Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

August 2011

ANTaR Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities, August 2011

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About ANTaR

ANTaR is a national advocacy organisation dedicated specifically to the rights - and overcoming the disadvantage - of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We do this primarily through lobbying, public campaigns and advocacy.

ANTaR's focus is on changing the attitudes and behaviours of non-Indigenous Australians so that the rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respected and affirmed across all sections of society.

ANTaR seeks to persuade governments, through advocacy and lobbying, to show genuine leadership and build cross-party commitment to Indigenous policy.

ANTaR works to generate in Australia a moral and legal recognition of, and respect for, the distinctive status of Indigenous Australians as First Peoples.

ANTaR is a non-government, not-for-profit, community-based organisation.

ANTaR has been working with Indigenous organisations and leaders on rights and reconciliation issues since 1997.

Introduction

ANTaR thanks the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (the **"Committee"**) for the opportunity to contribute to its Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities (the **"Inquiry"**).

ANTaR notes that the Inquiry comes at a time when many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are critically endangered. Whereas over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken in Australia at the time of colonisation, only 18 or fewer languages are currently considered strong. Over 100 languages are at advanced stages of loss.[1]

As recognised by UNESCO, development agencies, cultural organisations, and cultural and linguistics experts across the World, language is a critical medium through which all cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous alike, are carried.

In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, traditional languages provide speakers with a connection to their culture and their past, and a sense of identity and belonging. As noted by the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, language loss, and its resulting impact on culture and identity, has wide ranging implications for the health, economic opportunities and social welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Conversely, language preservation and promotion engenders resilience, improved health outcomes and economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[2]

The revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is therefore closely connected with ANTaR's efforts both to promote respect and affirmation for the rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to advocate for practical measures to improve social, economic and health outcomes (such as the *Close the Gap* campaign).

Two years after the launch of the Federal Government's strategy for preserving Indigenous languages, *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach 2009*, the Inquiry provides a valuable opportunity to assess the effectiveness of current Federal, State and Territory government policy in the area, and incumbent maintenance and revitalisation programs. In addition to Indigenous language learning, the Inquiry also allows for a re-examination of access to English language services in Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities. We commend the Committee for maintaining a focus on these issues.

[1] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010. See also Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*.

[2] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010.

Benefits of revitalising Indigenous languages

The current state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages

Before colonisation, 250 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken on the Australian continent. Of these, only 18 or fewer languages are presently considered strong, in the sense that they are spoken by all generations of people within the language group.[3] Approximately 100 languages continue to be spoken in Australia, but many are at advanced stages of loss. More than two-thirds of the languages spoken at the time of colonisation are nearing extinction, or already extinct.[4] Indigenous languages continue disappear in Australia at one of the fastest rates in the world.

As of the 2006 census, 9.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 5 spoke an Indigenous language, a decline from 11.1% in 2001.[5] Without meaningful action in the interim, we can expect to see a continued decline in the 2011 census, conducted earlier this month.

Given that the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is intrinsically connected with the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ANTaR is deeply concerned about this trend.

Language revitalisation defined

In its terms of reference, the Committee intends to inquire into the benefits of giving "attention and recognition" to Indigenous languages. ANTaR believes that the Inquiry must look beyond this, and must focus on Indigenous language revitalisation more broadly. In this submission, we use the term "revitalisation" to refer generically to:

- the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages currently spoken and transmitted inter-generationally;
- the renewal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages at various stages of loss;
- the revival or reclamation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages considered to be extinct; and
- the promotion of awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in the wider Australian community and internationally.

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[3] Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*. For an earlier discussion see also Schmidt, A., *The Loss of Australia's Aboriginal Language Heritage,* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993, in which the author maps Indigenous languages against eight stages of language loss, noting fewer than 20 languages at the strongest levels – Stages 1 and 2 – at which languages are transmitted inter-generationally.

[4] See Lo Bianco, J. and Rhydwen, M., "*Is the Extinction of Australia's Indigenous Languages Inevitable?"* in *Can Threatened Languages be Saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st Century perspective,* p 395.

[5] Obata, K. and Lee, J., "*Languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – An uniquely Australian heritage*" in Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia 2009-2010*.

