Language learning in Indigenous Communities

Summary

Firstly I have included some background information on myself and my experiences and why I feel able to make comments to this Senate enquiry. I then begin by talking about the pride aboriginal people gain from attention and recognition being given to Indigenous languages and how language is intertwined with other knowledge that can only be accessed with knowledge of the language. I go on to suggest that this knowledge could be shared with others and form an important part of our Australian heritage as national languages and then talk about how I have seen interest given to learning about aboriginal language and culture encourage aboriginal people to reengage, identify with and take pride in cultural activities. I next expound the benefits of Bilingual education, especially in the early years of schooling, as a valuable tool in closing the gap in literacy education and as a pathway to better English second language learning for aboriginal students who are then able to develop improved educational outcomes. After that I go on to talk about the importance of English language competency for aboriginal people in enabling them to participate in the wider economy but point out that this should be at the expense of maintenance or revitalisation of indigenous languages because they could hold the key to economic, cultural and educational development for aboriginal people. I then mention that as I am not currently living and working in an Indigenous community that I feel unable to comment on current programs for indigenous languages or measures to improve interpreting and translating services but do make mention of past experiences and perceived need in these areas. Finally I make mention of how I currently witness the loss, distress and longing for indigenous language that many indigenous people I have met and work with here in NSW now feel and reaffirm my commitment to Bilingual education as an effective means of teaching English and literacy to students in Indigenous communities where English is a second language and to maintain and revitalise indigenous languages.

Catherine Winfield Johnston

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Background Information

My name is Catherine Winfield Johnston.

I am a Primary School teacher who has worked for many years as a teacher and teacher linguist in a number of different indigenous communities in Australia.

I first worked at Mimili Community in the North West of SA, a small 3 teacher aboriginal 'bilingual' school, with an early childhood class of children in their first 3 years of schooling from 1980 to 1982.

I then worked at Papunya Aboriginal School in Central Australia North West of Alice Springs in the NT as a PreSchool teacher in 1983 and as a 'first years of school' teacher in 1984.

I then went on to work as a Teacher Linguist for 3 years from 1985 to 1987 overseeing the implementation of the Bilingual program at Papunya central school and various aboriginal outstations /homelands or nearby communities, namely Haasts Bluff, Mt. Liebig and Kintore.

Following my time spent in Central Australia I next worked as a 'first year's' teacher with the bilingual program at Galiwin'ku Community on Elcho Island in North East Arnhem Land in the Top End of the NT in 1989 and as a Teacher Linguist for 6months in 1990.

I later went on to work for 3 years 6 months as a Preschool teacher with the bilingual program at Yirrkala Community School in North East Arnhem Land in the Top End of the NT from 1993 to 1996.

Following on from this I worked for a year as a visiting teacher at Yirrkala Homelands School, again in the Top End of the NT, in 1997.

Then from 2002 to 2004 I again worked for 3 years as a Primary School teacher with the bilingual program at Yirrkala Community, followed by a year as the Teacher Linguist in 2005.

Since then I have undertaken further study to complete my Masters of Applied Linguistics, an Education Masters specialising in Language teaching and English as a Second Language teaching.

I have gone on to work with Dhunghutti aboriginal elders on language reclamation and learning for 6 months at the Djigayi Centre at Kempsey TAFE in NSW in 2006 and with the Dalaigur Preschool for a year at Kempsey in 2008. I have more recently been involved with a weekly aboriginal after school program with Birapai Land Council, sponsored by Red Cross in Port Macquarie in NSW this year.

I believe that my wealth of experience as a teacher of 30 years, 20 years of which have been in aboriginal communities, qualifies me to comment on the terms of reference of this Senate enquiry.

I also consider that since I have for 18 years been teaching, or assisting teachers to teach, non English speaking 'early years' aboriginal students, to read and write in their own language whilst also being taught to listen to, understand and speak English, as part of a bilingual program; that I am especially qualified to respond to the terms of reference of this senate enquiry.

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

I believe that giving attention and recognition to indigenous languages not only gives recognition to the languages, it gives recognition and pride to the indigenous people who speak those languages. It also opens a way for the wider Australian community and the world to develop understandings of the cultural, artistic, musical, religious, scientific and environmental knowledge that is intertwined within and opened up through an understanding of those languages.

In my experience, of learning a number of different indigenous languages whilst living and working in aboriginal communities over many years , I have noticed how different Indigenous cultural ways of doing things were often reflected in the languages spoken . These languages have different grammatical structures that reflect and reinforce how indigenous people communicate with each other. For example there are different terms for addressing people that will indicate who is to be involved in a discussion by the use of inclusive or exclusive markers and the addition of different suffixes on words can indicate the different relationships of people being spoken to or about. As Professor Michael Christie who has studied the Yolngu languages of North East Arnhem land ascertains "The yolngu world is explained by entirely the opposite principle :(to our understanding of dividing and contrasting) unity. There is a union between the natural and (what we would call) the supernatural, the past and present, and between the yolngu and their land, plants and animals." I believe that this worldview can only be better understood by others through a thorough exploration and understanding of indigenous languages that can help to explain it. I consider Indigenous languages hold the key to a vast storehouse of cultural, artistic, musical, religious, environmental and scientific information because much of this information is not fully translatable into English and can only be explained with an understanding of the indigenous languages themselves. It is therefore imperative that these languages continue to be used, maintained and understood.

