

To: Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Submission to the inquiry into LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES being conducted by the standing committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs

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The following submission responds to four of the eight terms of reference, namely:

- 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.
- The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages.

Introduction

The authors are pleased to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, which is currently inquiring into language learning in Indigenous communities. Their frame of reference is the Northern Territory.

From a number of Indigenous teachers, Indigenous teaching assistants and other indigenous staff at Wadeye [names supplied at end of submission]

Terms of reference points focussed on:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages.

“We are proud that we have a lot of information that some other white Australians like linguists want to learn. We know about many bush foods and how to prepare them. We have country names and a lot of knowledge that our ancestors have passed on to us. We want our languages to be respected, not just respecting English language.”

- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture.

“We have many people with many languages here: Marringarr, Magati Ke, Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Murrinh Nhuwanh and Murrinhpatha. We want to talk in the languages we speak, hold them strong and teach our children in them. We don’t want to have to leave part of ourselves at home when we come to school. We don’t want our languages and our culture wiped out. We see in communities near us, they speak only English and have lost their language. We don’t want this to happen here.

We know who we are. We are not white people, we are black people and we know much about our land, stories, our clans, our foods that we want to teach our children. We have a lot of knowledge that you don’t find in white English culture that is important to us.”

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

“We learn best in a language we understand and this is very true for our children. They already know a lot before they come to Western school and if we use our language with them they learn more quickly. We can’t learn to read a language we don’t speak, so if we give our young children the chance to learn to read first in their language, then they can make a bridge when white people ask them to start to read in English. In the early years they can start to learn to speak some English but not be forced to learn to read in English from those early years when they don’t know any English. Let them do one thing at a time. Let them learn to read and write in Murrinhpatha which they speak, then later maybe by year 4 or 5 move to reading and writing in English.

We think we have a right for our children to learn to read and write in a language they speak. So all our children should be able to have time throughout their schooling for our language and culture to be part of what they are learning, not just the really young ones.”

- The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages.

“At the moment we are using Murrinhpatha for reading and writing but only to year 3. But a

problem is because of Naplan they are forced at the beginning of year 3 to start to write English before they are strong in reading and writing Murrinhpatha. It is very confusing for them to have to learn another orthography before they have learnt all their own. They should not have to do Naplan in English in the early months of Year 3 and they should only begin to write in English when they have become strong in writing in a language they speak well.

We must give our children in Wadeye and the Thamarrurr region the opportunity to receive quality education.

Our people are strong in culture and many languages are spoken in the community and back in the Homelands of the different clans. We dream, think and communicate in our daily lives through our language.

At OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic School we now have a 'culture centre' called DA NGIMALMIN FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY CENTRE. It's a place of significance in the centre of the school where our old people come to teach our children our way of life. Teaching the children about people and the relationship to each other, traditional dance and songs, stories, land, name of animals and plants, the universe, art and craft and the list goes on. The culture centre fits in well with what the teachers are doing in the Early Years. We know it will form a very strong foundation for our children's learning and hope that by strengthening education in the first language will make learning in the English language easier. Children will enjoy coming to school every day to learn.

In our culture lessons we are having lessons for the clans in their own languages to keep those other languages strong or help the ones who have started to forget their own, to learn before it is too late and no one is left alive to teach them those clan languages."

Authors: Karrkurr Kinthari, Walbinthith Lantjin, Tharrngka Tchimburrurr, Mirrkun Namarlak, Nganani Bunduck, Daninh Bunduck, Kinmarri Mullumbuk, Kuwampam Melpi, Mankanak Lantjin, Pelli Dumoo, Diyini Lantjin, Palurn Tipiloura, Kabanin Ngarri, Ngumanhuk Dinding Melpi, Namengkena Namarlak, Marlem Kolumboort, Deminhimpuk Bunduck, Yerampuwup Bunduck, Tjinbururr Tchimburrurr, Alawu Kungul, Gemma Alanga Nganbe and Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe.

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