SUBMISSION FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

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Denise Shillinglaw is the Teacher in Charge of English at Broome Senior High School. She has been working in the field of Aboriginal Education for 10 years, based in Broome. Her knowledge is based on experiences teaching English as a subsequent language or dialect to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through Broome Senior High School, as well as her own research into Two Way education. The submission is part thesis and part reflection of the more broad issues related to discussion of traditional Aboriginal Languages, Kriol and varieties of Aboriginal English. Denise herself is involved in several cross-cultural partnerships with Aboriginal colleagues and friends whose advice and support is invaluable in her own understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Broome Senior High School has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population which makes up almost 50% of the school. Students come to Broome from all over the Kimberley and Pilbara and many reside at the Broome Residential College. The diversity of students' language backgrounds include Bardi, Yawuru, Walmajarri, Mangala, Bunuba, Karajarri, Nyulnyul, Kija, Jaru, Nyikina, Kriol as well as varieties of Aboriginal English.

Education is seen as a liberating force in western society. Literacy is a critical part of accessing education where disadvantage exists, and in Australia, Aboriginal people are a significantly disenfranchised subgroup. Many Aboriginal people are caught in a cycle of disadvantage involving education (Williams 1988), juvenile crime (Atkinson 1996; Mouzos 2001; Grabosky, Scandia, Hazlehurst & Wilson 1988), health (Altman 2003) and social justice (Jones, Masters, Griffiths & Moulday 2002). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) provides statistics about Indigenous people's socioeconomic, employment, crime and welfare states, all of which demonstrate the level of disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005). Outcomes of the 'cycle of disadvantage' include poverty (Luke 2002; Shnukal 1992), disease (Malin 2002) and malnutrition, high mortality and welfare dependence (ABS 2005). In schools where the attendance, retention and participation statistics of Aboriginal secondary students are low and success in school is inconsistent as a result (McRae, Ainsworth, Cummings, Hughes, McKay, Price, Rowland, Warhurst, Woods & Zbar 2000), the disadvantage is manifest. Post-school unemployment and long term welfare dependence for Aboriginal youth are reflected in the recent census figures and are a concern for most state governments (ABS 2005). This disadvantage is amplified in Kimberley schools where Aboriginal students speak Aboriginal English (AE) as their first dialect and/or Kriol as their first language, and/or a traditional Aboriginal language. However their literacy ability is only measured in Standard Australian English (SAE)– their second or subsequent language or dialect. Importantly, the language or dialect backgrounds of Aboriginal students and

their level of literacy in SAE impacts on learning outcomes, school participation and educational success (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey & Wyatt 1997).

Literacy achievement in SAE is considered to be important and necessary for functioning in Australian society. SAE is the language of the education system, legal system and other institutions of Australian society (Robertson 2003; Shnukal 1992). In Australian schools, SAE is the language of instruction in all classrooms except in the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) learning area (Simpson & Clancy 2001; McRae et al 2000); it is the language of interaction whether formal or informal; and the language of texts used in classrooms whether print or non-print, instructional or aesthetic (Malcolm, Grote, Eggington & Sharifian 2002). It is also the language by which academic achievement is measured or gained, particularly in the written form. At the same time, positive school experiences can have a significant effect on Aboriginal students' access and opportunity beyond school, rather than an over-representation in the juvenile justice system or in the welfare system (Hazlehurst & Dunn 1988; Jones et al 2002). Thus, practices in Australia which broaden literacy development in traditional Aboriginal languages (including Kriol) and improve literacy competencies in SAE, in particular in writing, are essential for success of Aboriginal students in secondary schooling (Catholic Education Office WA 1994; Education Department WA 1999a; EDWA 1999b).

The role and value placed on literacy in writing in western society are far-reaching; 'print texts and genres are, generally speaking, accorded more prestige than oral communication in our society' (MacIntyre 2001, p.5). In many western cultures, modern communication methods and technologies demand abilities in writing, with elaboration and explanation (Phillips & Healy 2004) to conduct oneself in the local and global community and in the journey for many to access a better life (Malcolm 1992). In Australia, the value placed on the production of the SAE written word by non-Aboriginal Australians is often a measure of a person's education (Luke 2002) and 'an enormous amount of cultural capital is invested in print and students who have limited access to it are clearly going to be disadvantaged' (MacIntyre 2001, p.5).