In my view, when these unique indigenous languages are given more attention and recognition they become more valuable as a significant heritage asset that could be acknowledged by all Australians as national languages. I believe that the knowledge that we have some of the oldest languages in the world that continue to be spoken will bring pride to indigenous and all Australians alike. I also consider Indigenous perspectives could then be better understood and explored by others through the learning of indigenous languages which could open up more indigenous knowledge, experience and understandings to the wider Australian community.

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

I believe that resourcing the development, maintenance and revitalisation of Indigenous language programs is best served by supporting the learning of initial literacy by indigenous first language speakers in their own or another understood Indigenous language within the community they live in. I see this as a vital first step in Closing the Gap in Indigenous education, especially in Literacy education.

Through the development of initial literacy, by indigenous first language speakers in their own or another understood Indigenous language of their community, indigenous language speakers are empowered to understand what literacy is all about. Through the discovery and use of literacy in their own languages I believe that indigenous people are reassured that their thoughts, ideals and

beliefs can be recorded and documented unchanged in written form so that they, and others, can refer to and explore them again later.

I also believe that indigenous people are empowered to better understand what others are trying to communicate to them if time, effort and resources are put into translating important information for them in their own language or other languages that are more fully understood by them. This, I believe, can demonstrate to them the power of literacy as a means of dissemination of information that could encourage and facilitate them to explore, understand and wish to utilise English literacy more in order to participate in aspects of the wider community culture further.

I believe too, that resourcing the development, maintenance and revitalisation of Indigenous language programs increases indigenous pride and self respect. I contend that it does this by indicating to indigenous people that the wider community acknowledges, respects and values them as individuals with their own identity, worldview, language and culture. This then strengthens indigenous peoples' desire to maintain and revitalise their knowledge and use of their own unique languages to identify and maintain their culture with. I believe it gives them pride in who they are and their place in the world taking into account the past, the present and in looking to the future.

In my time as a teacher in the 1980's in the Central Australian aboriginal communities of Mimili in the North West of SA, and at Papunya in the North West of Alice Springs in the NT, I was always keen to show the aboriginal people there that I had an avid interest in their indigenous languages, knowledge and culture. I did this by researching and writing a booklet on Bush Tucker and by becoming involved in participating in traditional dances with the women. This, I believe demonstrated to the aboriginal people in these communities that there was interest and respect in their traditional knowledge by the wider Australian community. I remember encouraging aboriginal students to take more interest in learning about bush tucker and traditional dancing from the elders when they came with me on bush excursions but they were sometimes reluctant to research 'old' foods or embarrassed to become involved in the traditional dancing. However, gradually, over time, the students saw that as there was 'outside' interest in these things so they began to learn the songs, stories and perform some traditional dances with pride to share this knowledge with others.

Later in 2003, when I went to visit these communities again with my family, some of my previous students and people I knew in Mimili community were pleased to inform me of an Ecotourism venture they had established at Mimili to show visitors how to collect bush tucker and invite them to participate in learning some traditional dances. They told me the idea had stemmed from my earlier interests in these areas with them. They also went on to proudly show how they had put the money they had made from their venture back into the infrastructure of their community to build more bitumen roads with curbing, and street lights 'to make it like a real town'. I believe that this early interest and respect I had shown for language and culture of the aboriginal people at Mimili had significantly contributed to 'Closing the Gap' and assisted them to participate more fully in the wider Australian economy in a sustainable way whilst also allowing them to maintain and share aspects of their language and culture with others. I also believe that it was my development of a reasonable understanding of Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara language when I was at Mimili that enabled me to research the bush tucker of the area and interact with the elders to demonstrate and facilitate an interest in the maintenance and sharing of language and culture.

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

In my work, as an early childhood teacher of indigenous children who speak an indigenous language as their first language over the last 30 years, I have seen these indigenous students gain a number of benefits from the inclusion of indigenous languages in their early education.

Since I taught for many years as a teacher in a bilingual school, I was able to teach students to listen to, understand and speak English first in their early years of schooling. As part of this program I was also able to enlist the support of an aboriginal education worker / teachers to teach the students how to learn to read and write whatever could be said in their own language first. This benefited the students immensely because it enabled them to learn and understand what 'literacy' was about; that it was about learning to read and write whatever could be spoken, understood and predicted. The students could learn to do this more easily in the indigenous language they understood and spoke in the community. The alternative was for them to learn to 'bark' at print and attempt to imitate the sounds of the foreign language for me as the non indigenous teacher who was trying to make them understand the 'foreign' language of English and what 'print' meant when they first came to school. However after a few years at school, because they were enabled to develop literacy skills in their own language first, students were able to transfer their literacy skills to reading and writing in the foreign language of English that they then understood and could use better.

