

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra 2600



18 August 2011

Dear Dr Anna Dacre,

Thankyou for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry on Language Learning in Indigenous Communities. In the following submission I will address some of the terms of reference in order to illustrate the great significance of Indigenous languages in Australia, and the need to make a strong commitment to their continued use and preservation for cultural and educational purposes.

Attention and Recognition to Indigenous Languages

Committing attention to and recognition of Indigenous languages is vitally important for Australia. These languages are an essential element of our national history and culture and should be treated with great respect and care. The systematic destruction of many Indigenous languages through colonial convictions and oppression of the Indigenous population has caused much damage. It is therefore the responsibility of Australians today to honour and preserve these languages.

The Australian government has made some pleasing steps towards a commitment to supporting and preserving Indigenous languages with the strategy, *Indigenous Languages: A National Approach 2009*. One of the targets of this strategy is to support Indigenous language learning in schools¹ and therefore I urge the government to continue to build on and support this target. The Australian Human Rights Commission Social Justice Report of 2009 outlines the importance of recognising and attending to language preservation. The report lists a range of reasons for doing so, including, that strong connections to one's mother tongue, promotes resilience, improves health and cognitive functioning, and increases employment options.² The report also cites research from the United States, South East Asia and various communities across Australia, that draws attention to the great value and importance of minority language use.³ Other research from overseas Indigenous settings also contributes to understanding the needs and challenges in valuing, recognising and supporting Indigenous language use. Research into the value of Intercultural Bilingual Education in a Mapuche context in Chile⁴, bilingual maintenance programs in Mexico⁵ and the rights of minority Ecuadorians to maintain their own languages while also learning other languages⁶ are part of a body of research addressing these issues. Australia can learn from this research and also should continue to support research into how best to recognise and support Indigenous Australian languages so as to build understanding and awareness across all sectors of the Australian community.

¹ Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission

² Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp 60-63

³ Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp 60-63

⁴ Patricio Ortiz 'Indigenous Knowledge and Language: Decolonizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Mapuche Intercultural Bilingual Education Program in Chile', Canadian Journal of Native Education, 2009, v 32, no 1

⁵ Kellie Rolstad 'Language Death in Central Mexico: The Decline of Nahuatl and the New Bilingual Maintenance Programs', Bilingual Review, 2001, Vol 26, Issue 1

⁶ Marleen Haboud 'Teaching Foreign Languages: A Challenge to Ecuadorian Bilingual Intercultural Education', International Journal of English Studies, 2009, vol 9, no 1

Closing the Gap, Identity and Culture

There are many benefits to the use of Indigenous languages in schools and the broader community. As demonstrated by the research cited in the section above, connection to Indigenous languages has benefits for resilience, health, educational attainment and employment. All of these benefits contribute to 'closing the gap' and addressing Indigenous disadvantage. As stated in the Social Justice Report 2009, 'language and culture are interdependent'⁷, therefore, language plays a significant role in maintaining a strong identity and connection to cultural heritage.

Australian researcher and educator Stephen Harris also notes the important benefits in bilingual education increasing academic achievement and contributing to a sense of Indigenous identity, thus promoting strength and resilience in Indigenous communities⁸. In seeking to value identity and culture and 'close the gap' there is a need, however, to recognise other forms of 'language' that co-exist with Indigenous languages to produce success. Some of these 'languages' are Indigenous knowledge and conceptual understandings that differ from Western knowledges and frameworks⁹ and the language of Western schooling¹⁰ which includes the values that are inherent in the learning environment and the expectations of connection between home and school. These 'languages' often go unacknowledged and therefore those interacting in education in Indigenous communities frequently misunderstand each other or struggle to establish why problems emerge or success is hindered. It is therefore important that Indigenous communities are supported to engage in multi-lingual education and that non-Indigenous teachers entering these communities to teach in the schools are also given an education in the multiple 'languages' that will be required for both their and their students' success.

Indigenous Languages in Early Education

For Indigenous children who begin their formal schooling with limited English language knowledge, it is vital to begin instruction in the language familiar to them. Language is used to 'make and share meanings with the people with whom we interact'¹¹, therefore, if young children are forced to only use English at school to learn they become estranged from the meaning making process in their own context. Research with Indigenous American children has also shown that immersion in Indigenous language learning in early childhood education produces a strong foundation for further learning.¹² This, along with the understanding that confidence using one's mother tongue produces resilience and greater health and cognitive function (as presented in the first key term of reference above), shows the use of Indigenous languages in early schooling is of utmost importance.

Improving Education Outcomes

It must be recognised that Indigenous parents will have many and varied aspirations for their children and these may differ within and between communities. Bilingual and bicultural education may therefore have to be established slightly differently in different communities. Harris suggests a bicultural model of schooling needs to be uniquely

⁷ Social Justice Report 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 60

⁸ "Soft" and "Hard" Domain Theory for Bicultural Education in Indigenous Groups', Peabody Journal of Education, 1994, vol 69, no 2

⁹ Kerwin, D.W. 'When we Become People with a History', International Journal of Inclusive Education, 2010, vol 15, no 2

¹⁰ Graham, B., 'Learning the Language of Schooling: Considerations and Concerns in the Aboriginal Context', Keynote Address, First Years of Schooling Conference, Sydney, 1986

¹¹ Graham, B., 'Learning the Language of Schooling: Considerations and Concerns in the Aboriginal Context', Keynote Address, First Years of Schooling Conference, Sydney, 1986, p 4

¹² Lockard, L & De Groat, J. "He said it all in Navajo!": Indigenous language immersion in Early Childhood Classrooms', International Journal of Multicultural Education, 2010, vol 12, no 2

crafted in each location to suit the needs and aspirations of the community.¹³ What is necessary for this to occur is support for Indigenous educators to become qualified in Western forms of educating and for non-Indigenous teachers working in these communities to receive extensive education in the various forms of knowledge being negotiated in these settings, such as Western knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, 'school' knowledge and cultural/community knowledge. All those interacting in these communities must be able to traverse consciously and confidently, the multiple forms of knowledge engaged with. It is also important to note here the potential harm of high-stakes testing as demonstrated by research conducted in Alaskan Indigenous communities.¹⁴ The use and emphasis placed on high-stakes testing in Indigenous communities in Australia may therefore need to be renegotiated in order to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Education and Vocational Benefits of English Language Competency

The proficient use of English is incredibly important for interacting with strength in the world today and therefore this should be a great priority when considering education in Indigenous communities. English should not, however, be taught at the expense of Indigenous languages. As demonstrated by research cited in above sections of this submission a strong connection and deep understanding of one's first language enables greater cognitive functioning and higher resilience. This means there should be an equally stringent commitment to the teaching of Indigenous languages and English in Indigenous communities. Along with this commitment there must be further research carried out to establish the ways in which different cultural paradigms may be used to advance knowledge in both Indigenous languages and English. There must also be a greater emphasis on teacher education in different ways of knowing, different ways of learning and how these can be used to advance English language competency, while resisting a shift towards a hierarchy of knowledge in which English is placed at the top.

Thankyou once again for this opportunity to advise on this area of great importance in this country.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Rudolph

¹³ "'Soft" and "Hard" Domain Theory for Bicultural Education in Indigenous Groups', Peabody Journal of Education, 1994, vol 69, no 2, p 149

¹⁴ Wyman, L et al 'High stakes testing, bilingual education and language endangerment: a Yup'ik example', International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 2010, vol 13, no 6