Recognition in international instruments

The importance of Indigenous languages is clearly recognised in numerous international instruments. Most notably, Article 13 of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* provides that:

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.*

2. *States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that Indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.*[6]

Article 14(1) of the Declaration provides for educational autonomy of Indigenous peoples, by affording them the right to "*establish and control their education systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.*"[7]

Further, Article 31 of the Declaration recognises the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. As noted by the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, such rights "*can only be realized through the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, language and culture*".[8]

The Commonwealth Government formally endorsed the Declaration in April 2009, although to date it has not developed a national implementation strategy. However, the Government has subsequently committed to addressing language revitalisation in *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach*, which we discuss further below.

ANTaR notes that Australia has not yet ratified the *Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. This is to some extent a corollary to many of the principles set out in the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* ANTaR supports the recommendation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner calling for Australia to become a party to the Convention.

Benefits of language revitalisation

The Commonwealth Government's acknowledgement of the plight of Indigenous languages (and the need for revitalisation) in its *National Approach* marks its recognition that the loss of culture and identity resulting from language loss has serious consequences for the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Equally, it recognises that language revitalisation brings with it many benefits.

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[6] *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 13.*

[7] *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 14(1).* This reaffirms similar provisions in other instruments, such as Article 29(2) of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which Australia has ratified.

[8] United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, "*Study on Lessons Learned and Challenges to Achieve the Implementation of the Right of Indigenous Peoples to Education*", Human Rights Council, 31 August 2009, p10.

ANTaR supports the position of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner on the nature and extent of these benefits.[9] We note that the Commissioner's position is based on extensive research, and is consistent with much of the prevailing academic literature ANTaR has reviewed on the relationship between language and the socio-economic well-being of Indigenous peoples.

In summary, the key benefits of language revitalisation include the following:

- that knowledge of one's traditional language promotes stronger connection to culture, greater self-esteem and resilience;
- that there is evidence pointing to a strong correlation between strong language and traditional culture and improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including in rates of mortality and morbidity;
- that children experience meaningful cognitive benefits when educated bilingually during infancy. Mother-tongue bilingual education may better equip children to progress their learning of English and other subjects, with obvious benefits for their well-being and economic opportunities;
- that knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, embodying traditional cultural and ecological knowledge, has the potential to give speakers improved access to employment in government services, environmental management, the arts and tourism. In turn, each of those sectors benefits from access to traditional knowledge. For example, government service delivery is aided by more effective communication between court officers, healthcare and other professionals with individuals in those communities where traditional languages prevail. Environmental projects gain access to sustainable management practices refined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over thousands of years. The arts and tourism are enlivened and enriched by Indigenous languages, and the cultural, musical and ecological knowledge they carry.

Given these benefits, Indigenous language revitalisation is inherently linked with each of the seven building blocks within the *Closing the Gap* commitments, and is a key component of achieving its stated targets.[10]

At its heart, the revitalisation of language is a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to preserve an innate aspect of their culture. As noted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner:

"*As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we know we have a unique place in this country and we value our languages. They are precious to us, and there is a sense of loss amongst those of us who no longer speak our languages.*"[11]

<u>Recommendations:</u>

1. **The Commonwealth Government should ensure that Australia becomes a signatory to Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.**

[9] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010, pp 60-64.
[10] See http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/progserv/ctg/Pages/default.aspx
[11] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010 at p7.

The Australian Policy Framework

ANTaR believes that *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach* is an important embodiment of the Commonwealth Government's commitment, in principle, to promote language revitalisation, and to provide for improved literacy and numeracy amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Across the Commonwealth, States and Territories there are several policies, and numerous programs, relating to Indigenous language revitalisation.

Although there are many encouraging success stories at a grass roots level, ANTaR believes that taken as a whole (and in many cases individually), Commonwealth, State and Territory government policies have not been effective in achieving their stated aims. This is evident in empirical research and statistics, which show a worrying and continuing trend of language decline.

