Brief submission to the federal parliamentary inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Teaching revival languages in schools

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Source of comments

These comments are based on discussion at a Workshop recently hosted at the Koorie Heritage Trust by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) in conjunction with La Trobe University (LTU) in relation to the ARC-funded Linkage Project 'Meeting point: integrating Aboriginal and linguistics knowledge systems for description of contemporary revival languages in Australia'. The comments represent my interpretation of the discussion, focussing on what supports would be most effective in promoting Indigenous language use and education in the south and east of the country.

The meeting was attended by a small number of established teachers of reviving and revitalising languages from the Eastern states as well as VACL and LTU staff. The focus was on how language is developing but we also discussed the successes needs of programs more broadly.

Revival languages as LOTE L2 languages

These types of language programs are used to reintroduce Aboriginal languages into schools at least for indigenous students. The students involved typically speak English, Aboriginal English or another language at home so are acquiring the language as a LOTE. Staff in these programs are often employed on a casual basis across several schools and rarely interact with specific cohorts of students for more than one hour per week. They are seldom invited to access training opportunities offered to other school staff and are often required to reapply annually for funding to support the language development work that underpins the teaching of revival languages. There is an urgent need to formalise support for these programs and ensure that funding is offered on more than annual cycles.

A collective vision for the future

One of the exercises we did during the workshop was to invite people to consider their long term goals in relation to their language programs. There was a unanimous desire to see Indigenous languages taught in all Australian schools in culturally appropriate ways. This aspiration is based on awareness both of how far many communities have come in reclaiming authority in relation to their languages and of how profoundly language and culture learning can impact on other aspects of the wider community.

Culturally appropriate teaching of Indigenous languages in schools would involve:

- teaching being done by authorised, well trained, mostly Indigenous staff
- teaching language in conjunction with teaching culture
- teaching the language of the country on which the school is found

The benefits for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students that we noted for a program of this type include:

- increased language awareness
- cultural awareness
- increasing levels of self-respect and respect for others
- concrete steps towards reconciliation within schools and extending out into the wider community
- better progress in developing literacy
- better classroom behaviour

Success factors in relation to these types of programs include:

- community lead programs in partnerships with schools (relevant protocols are set out, for example, in the *Aboriginal Languages, cultures and reclamation in Victorian schools: Standard P – 10 and Protocols* document available from http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/aboriginal/index.html)
- access to LOTE and teacher training for language teachers

- access to linguistics training for those involved with language development
- capacity (financial and technological) for materials development

Barriers in relation to the ongoing success of these programs include:

- limited numbers of community members available to teach or to train to teach
- lack of coherent pathways through professional training and development. The courses currently available are either targeted at fairly basic levels of linguistic sophistication (eg. Certificates I & II in Indigenous Language and Knowledge Work and the Bachelor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Systems at Batchelor Institute) or require relatively high, sustained academic standard (eg. University of Sydney's Graduate Certificate/ Diploma/ Master of Indigenous Languages Education, which requires a 4 year undergraduate teaching degree as a prerequisite). There are excellent pedagogical approaches available that specifically address the needs of Indigenous students but they are not widely known (for example Accelerated Second Language Acquisition – see for example http://discover.scu.edu.au/2007/issue4/index.php/3/).
- lack of established career pathways to attract young people to train and work in this area
- lack of employment security and lack of pay parity with other teachers restricts the number of people prepared to do this work and shortens the working life of many who are involved. Casual employment of teachers in Aboriginal language programs in schools entails a range of serious problems about professional standing for these staff and often means that the pay rate is inappropriate to experience, standing in the community and in some cases formal qualifications of teachers.
- marginalisation of Indigenous teaching staff within specific schools
- need for materials development
- timetabling issues – Indigenous language and culture programs are often treated as optional extras

Closing the Gap and teaching non-Aboriginal Australians

Indigenous languages have an enormous potential contribution to make in relation to *Closing the Gap*. There is no more powerful way to reassert community authority over the schooling of children than to allow community members to teach community business within school spaces. Indigenous language programs can lead the way to changing school culture and students' perceptions about school. These changes are reflected in improved levels of attendance with flow on effects in terms of learning more generally.

Insofar as Closing the Gap involves changing non-Aboriginal people's attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians, access to learning an Indigenous language and learning about Indigenous culture is an extremely powerful means of change. Indigenous languages and appropriate aspects of Indigenous culture should gradually be incorporated more deeply into the whole curriculum for all Australian students. This is already happening in some communities (eg. primary schools in Parkes) and has had a very significant impact on levels of racism within these schools. Whenever the opportunity is available, this type of activity should be supported.

At the same time, many communities who are working towards language revival are not yet ready to share their languages and cultures with others. Language revival is a slow and emotional process, involving as it does a deep acknowledgement of all that has been lost and well as the great cultural resources that remain. People need time to regain confidence with their languages and a sense of authority in this area before they can consider sharing these things with others. The possibility of moving gradually towards wider teaching should never be constructed as an obligation.

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