

INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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My aim in writing this submission is to focus on the way the Terms of Reference specifically apply to Indigenous language learning from the point of view of speech pathology practice, especially as it relates to formal education.

I am thankful for the opportunity to be providing some comment.

SUBMISSION SUMMARY

In order for Indigenous children to move forwards to where they, their families and their wider communities want them to be, we need to first meet them where they are. Where Indigenous children are, in linguistic terms, should surely be viewed as a pretty good place to be; they have the capacity to become fluently bilingual and bicultural and to enjoy all of the cognitive, social and wellbeing benefits that such a situation brings. Their current reality is quite different. A significant shift in the currently deficit based discourse surrounding Indigenous language learning needs to occur.

INTRODUCTION

I have worked and researched as a speech pathologist with Aboriginal communities across Australia for twenty years. I have worked in both health and education systems with Aboriginal peoples living in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia. My experience in working with Indigenous languages is diverse; I have worked with Aboriginal peoples speaking Aboriginal Englishes, Kriols and various traditional languages.

Speech pathologists provide communication assessment and therapy services for people with communication difficulties. When working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, this requires the speech pathologist to be able to accurately distinguish between communication differences and communication delay or disorder. Speech pathologists are not English as a Second Language professionals. Speech pathologists need to consider an individual's total communication system in order to determine whether that person's underlying speech and / or language learning systems are typically developing or are impaired. Investigating an Aboriginal child's home language development, therefore, constitutes an integral part of any speech pathology involvement. Speech pathologists are also an important part of a school's learning team given that literacy learning is primarily a language based skill. A speech pathologist's understanding of language and literacy learning enables close collaboration with linguists and educators to inform formal teaching pedagogies and philosophies with Aboriginal children.

ADRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Current Situation

In my experience, Indigenous languages are typically viewed as problematic by non-Aboriginal educators and education systems. All types of Indigenous languages, including Aboriginal Englishes, Kriols and traditional languages, have been described to me in my various roles as speech pathologist and / or researcher as barriers to education and even as deficient as languages in and of themselves.

Examples of comments which reflect this observation include:

“The home genre of language relies on shared contexts and body language instead of vocabulary. There is assumed or implied understanding. The children have difficulty code switching to a more verbal expression and so have problems with the school language”. (Gould, 2009, p129)

This statement was said by an experienced senior non-Aboriginal teacher teaching in an Aboriginal community where Aboriginal English is the home language of the community.

“The teacher needs to keep thinking and rephrasing because the children are not exposed to a large vocabulary at home”. (Gould, 2009,p182)

“What you need to understand Judy is that the parents understand as little as the children do”. (Gould, 2009, p185).

These signs have been placed within an Anangu school in remote South Australia where the community language is Pitjantjatjara:

“Build vocabulary in students by talking in Standard English”

“Remember staff need to speak Standard English when talking at school”

I was told by one of the Non-Aboriginal teachers that these posters had been placed there for the benefit of the Anangu Education Workers who continue to speak to the Anangu children in Pitjantjatjara when at school.

This comment from a really well intentioned non-Indigenous teacher maybe summarises the urgency in increasing the value afforded to Indigenous languages in education:

“I didn’t know the children were speaking another language until I had been teaching here for over a term. Until I went to an inservice in Cairns and found out the children were speaking another language, I just thought the children were speaking bad English because they were intellectually impaired. No-one told me they were speaking another language when I got here.” (Gould, 2009, p 204).

This is a 'no-win' starting point for the Aboriginal child to be placed in as they enter school.

Suggested Action

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages have been well presented in various submissions already made to this inquiry. It would be advisable for the processes employed to give attention and recognition to Indigenous languages to acknowledge and understand these current deficit based beliefs and misperceptions about Indigenous languages (as indicated in the above examples). Ultimately, affording appropriate attention and recognition to Indigenous languages should also assist in challenging and dispelling these detrimental beliefs.

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

Current Situation

We all know that Indigenous children are more than simply skilled sportsmen and sportswomen. I often emphasise to non-Indigenous professionals the linguistic capacity of Aboriginal children who have shown themselves able to know when to speak Aboriginal English and when to communicate using their traditional Aboriginal language. This cognitive and language strength is typically not recognised as such by non-Indigenous educators. Rather, I have recorded comments such as these from non-Indigenous teachers:

"It's probably not acknowledged (at home by parents) that school language is different or that SAE exists" (Gould, 2009, p181).

