

The Committee Members,  
Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Dear Sirs,

"In Australia, our ways have mostly produced disaster for the Aboriginal people. I suspect that only when their **right to be distinctive** is accepted, will policy become creative"... Kim Beazley Sr.

*The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education-*

I've lived in Yuendumu for almost four decades.

My wife taught at Yuendumu School for three decades. She was deeply involved with the (since closed down) bilingual programme, and taught English as a second language.

The mother-tongue of most Yuendumu residents is Warlpiri.

Our oldest son learned Warlpiri as a second language by immersion both with his friends and in Yuendumu School. At the time Yuendumu School had a fully functional stepped bilingual programme.

Our son is convinced that growing up bilingual, with two very different languages, two very different ways of thinking, is the reason he developed his considerable computer skills.

He now works for Google at the cutting edge of IT.

**NOT** to include Indigenous languages in early education (to deny Aboriginal children the full benefits of bilingualism) - **where the possibility to do so exists-** is not just a missed opportunity, it is criminal.

*Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second Language:*

Warlpiri children in Yuendumu are not given the opportunity to learn English as a second language by immersion. Initially their exposure to English is limited to the non-Warlpiri teachers at the school, other (minority) English speakers in the community and to the programmes on Television. By the time they have grasped enough English to understand what the teacher is saying, their intellectual and scholastic development will have been held back and only exceptionally gifted children will ever catch up.

The "4 hours English only" policy of the NT Department of Education is not only unjust, but is educationally unsound.

NAPLAN testing by English language culturally alien questions is not only meaningless but cruel. Children are virtually told they are hopeless. This is not likely to encourage school attendance

Improvement of education outcomes in non-English speaking communities, in my opinion, can only be achieved by a serious well resourced programme of teaching in the vernacular, combined with teaching English as a second language.

When bilingual education was at its height, students came out of Yuendumu School fully bilingual and bi-literate. It is not surprising to me, that these people are today the best English speakers in our community.

Even at high levels of the Education bureaucracy, the distinction between "childhood language acquisition" and "teaching in the vernacular" isn't clearly understood.

Arguments in favour of bilingual education are often met with "But they have to learn English" or "their parents want them to learn English".

“Teaching in the vernacular” is about using the language the children understand as a medium of instruction, to teach them **anything, including English**.

To attempt to teach anyone anything using a language they don't know (in this case English) is impossible.

The key to 'Reconciliation' and 'Closing the Gap' in those places where Indigenous languages continue to be spoken, lie, in my opinion, in the full recognition and appreciation of these languages.

Only if Warlpiri children grow up believing that their language is valued, will they embrace literacy. The key to improvement in school attendance lies in Warlpiri people feeling that they “own” the School; that the school environment isn't “foreign”; that the curriculum is relevant to their world view and social environment. A much greater role for the Warlpiri language in school would be an important step in achieving this sense of “ownership”.

I leave the final word to someone that said it over half a century ago, so much better than I could:

“Above all, let us permit native children to keep their own languages, -those beautiful and expressive tongues, rich in true Australian imagery, charged with poetry and with love for all that is great, ancient and eternal in the continent. **There is no need to fear that their own languages will interfere with the learning of English as the common medium of expression for all Australians.** In most areas of Australia the natives have been bilingual, probably from time immemorial. **Today white Australians are among the few remaining civilized people who still think that knowledge of one language is the normal limit of linguistic achievement.**” - T.G.H Strelow, 1958. *(my emphasis)*

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