Submission from the Sisters of St Joseph SA Reconciliation Circle to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Languages in Australia August 2011

The Sisters of St Joseph SA Reconciliation Circle appreciate the opportunity of contributing to the discussion and are hopeful that this critical matter will be given the positive attention it deserves resulting in

- consequential policy change,
- new prioritising and
- increased funding in this crucial matter of the role of indigenous languages in Australia.

'Unlike other languages spoken in Australia, the disappearance of Aboriginal languages from Australia, means their total disappearance.' The language of Australia. Discussion paper on an Australian literacy and language policy for the 1990s. Vol 1

The importance of teaching our Indigenous language is to keep it alive and to nurture it, to preserve and to sustain our language. We have fear that we might lose our language, our Culture, Our Values and our Beliefs Yalmay Yunupingu Yirrkalla '08

Introduction

Our submission will address some, but not all, of the terms of reference of the inquiry.
Given its particularly urgent nature, our main emphasis in our response to the Inquiry will be on the necessity of reversing the recent (2008) policy change which has led to the immediate and tragic demise of the remaining few (Aboriginal) bilingual schools in Australia – the then existing 9 schools in the NT.
We remind the Committee that there were formerly 20 Accredited Bilingual Schools (in the NT) In 2008, only 9 remained. The Accredited Bilingual programs which were forced in 2009 onwards to teach in English for the first 4 hours of the day included:

Areyonga CEC
Maningrida CEC
Lajamanu CEC
Milingimbi CEC
Galiwin'ku CEC
Willowra CEC
Yirrkala CEC
Yuendumu CEC
Numbulwar CEC.

This was out of a total of 150 schools in the NT. These were something of the 'jewels in the crown' of the once highly acclaimed Northern Territory educational system. Our members have witnessed in dismay the forced changes (proposed 2008) by the Northern Territory Government to the bilingual schools of the Northern Territory. We were shocked at the time, to hear that these changes earned the immediate endorsement of the Federal Government

The contribution of Indigenous languages to strengthening Indigenous Identity and culture

In support of the many Aboriginal leaders and communities who have spoken strongly on this matter of forced closure of the bilingual schools, whether publicly or on communities/ towns /cities across the nation we name the situation again as 'crucial'. As well as her immediate concern of the NT crisis situation, Yalmay Yunupingu's powerful words hold true for

Aboriginal communities throughout Australia including those areas where the local language is currently spoken fluently by children: '***Yolngu language is our Power, our Foundation, our Root and everything that holds us together***. *Yolngu language gives us strength; language is our identity, who we are. Yolngu language gives us pride. Language is our Law and Justice…The world is rapidly changing and we must have our land, language and culture or we are lost…*.
Yalmay Yunupingu Yirrkala School NT 2008

The ABC radio programme *Awaye* on 6 Dec 08 introduced the discussion in the following forceful manner : "**Language death has been likened to the death of a culture, a way of life and the collective identity of its speakers**. (our emphasis). The introduction continued: "This week we ask: what is the future of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal languages are the strongest? There are moves underway to force the Territory's nine bilingual schools to teach the first four hours of each day in what's to many students from remote communities a foreign language, English. In contrast, Aboriginal communities throughout the rest of the country are attempting to recover their lost languages."
http://www.abc.net.au/rn/awaye/stories/2008/2435431.htm

Measures to improve educational outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

Our members recommend of course that the main measure to achieve this goal is the reintroduction of bilingual education, well funded and strongly encouraged.

The presenting reason given at the time by the then NT Minister of Education , strongly supported by her Federal counterpart for the forced demise of the bilingual programmes was that many Northern Territory Aboriginal children are not reaching the 'benchmark' for literacy in English.

Many of our Reconciliation Circle members are teachers or former teachers so we recognize that this is indeed a disturbing fact. However we also recognize that these bilingual schools because of their actual nature are the very ones where the children are far more likely to eventually well master English. '*Proceed from the known to the unknown*.' is a basic educational premise very familiar to school teachers.