"You can't expect them to perform at the same levels [as students at other schools]". (Gould, 2009, Pge 186).

And then, these comments from Aboriginal professionals:

"The context of the situation effects how much the children will talk. They behave and talk differently at home and out in the community than they do in other places" (Gould, 2009, p251).

"They go to highschool from being in special ed [at primary school] and then they won't face their friends so they drop out of school. They're being branded and isolated. There are effects on the parents to have II (intellectually impaired) kids, the parents have to fight for their kids. This creates confusion, Shame and upset" (Gould, 2009, p205).

The inappropriate mis-labelling of Indigenous children exhibiting communication differences as being communication impaired has far reaching and damaging consequences for that child, their family and the wider community.

If a person is only able 'to do' their language and culture (that is, the dominant language and culture which exists within their community) at set times of the school day (usually during the late afternoon when all of the 'real' learning time has passed), who is that person to be the rest of the time?

Suggested Action

While my attempts to speak with Aboriginal children and parents in their home language, when that language is a traditional language, are always met favourably by the Aboriginal peoples themselves, we need to understand that this situation can be very different when the home language being spoken is Aboriginal English. An Aboriginal teacher once told me that,

“It’s not true if a non-Indigenous person mimics Aboriginal English. Aboriginal English is about the spiritual and the cultural. We just laugh and say someone’s sounding like a blackfella” (Gould, 2009 p145).

There is a large amount of learning that needs to occur in order for non-Indigenous professionals to understand the socio-political underpinnings of learning to speak a traditional Aboriginal language versus mimicking Aboriginal English.

The investigation of Indigenous home languages needs to become commonplace when conducting assessments and providing support for Indigenous children by speech pathologists (also refer to Terms of Reference no 6, addressing interpreter services). It would be most preferable for speech pathologists to be competent in speaking the Indigenous language of the child being assessed. At the very least, the speech pathologist needs to have a solid theoretical knowledge of the languages being spoken and be able to work with a suitably trained interpreter when assessing and providing support for Indigenous children. This will help to reduce the current inappropriate and damaging over-diagnosis of communication differences as communication disorders by speech pathologists. The teaching of Indigenous languages needs to occur at undergraduate and graduate entry level university training courses for speech pathologists. Learning even at a basic, introductory level any Indigenous language, when combined with the linguistics teaching which currently occurs, will equip speech pathologists to work much more effectively across different Indigenous language groups, even if the languages spoken are not the one which they learned at university.

3. The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

Current Situation

As we know, children have in no way completed their oral language learning in their home language by the time they enter school. A large amount of later language learning occurs in the lower, middle and upper primary school years. Children who receive education in their community’s dominant language benefit from all of this later language learning which occurs in schools.

Home language teaching is also especially critical for Indigenous children in the early years when one considers the very high rates of hearing loss among Indigenous children. Educating and communicating with Indigenous children in their home language helps them to be able to hear speech better (as the sounds of English are typically harder to hear for children suffering the types of hearing losses experienced by Indigenous children) and it helps them to understand language better because they can use their knowledge of the language being spoken to predict and maybe fill in some of the gaps when hearing is too difficult.

For example, Pitjantjatjara is a language which typically does not contain final consonants. Their syllable structures are quite different from Australian English. However, the way educationalists currently teach rhyme, for example, focuses on the use of consonant-vowel-consonant word shapes (ie pat mat fat). This is a word shape which is foreign to Anangu and therefore which places an extra cognitive load on the children

trying to learning this new skill of identifying rhyming words. Furthermore, hearing final consonants can be more difficult for children suffering the types of hearing losses suffered by Indigenous children. Indigenous children are being disadvantaged by not being taught skills like phonological awareness skills in a language which contains syllable shapes with which they are familiar and which contains speech sounds which Indigenous children are more likely to be able to hear. The development of phonological awareness skills has been shown to be very important in terms of literacy development with all children.

