

To the House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

**RE: Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities**

**Terms of reference – Part 1**

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
- The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
- Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language

The decision by the Northern Territory Government in 2008 to stop First Language instruction for the first four hours contravenes a number of human rights that severely disables Indigenous community members and has a number of deleterious consequences for Indigenous students in bilingual schools.

Firstly, the government failed to consult with any community members regarding the abandonment of first language instruction despite the fact that such instruction is strongly advocated for by remote communities since it can represent a way to maintain and revitalized language and culture.

Secondly, the abandonment of first language instruction represents a contravention of the United Nations legislation (of which Australia is a signatory) that maintains the rights of Indigenous parents to have their children educated in their traditional language. <sup>1</sup> Displacement of a mother tongue in educational instruction could have the consequence of highly contributing to the extinction of language diversity. <sup>2</sup>

In addition, there are a number of benefits for Indigenous people in terms of language and cultural maintenance.

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<sup>1</sup> Simpson, J. Caffery, J. McConvell, P. (2009) 'Gaps in Australia's Indigenous Language Policy: Dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory' *AIATSIS Discussion Paper Number 24*, AIATSIS, Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> Magga, O.H., Nicolaisen, M., Trask, M., Skutnabb-Kangas, T. and Dunbar, R. (2005). *Indigenous Children's Education and Indigenous Languages*, Expert paper for the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, May 2005, viewed 27 May 2011, <[http://www.arcticlanguages.com/papers/PFI1\\_indigenous\\_childrens\\_education.pdf](http://www.arcticlanguages.com/papers/PFI1_indigenous_childrens_education.pdf)> .

Learning in the first language for the first few years of school instruction (also referred to as language immersion) enables first language users (the students) conceptual understanding of curriculum content and material otherwise denied to them as a mere consequence of being able to understand the instructor.<sup>3</sup>

A great deal of research also indicates that learning literacy and curriculum content in the first language is far faster and leads to a very high transference of skills to a second language (Standard Australian English) as opposed to very slow acquisition of second language literacy skills in the first instance.<sup>4</sup> Thus, students will achieve a far higher academic outcome. In addition, Bilingual aptitude is known to contribute to cognitive development (through concept formation, reasoning, visual-spatial skills and creativity gains as well as diversity in classification) which again increases educational outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the United Nations advocate bilingual education very strongly in Indigenous contexts claiming that it is “superior to all other forms of education practices in order to achieve literacy and generally effective learning, including the development of the child’s personality (and) talents”.<sup>6</sup>

By ensuring the legitimacy and status of Indigenous languages, as well as the absence of marginalization of the ‘other’ in a second language, bilingual education also leads to stronger identity formation and social and emotional well-being in Indigenous children and much higher cultural and contextual relevance of school – all factors that also lead to higher educational and health outcomes and much higher school attendance.<sup>7</sup>

## Terms of reference – part 2

- Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

In Central Australia there are the beginnings of a language and cultural centre. This centre, under the auspices of reknowned Indigenous elder, Veronic Dobson, is well-placed as role model of language service delivery. It is envisioned that the centre will provide language experts and language training for both translating and interpreting services as well as language teaching for educational institutions (they can be outsourced from the centre) for primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The centralization of the service as well as its status of Aboriginal control means that much needed language teaching and interpreting services can be easily accessible.

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<sup>3</sup> Simpson, Caffery & McConvell Op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> May, S., Hill, R. & Tiakiwai, S. (2006). *Bilingual Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand: key findings from Bilingual/Immersion Education: Indicators of Good Practice*. Ministry of Education Wahangua Mahi Ranahau Research Division: New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> Purdie, N. (2009). A way forward for Indigenous Languages: Should Aboriginal students be taught in their own languages? *Developments*, Vol. 21 [2009], Art. 2

<sup>6</sup> Maggie et al, Op Cit

<sup>7</sup> Purdie, N., Stone, A., (2005). ‘Indigenous students and literacy and numeracy: What does the research say?’ *Professional Educator*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 10-13.

I have only listed a small number of research articles available on the issue of Indigenous education and Indigenous languages. There is considerable international research that can also be accessed.

Yours sincerely

Janine Oldfield