We believe that some of the key reasons for this are as follows:

- the policy framework in Australia remains fragmented and uncoordinated, both across States and Territories and within them;
- there is no common set of core principles which underpins Indigenous language policy at all levels of government;
- governments across the country have not sufficiently funded programs designed to achieve policy objectives;
- approaches to funding are inconsistent, hindering the effectiveness of programs and increasing complexity for those requiring funding.

Core principles

ANTaR believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language policy across Australia should be founded on a common set of principles which acknowledges the following:

- that languages are an intrinsic part of the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- that greater awareness and revitalisation of languages (including their preservation, revival or reclamation) is of significant importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must have primary ownership of decision-making in language revitalisation policies and programs, with appropriate support from governments and the wider community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse, and may have differing views about the nature and scope of programs depending on their needs and the particular context;
- that language policies and programs must enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build knowledge, skills and leadership;
- that the dynamics of language loss in Australia are complex.[12] Accordingly measures for language revitalisation must be appropriately funded for the long-term, well-

[12] In particular, it is important to recognise that language loss, or indeed language shift, does not simply involve Indigenous languages being supplanted by English. Rather, it can also involve the displacement of a particular language by another Indigenous language – the *lingua franca* of a particular region, or by

researched, carefully planned and resourced with qualified personnel with the requisite skills, knowledge and experience;

- that bilingual education involving Indigenous languages and English allows for more effective development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of mother-tongue literacy in Indigenous languages, as well as better English literacy and broader education outcomes.

Indigenous Languages– A National Approach focuses on specified objectives and actions, but, to its detriment, does not contain any formal statement of guiding principles. In contrast, the New South Wales *Aboriginal Languages Policy* (May 2004) clearly articulates the core principles on which it is based.

ANTaR believes that the adoption of such a uniform set of principles across the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments is an important first step in bringing consistency and congruence to policy and programmatic approaches across Australia.

Inconsistency between Commonwealth, State and Territory policies

While a detailed analysis is not possible in this submission, a review of Commonwealth, State and Territory Indigenous languages policies reveals a glaring lack of consistency which can only inhibit language revitalisation efforts. The *National Approach* does not explicitly address this.

Additionally, with the exception of New South Wales, States and Territories typically have a patchy, "portfolio by portfolio" approach to Indigenous languages. This further inhibits effective action.

ANTaR believes that is best addressed through an agreed national, state and territory framework, which is founded on a set of core principles (as outlined above), and administered through a National Indigenous Languages Centre. Such an agreement could be pursued through COAG agreements, as has taken place in the context of other national policy initiatives.

National Indigenous Languages Centre

In the *National Approach,* the Commonwealth Government committed to undertake a feasibility study for a National Indigenous Languages Centre. However, to date, no meaningful steps appear to have been taken towards this.

Reflecting on the experiences of other nations (particularly, New Zealand's Maori Language Commission) ANTaR believes that the establishment of such a body is an essential step that goes hand-in-hand with the creation of an effective national policy framework. It would allow for:

- the development of a consistent policy framework;

Aboriginal English or a form of creole. As noted by Lo Bianco and Rhydwen, "*That an Aboriginal language is healthy and being transmitted inter-generationally is a cause for celebration in the face of the dominance of English. Yet if the vitality of the language is at the expense of other local languages, the celebration is also a wake*": see Lo Bianco, J. and Rhydwen, M., "*Is the Extinction of Australia's Indigenous Languages Inevitable?"* in *Can Threatened Languages be Saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st Century perspective,* p 399.

- more effective use of the considerable expertise in Indigenous languages across Australia;
- greater consistency in the administration of funding;
- improved quality control in the delivery of programs, and more effective, transparent monitoring of their effectiveness.

As noted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, we need a single organisation which "*has its eye on the big picture and can apply expertise to a complex language environment*".[13]

Inadequate and uncoordinated funding efforts

At the Federal level, the Office of the Arts administers funding for Indigenous language programs through the *Maintenance of Indigenous Language and Records Program* ("MILR"). States and Territory governments have separate, and often fragmented, approaches towards funding for such programs.

In absolute terms, funding levels appear to be inadequate given the precarious position of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

In the *National Approach,* the Commonwealth Government committed to investing $9.6 million, through MILR, in revival and maintenance programs in 2011-2012. In the 2011-2012 funding round the Office of the Arts received 90 applications seeking approximately $14.4 million in funding against the MILR budget. A total of 67 activities are being supported in 2011-12.[14] Similarly, in each of the two previous funding rounds for MILR, the level of applications for support significantly outstripped the level of funds granted.