Suggested Action

Home language learning and education in home languages benefits various aspects of educational achievement. Indigenous children need to be afforded this right to have access to literacy, phonological awareness and oral language teaching in their home and community language.

For example, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara are not only the home languages of the Anangu, they are also the dominant languages which exist within their communities; English is typically a foreign language, it is not the dominant language of their wider communities. Their language learning situation is unique and specific to them.

What is great and healthy to see is the Reception/Year One class where the Anangu staff member holds the attention of a group of young Anangu by reading them a story in home language while talking about and discussing the story all in a language that allows the children to simply be who they are. This is the language environment where learning can truly take place.

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

Current Situation

This is really best left to those with expertise in this area. My only comment is that from a speech pathology perspective we really strive for adequate oral language learning and phonological awareness skill development in a language throughout the early years in order for children to be primed to benefit from formal literacy learning. This can surely only occur when children are taught in their home/community language, especially in the early years.

It is the current education system which is denying Indigenous children the capacity to become fluently bilingual and bicultural members of this society. Instead, a new, panic driven reality, educating Indigenous children as if they're 'little white kids', is being imposed. It appears that education has been presented to Indigenous peoples as a 'one or the other' thing; either we teach your children as if they're white and they will be able to succeed in the wider world or they get left behind to flounder as has been the way for generations. Which one would any parent pick for their child given such a choice?

The following examples give a glimpse of an education system which is really not working well:

Hearing 5, 6 and 7 year old Aboriginal children being spoken to and being given directions in English within a classroom and then having those same children reprimanded for not paying attention or being disruptive and disobedient.

Seeing Aboriginal Education Workers sitting in a classroom while the non-Indigenous teacher teaches the class entirely in Standard English. And then to see the AEW's role is actually to discipline the children in their home language when the non-Indigenous

teacher's disciplining in English has not had the desired effect. Where is cross-cultural communication and mis-communication being considered in all of this? Where is the expertise of the Aboriginal workers being identified and valued?

Suggested Action

Once again, this discussion is best left for those with expertise in this area.

We will improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children in schools when we cease to assess them using standardised tests which are not designed for use with this population and which are not normed on Australian Indigenous populations.

We need to include known aspects of best practice into teaching and allow good teachers to simply teach rather than implementing and even mandating the use of generic 'Indigenous' literacy packages and programs which are vying for the Indigenous education market. This type of policy decision making is once again panic driven, stemming from the need to 'close the gap' for Indigenous children. One size never fits all, especially when that 'one size' does not consider the specific linguistic and cultural learning needs of Indigenous children. This also involves our universities better preparing teaching graduates to teach Indigenous children.

Currently, speech pathologists are employed in only very few state and territory departments of education across Australia. South Australia employs speech pathologists within the Department of Education and Children's Services. In my experience, employing speech pathologists within state or territory departments of education is highly beneficial in terms of better meeting the educational needs of Indigenous children within Australia.

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

English language competency for Indigenous children is probably best commented on by Indigenous peoples themselves. My own comment would be that English language learning must never occur at the expense of their own home language/s. Historically, when this tragic situation has been allowed to occur or when it has been enforced on Indigenous peoples, I personally don't see how this has ever ended well.

6. Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

Current Issue

This is a major issue for speech pathologists working with Indigenous peoples and it is one which has never been adequately addressed in terms of real funding or government policy making. It is a disgrace that, as a speech pathologist who does not speak all of the Indigenous languages with which I must work, I cannot visit a remote Aboriginal community and have ready access to a suitably trained interpreter to help me conduct even the most basic aspects of my work. Thankfully, I do have access to such interpreters when conducting my work with various immigrant groups within Australia. Why is this not possible with our own Indigenous communities? This is a truly appalling and inequitable situation and one which needs to be rectified immediately if we have any chance of 'closing the gap'.

Miscommunication between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous health and education professionals is probably fairly described as a regular occurrence. Sadly and, in some cases, tragically, many non-Indigenous professionals do not even realise when this miscommunication has occurred. Trained interpreters are urgently required to rectify this situation.