In WA, there are various factors that limit Aboriginal students in their acquisition of writing in SAE. One is the language backgrounds of the students. Many Kimberley Aboriginal students as literacy learners come to school with a different language, such as Kimberley Kriol and sometimes also a traditional Aboriginal language. Other Aboriginal students may come to school with a different dialect of English such as AE (EDWA 1999b; Williams 1988). For many of these students, the language or dialect that they bring to school is one that is different from that of the classroom and is one that is not written. Subsequently, these students do not necessarily have the print rich environments or the first language modelling of reading or writing practices in their pre-school or out-of-school lives. This is a fundamental difference in what these students bring when they attend the classroom, where writing in SAE is a highly valued activity (Williams 1988). Furthermore, in secondary classrooms across learning areas, the demonstration of understanding is through writing, placing huge pressure on these students. The centrality and difficulty of writing, for secondary Aboriginal students

whose first language may be a traditional Aboriginal language or Kriol and/or whose first dialect is Aboriginal English, demands new and innovative approaches towards teaching reading and writing in SAE (Bevan & Shillinglaw 2010).

Aboriginal students in the Kimberley, and indeed around Australia, are similar in circumstance to other groups of indigenous people worldwide where there is evidence to suggest that issues surrounding literacy are a part of greater issues of colonisation and assimilation (Haebich 1988; Partington, Godfrey, Harslett & rRicher 2000). The efficacy of a particular strategy to improve literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students would have to involve the empowerment of Aboriginal people and attempt to be bicultural, bilingual, bidialectal, inclusive and equitable. As a secondary English teacher, with experience in teaching literacy and with knowledge of practices involving English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Second Dialect (ESD) students, the diagnosis of Aboriginal students' literacy levels does not take into account different language or dialect backgrounds, and in general does not bridge between students' cultural backgrounds and the culture of mainstream Australian society (Malcolm 2003; Mellor & Corrigan 2004; Greville 2000).

The dialect of English spoken by many Aboriginal people around Australia, including Aboriginal groups in the Kimberley is AE (EDWA 1999a; EDWA 1999b). AE 'refers to a range of varieties of English spoken by Indigenous Australians which incorporate regional variations and are sometimes named using local terms' (Malcolm et al 1999, p.111). AE also ranges from heavy to light (Clancy & Simpson 2002) often causing miscommunication, offence and estrangement from the classroom and school as its surface features are similar to SAE (Malcolm et al 1999). Aboriginal English is very different from Standard Australian English on a number of levels often unnoticed by non-Aboriginal teachers (Sharifian 2001). On the surface, it is apparent that AE draws from both SAE and some traditional Aboriginal languages (Williams 1988). However, it has a clearly defined set of rules for grammar, syntax and semantics (DOEWA 2002). Below the surface though, there are more subtle differences in pragmatics and behaviours (EDWA 1999a); yet deeper still are the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values, attitudes and beliefs (Sharifian 2001; EDWA 1999a; EDWA 1999b; Malcolm et al 1999). Furthermore, AE is not to be confused with Kimberley Kriol. An English-based Creole, Kriol is a contemporary Aboriginal language that has evolved from a pidgin, passed down through at least four generations to make it a language in its own right (CEOWA 1997; Mickan 1992). Kimberley Kriol originated during the period of dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal people in WA history, where Aboriginal people were displaced from their traditional lands and relocated to ration depots around the state (Haebich 1988). Today, many Aboriginal students are multilingual; they may use AE and Kriol and have access to one or more traditional Aboriginal languages in their homes or communities. In short, Kimberley Aboriginal students are ESL and ESD because they speak AE as their first dialect and/or Kimberley Kriol as their first language (Ovington, 1992).

For many Aboriginal students the writing of SAE is not a usual phenomenon (EDWA 1999a). Indeed, the use of written SAE is often a difficult and laborious task for Aboriginal students of all ages, but is more explicitly

avoided in the secondary years of schooling. The results are inevitable: poor attendance, poor achievement in literacy and poor graduation statistics (Trewin 2005). Teachers constantly require professional assistance in motivating Aboriginal students to write, believing students have no value for literacy or education in general when this is not the case (Partington et al 2000).

Recommendations:

- Schools aim to recognise, acknowledge and value the diverse linguistic backgrounds which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students come from including traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol and varieties of Aboriginal English.
- Recognise the ESL/D background of Aboriginal students and the role language plays in negotiating a curriculum that is delivered in Standard Australian English (SAE) and assessed against SAE competence.
- Implement appropriate ESL/D teaching and learning metholodogies as a matter of urgency
- Establish and encourage programs with funds and resources invested in the active preservation of traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol and varieties of Aboriginal English to protect, develop and sustain strong sense of cultural and individual identity within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community
- Investment in 'Two Way' teams in schools and classrooms to forge pivotal partnerships in leading bilingual, bicultural and bidialectal education delivery, and for codeswitching in the classroom environment as a bridge from traditional Aboriginal languages, Kriol or AE to SAE (Harper & deJong 2004; Munns, Lawson & Mootz n.d.).
- Investment in more roles in school contexts for Aboriginal personnel whose linguistic knowledge will benefit the whole school, with ongoing support and capacity building

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