The students also benefited from beginning their schooling in a non threatening environment with aboriginal education worker / teachers who could model and support them in their learning. This meant that they were more open to participating and engaging in an educational program that they could communicate freely in. This was because aboriginal education worker / teachers could speak and use the indigenous language of the community to explain to the students many different aspects of school learning and culture. This gave the students confidence to tackle the task of education and learning in the foreign school setting. It also gave them the support of knowing that the school and teachers had some knowledge understanding and respect for their own cultural background and valued the knowledge that they brought to school. Attempts would often be made by teachers and aboriginal education workers/teachers to build on to, extend or compare and contrast new knowledge with traditional or cultural knowledge that students brought to school. This enabled students to develop fuller, deeper understandings of the new knowledge that was being explained and taught to them, and wherever possible this new knowledge was also being explained and taught to them in their own language especially in their early years of schooling.

I have seen indigenous students in bilingual schools become excited and proud to realise that they could read and write in their own language and then quickly transfer this skill to reading and writing in English. I have seen these students advance further in their English literacy when they were half way through Primary school than other indigenous students who attended non bilingual schools during the same period that were still struggling to gain an understanding of and ability to use English literacy.

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

In the Indigenous communities I have worked in where English is a second language, I have seen how the use of indigenous languages in the school programs has been an effective measure used to improve educational outcomes.

For example, when teaching Mathematics , many English language terms are used, especially with problem solving activities. So, what I have seen to be effective, for indigenous students to better understand what they are being asked to do, and how to go about doing it, has been to have many of these mathematical terms translated into indigenous languages. In bilingual schools this has also been taken one step further with not only the language but also the different cultural ways of thinking being used to effectively teach new concepts. This has also enabled these indigenous students to gain a better understanding when and how to use English terminology appropriately.

I have also found that when teaching new understandings in other subject areas, to indigenous students for whom English is a second language, that the new knowledge does not appear to be fully understood if only English is used to teach it. However, since the non English speaking indigenous student's receptive knowledge and understanding of English is often greater than their ability to speak it, these students are often find it difficult to discuss new learning when confined to doing so only in English. Yet, if Indigenous languages are able to be used by these students in the classroom they can discuss new concepts more easily with aboriginal education worker/teachers.

I therefore believe, and have seen, indigenous students, for whom English is a second language, benefit from using indigenous languages in school to gain a fuller understanding of new concepts, skills and knowledge introduced and taught. This has improved their educational outcomes.

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

As Indigenous people in Indigenous communities do not fully live in isolation from the rest of the world today, I believe that it is imperative that they are, or become, competent English language users so that they can communicate with more people throughout the world.

I believe Indigenous people in these communities need English competency in order to participate more fully in the broader economy which I consider they will need to do if they are to receive or produce goods and services as part of that economy.

I also believe that In order to be an effective participant of the wider economy that they will benefit from directing their efforts into developing 'vocations' that are of service to, or provide 'goods' for, both themselves and others in that economy.

Now as the 'currency' language of the wider economy is English, it is of paramount importance that those involved in such 'vocations' have or develop English competency. However, since such 'vocations' and English competency levels are still developing in Indigenous communities, I believe it is necessary and beneficial for there to be an educational focus on developing English competency in these communities. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the development of English competency in Indigenous communities should not be at the expense of maintaining and revitalising indigenous

languages in these communities, because I believe that Indigenous languages are the very fibre that holds together much of what indigenous people in these communities can develop into 'vocations' services or provision of 'goods' for both themselves and others in the wider economy.

Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

As I have not been living and working in Indigenous communities where English is a second language for a few years now I am unable to comment on measure made to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services.

However I would like to comment that I have seen an overwhelming need for such services in the past and do not believe that the situation has changed much in this regard.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages,

As I have not been living and working in Indigenous communities where English is a second language for a few years now I am unable to comment on the effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages.

However I would like to comment that I have seen such programs operating very effectively in the past. I have seen them operating most effectively when there have been committed aboriginal education worker / teachers and team teachers, committed experienced teachers, supportive involved community members and less substance abuse and social order concerns in communities.

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

As I have not been living and working in Indigenous communities where English is a second language for a few years now and as I am not fully familiar with all current Indigenous languages policies I feel I am unable to make much an informed comment on the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government **Indigenous** languages policy.

However I would like to comment that I am a firm believer in the benefits of Bilingual education and have seen the Bilingual program of the Northern Territory to be most effective in maintaining and revitalising aboriginal languages and in teaching literacy and English to Indigenous students in Indigenous communities where English is a second language especially when all the conditions were right for producing favourable educational outcomes in aboriginal community schools.

I have also witnessed the loss, distress and longing for indigenous language that many indigenous people I have met and worked with here in NSW now feel. People here, I believe, feel at a loss in accessing and revitalisating remnants of their indigenous languages as there are numerous issues that I have seen them grappling with and working through such as these:

'How can you teach your grandchildren language when you don't have that language yourself?',

' How do you know which language to teach your grandchildren when their parents and grandparents are from different language groups or you are living in a different language group area?'