Suggested Action

Speech pathologists employed within one department (eg the Department of Education based in Katherine, NT) often work across a number of Indigenous languages such as traditional languages, Aboriginal Englishes and Kriols, and it is simply not possible to learn them all. Furthermore, the turnover in speech pathology staff especially within rural and remote areas means that not all speech pathologists will become sufficiently fluent in any of the Indigenous languages with which they need to work. Speech pathologists need as a bare minimum trained interpreters to assist us in our work.

I also believe that teaching an Indigenous language as part of speech pathology training courses will assist the capacity of speech pathologists to be better able to work effectively with those interpreters we desperately need, once they become available.

Personal note:

The way Indigenous peoples have driven their own lives forwards over the years has been inspiring, and this will continue to occur whatever non-Indigenous people think or do because that is who Indigenous peoples are. It seems to me that, for the most part, Indigenous peoples are often continuing these moves forwards in spite of rather than in conjunction with support and assistance from governments and publically funded systems. I appreciate that change related to the shifting of one's personal values and professional beliefs takes time. But how much time, how many more educational opportunities for individual Indigenous children are to be lost? I also appreciate that these values and beliefs are what underpin much of human behaviour. Tackling this last point, in terms of how non-Indigenous professionals and the systems and bureaucracies they inhabit contribute towards the poor educational achievement levels for Indigenous children, is often the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to discussing Indigenous education. The effective and positive implementation of the recommendations suggested in many of the fine submissions published on your website and those that have been written in various reports, research papers and government inquiries for many years now requires this difficult topic to be openly addressed.

Those people whose personal beliefs and/or professional dogmas continue to present as barriers to Indigenous peoples and those working with them to further educational outcomes for Indigenous children need to be removed. Time and natural attrition alone are not going to achieve this much needed outcome. I cannot see how it is okay to continue simply waiting for these non-Indigenous people to move on; also, sadly, there always seem to exist a number of like minded non-Indigenous people waiting in the wings to take their place.

We need to ask the really difficult questions that address why so many non-Indigenous created policies and programs for Indigenous peoples are the way they are.

- Why are the failures of these policies and programs given such little examination and scrutiny?
- Why are non-Indigenous professionals, systems and bureaucracies not held to account for the failure to deliver adequate education, which addresses and utilises their linguistic and learning capabilities and strengths, to Indigenous students?

- Why instead is the solution too often to merely implement yet another non-Indigenous driven or created policy or program? Indigenous communities must cease to be a test tube for whitefella experiments, no matter how seemingly well intentioned those experiments are. Let's just start relying on evidence based practice like we do when educating other more financially and politically powerful segments of our society. Of course, the lives of Indigenous children can be complex and this can ultimately impact their education but what we are doing at the current moment is far from what we would accept in various other schools within Australia. This is one 'gap' we actually can bridge if only we have the political will and financial backing to do so.
- Who really is in the driving seat when it comes to Indigenous policy and program implementation arrived at through consultation?
- When is offering a choice to an Indigenous community not really a choice?

Indigenous education is everyone's business but not the monopoly of the whiteman. Real choice comes with power. The problem: Real power in real terms continues to rest with the whiteman. We keep talking about the problems in and with Indigenous health and education and how to 'close the gap' when those who have been around long enough can tell you very quickly that the very system and the very bureaucracy inhabited by bureaucrats is and always has been in actual fact The Problem. Grassroots people have always worked constructively and positively on grassroots problems, using community driven and owned solutions. Many people and communities are achieving very good successes but until the bureaucracy catches up with the intent, knowledge and experience of those really living and working in communities, positive change will never become sustainable. It will be as fleeting as the next change of government or, worse still, as the never ending resignations in frustration and ill-health of those individuals who worked so hard to effect the positive change in the first place. We will continue to lose good, committed health and education professionals and volunteers working at this grassroots level to mental health illness, stress related ill health, burnout and fatigue. Continuing to allow white bureaucrats working in their white bureaucracies to dictate to Indigenous peoples and communities, under the guise of consultation and collaborative partnerships, will only perpetuate the deplorable situation in terms of health, wellbeing and educational achievement currently endured by so many Indigenous peoples in this country.

When do we need to start speaking in terms of a violation of basic human rights and, in the case of Indigenous education, a breach of ethical practice?

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Gould, J (2009). The interaction between developmental assessment, deficit thinking and home language in the education of Aboriginal children: A community case study. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of South Australia.