations to carry out your activities?

The School is largely funded by the Commonwealth Government and has minimal support from the Territory Government. This funding is for the School's general education programs with nothing specific for Indigenous languages. In the past the School did receive some specific Indigenous language funding (NIELNS) but this is now obsolete.
This year the School has received some minor funding for Warlpiri excursions from the Warlpiri Education Trust.

iii) Can you describe how your project's activities may have helped the whole community?

In addition to supporting children to learn their language, the school also provides employment for many Aboriginal people, including those whose skills in their own languages are valued. The fact that the School's policy is to promote Indigenous language and culture and to value it gives the whole community a sense of worth – a cultural identity of which the people can be proud.

5. How are your languages, including your local languages taught in school?

The School has a two-way (bilingual and bi-cultural) approach to education.

i) What difference has the teaching of local languages made to children's attendance and achievement at school?

The languages are taught formally in class in structured lessons in a 'maintenance' rather than 'immersion' model. There is an emphasis on oral skills with all lessons being conducted entirely in the native language (not English). However, the children are also taught to read and write in their languages. We believe that the teaching and use of Indigenous languages makes the school user-friendly for Indigenous students and encourages attendance. We believe that learning to read and write in their own languages also enhances their learning in English.

6. What interpreting and translating services are available in your local languages? How useful and effective are they?

The School does not have funding for interpreting and translating services but could provide these were funding available.

7. What are the main difficulties facing your project?

There is a lack of adequate funding to continue providing such a comprehensive language program. We get caught in the 'blame game' between the Territory and the Australian Government, with each shifting responsibility for funding to the other (ie, 'it's a national policy so the Australian Government should fund it', countered with 'you're an independent school so the Territory should fund it'). There is a lack of recognition of the importance of Indigenous language and culture illustrated graphically by the NT Government's '4 hour' Indigenous language policy and its attempt to abandon bi-lingual learning. Supporting in funding and in recognition are critically important. However, there is also a difficulty in obtaining good language teachers and an urgent need to train and support Indigenous people for such roles.

8. What are you aiming to achieve in the future?

We aim:

- To improve the quality of our teaching of Indigenous language
- To recruit, train and support Indigenous language teachers
- To dramatically increase the resources available for teaching Indigenous languages
- To record Indigenous stories in language and to build up archives so that the languages are preserved
- To have translation services (Language to English and English to Language) that create resources for cross-cultural understanding.
- To ensure that Indigenous people have a sense of ownership of the educative process

- To have Indigenous language and culture informing and enriching pedagogy.