The inadequacy of funding in absolute terms is compounded by the lack of policy co-ordination between the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. This results in inconsistent approaches towards the funding of language revitalisation programs.

It also results in increased complexity for applicants seeking funding. Applicants often must seek multiple sources of funding from the government and private sector (such as through land use or royalty agreements), with different processes, timelines and assessment criteria. Further, a grant-based approach favours better resourced applicants, and does not necessarily reflect a strategic or regional analysis of language requirements, as could be led by a National Indigenous Languages Centre.

We believe that securing national agreement on a renewed framework, and the establishment of an appropriately resourced National Indigenous Languages Centre would go a long way towards addressing these issues.

[13] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010 at p72.
[14] Including 10 multi-year activities that were approved in previous funding rounds. See http://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/milr-funding-2011-12.pdf.

Constitutional recognition of Indigenous languages

ANTaR notes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's recommendation that the Australian government "*commence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in the future".*[15]

ANTaR is currently separately campaigning for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in light of the Government's commitment to hold a referendum on the subject at or prior to the next Federal election. Appropriate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be considered within this process, informed by the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Recommendations:

2. **The Commonwealth Government should commit to work together with State and Territory Governments to develop, agree and implement, through COAG agreements or other appropriate measures, a consistent national policy framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The national policy framework should be founded upon and articulate core principles which acknowledge the following:**

    - **the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and to the wider Australian community;**

    - **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must have primary ownership of decision-making in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language policies and programs, with appropriate support from governments and the wider community;**

    - **language policies and programs must enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build knowledge, skills and leadership;**

    - **language revitalisation is a complex field and must be appropriately funded for the long-term, well-researched, carefully planned and resourced with qualified personnel;**

    - **bilingual education provides an effective means to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and should be supported in those communities who wish to implement such a model.**

3. **The Commonwealth Government should fund a national working group to establish a National Indigenous Languages Centre with authority over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages policy, research, funding, program standards and monitoring.**

4. **The Commonwealth Government should commit to resourcing the National Indigenous Languages Centre adequately for language revitalisation and other efforts, having regard to the recommendations of the national working group, and following its establishment, the Centre itself.**

[15] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010 at p 105.

Current Revitalisation Programs

ANTaR is encouraged by efforts underway at a grassroots level across Australia to revitalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. These encompass education and literacy courses; the establishment of regional language centres; language nests; drama, music and art programs; and programs to preserve and promote language through technology.

In the face of uncoordinated policy approaches, an inadequate and complex approach to funding and, in some cases, disruptive Government intervention, the continued success of many of these grassroots programs reflects the commitment and hard-work of teachers, community workers and students towards their languages.[16]

However, much remains to be done if we are to achieve an effective, co-ordinated approach to language revitalisation, let alone improve broader education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

While ANTaR is not a service delivery organisation and hence is not at the coalface of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language education, based on our research we believe the Committee should consider the following measures:

- greater support and funding for regional or community language centres at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are recorded and taught, teachers are trained and education materials are developed;
- greater support for "language nests" – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled early childhood education facilities in which children are "immersed" in a language environment. We note the positive experience in Indigenous cultures outside Australia who have established such language nests;
- continued Commonwealth Government support for the work of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority for the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the National Curriculum for primary and secondary education – including making Indigenous language study available as a discrete option within the Languages Other Than English ("LOTE") section;
- a commitment by State and Territory governments to ensuring adequate training courses and places for teachers of Indigenous languages.

The National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014

In May 2011, COAG endorsed the *National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014* released by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs ("MCEECDYA").

The Plan sets out a framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across Australia and incorporates a number of action items – national, systemic and local – towards improving education outcomes, including action items regarding Indigenous languages. These include:

[16] Case studies are discussed widely in the *Social Justice Report 2009,* at pp 81 to 100, and in academic literature. For instance, see Lo Bianco, J. and Rhydwen, M., "*Is the Extinction of Australia's Indigenous Languages Inevitable?"* in *Can Threatened Languages be Saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st Century perspective.* See also Hobson, J., Lowe K., Poetsch S. and Walsh M., *Re-awakening languages: theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages,* including Chapter 10, "*Language Centre as Language Revitalisation Strategy: A Case Study from the Pilbara".*

- obtaining government commitments to maintaining advisory arrangements to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, cultures *and languages* are considered in program and policy development;
- a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to funding and support for a study into a national panel of experts on teaching of Indigenous languages, as announced by MCEECDYA in the *National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014*[17];
- acknowledgement of Indigenous languages in MCEEDYA's *National Plan for Language Education in Australia*, with a requirement that States and Territories communicate expectations for the teaching of Indigenous languages to schools.

ANTaR commends MCEEDYA's commitment to these actions.

However, we note that the Plan does not adequately address the recommendations made by the Australian Human Rights Commission during the community consultation process.[18] ANTaR calls upon the Committee to revisit these recommendations in considering the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early education; measures to improve education outcomes; and the value of bilingual education (discussed further below).

Recommendations:

5. The Committee should consider appropriate means to ensure Commonwealth, State and Territory government support for the language revitalisation measures, outlined above, having regard to the findings of the Social Justice Report 2009 regarding Indigenous languages.

6. The Commonwealth Government should ensure support, resourcing and funding for MCEEDYA to deliver on its commitments in the National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014, including its proposed feasibility study into a national expert panel on Indigenous languages.

7. The Committee should work with MCEEDYA to ensure that the recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission in its submission on the National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014 are reflected appropriately in policy and programs on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

[17] See *National Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014*, recommendation 12.
[18] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs on the Indigenous Education Plan Draft 2010-2014*, February 2010. Available at: http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/indigenous_education_2010_consulation_submissions,30611.html

English language learning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

ANTaR believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have access to opportunities to increase their proficiency in English. We support the *Closing the Gap* program's objective to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by 2018.

However, governments at all levels must act responsibly in determining the most effective means to achieve greater proficiency in English. Further, this should not come at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language revitalisation efforts.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that education in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, particularly through bilingual education models, allows for better English language proficiency.

Bilingual education

We note the discussion and research of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner citing evidence indicating that bilingual education is more effective than English-only approaches in enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to improve their English language skills.[19] The United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has expressed similar views, noting that bilingual education allows for "*a better personal and conceptual foundation for learning …; access to more information and opportunities …; and more flexible thinking processes …".*[20]

In the *National Indigenous Education Plan 2010-2014*, MCEECDYA has committed, amongst other things, to:

- consider including bilingual and bidialectal evidence-based strategies in a national database of evidence-based literacy and numeracy strategies;
- work together with education providers to support access to family literacy and numeracy programs, including multilingual family programs, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

However, the Plan falls short of explicit support for bilingual education models where supported by local communities (as per the Australian Human Rights Commission's recommendation).

The lack of uniform support at all levels of government for bilingual education programs involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and English is out of step with prevailing research, international experience and the wishes of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We remain particularly disappointed in the Northern Territory Chief Minister's decision in 2008 to mandate that the first four hours of the school day be conducted in English. This effectively renders unworkable the bilingual education model that operated in many schools in the Northern Territory, which of all States and Territories has the highest proportion of children entering schools with an Aboriginal language as their first language.

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[19] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Chapter 3, Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney, 2010 at pp 89 to 94.

[20] Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, "*Study on Lessons Learned and Challenges to Achieve the Implementation of the Right of Indigenous People to Education*", United Nations Human Rights Council, 31 August 2009, at p17.

Specialist Teachers

The *National Indigenous Education Plan 2010-2014* includes a commitment to ensure teachers working in remote schools with multilingual students are "appropriately prepared" with English as a Second Language ("ESL") training.

However, MCEEDYA fell short of the Australian Human Rights Commission's recommendation for specific targets for specialist teachers to tagged specialist teaching areas, such as Early Childhood and ESL teachers. The Committee should consider this in considering measures to improve education outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where English is not the dominant language.

Recommendations:

8. **Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should explicitly recognise the value of bilingual education models and provide support for the introduction of such models, where desired, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**