Yalmay Yunupingu, acclaimed educationalist from Yirrkala spoke at the time from what should have been irrefutable experience: '*I've been an ET 2 and also a Classroom Teacher for thirty-two years, and my experience is that the children do better in reading and writing if they learn in Yolngu Matha first. Also using Yolngu matha helps children understand difficult ideas in English, this helps them learn English concepts better. This is a very important part of bilingual education, allowing the children to think in the language they think in, the language they know when they come to school.* ' Yalmay Yunupingu Letter to the NT Minister for Education, Marion Scrymgour 2008

At the same time (as the NT Government's announcemen) there was also predictable outrage among non Aboriginal academics and others with specialist knowledge in this field. Speaking in the 5th of December 2008 soon after this announcement which shocked so many educationalists nationally as well as in the Territory, the "FATSIL [Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages] National Manager Paul Herbert was sceptical of the proposed change. He believed *that Bilingual Education is merely the scape goat for a whole list of contributing factors. These factors include but are not limited to hearing loss, a lack of investment in schools and the community, poor attendance and factors related to the intervention."*

It seems hard to go past the commonsense of the Aeryonga Elders' Statement at the time: '*How can you tell us the teachers must use only English even if the children don't understand what they are saying?'*

Finally in this section we quote in full from a 2010 media report, noting the predictable results which have come from the forced speaking of English in the first four hours of schooling ……**'Four hours of English' policy hitting test results** Mark Schliebs From: *The Australian* November 16, 2010

The requirement in the Northern Territory for schools to teach the first four hours of the day in English is failing remote communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda said bilingual schooling -- where students are taught in both in English and their native languages -- should never have been scrapped in the Territory.

"There's a lot of practical research supporting teaching kids in their natural tongue, and then teaching them English later," Mr Gooda said.

The first four hours of English program was introduced in January last year. Nine government schools in remote communities -- along with several other independent schools -- stopped bilingual teaching. Since then, NAPLAN results at many of those schools have fallen dramatically.

Leah Kerinauia, principal of the Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School in the Tiwi Islands, said students found it hard to keep up with the curriculum while learning English at the same time. *End of report*

The contribution of Indigenous languages to closing the Gap

We submit that there will be no effective Closing of the Gap in health while these negative and confusing decisions are implemented which are so contrary to the well being and identity of children, families and communities. Ie the forced demise of Indigenous languages (not to mention other negative measures of the NT Intervention which are resulting in less school attendance.) Instead of the continuing blame that seems to be placed on Aboriginal Territorians let there be one legislative/policy reversal - positive outcome which encourages the people so sorely in need of this. Bilingual schools are a wonderful achievement and need to be celebrated and supported - not the reverse.

Obviously there can be no Closing of the Gap when these crucial issues as bilingual teaching and practice so integral to the identity of a peoples such as language and culture are abandoned and targeted by the very Governments one would think would be protecting and encouraging their practice. To our shame like many other Government practices presently taking place in the Northern Territory, many Aboriginal people in the Territory and elsewhere in Australia can only recall the history of the nation repeating itself by reminding them of the past government policies whereby 'Protectors', superintendents and missionaries forbade the speaking of language in schools and mission homes. In this way so many Aboriginal languages were lost.

In contrast, the members of our Reconciliation Circle were pleased to hear the introductory statements to the present Inquiry by the Chairperson, Mr Shayne Neumann MP which reflect a different level of awareness: "*Our Committee's recent report into the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system, Doing time - time for doing, found that self-healing and connection to culture programs have been highly effective in getting people back on track.* Mr Shayne Neumann MP, 2011.

Our submission endorses this awareness and urges the Committee to do all in its power to

ensure Governments heed this in practice- in policies and funding.

The Committee aims to look at what's working, as well as looking for innovative measures to improve competency in English in communities where English is a second language." Shayne Neumannn MP – Introduction to the Inquiry

We point out to the Inquiry, the comments several of our members heard within the last week, the testimony of a long term teacher in former South Australian bilingual schools: 'The *children used to* ***dance*** *into the schools at Ernabella and Fregon when we taught them first in Pitjantjatjara.* ***They loved going to school and they then had the tools to learn in English.*** c Nancy Sheppard 13th August 2011 (reflecting on teaching in the APY Lands, South Australia in the 1950s) (our emphasis)

Yalmay Yunupingu of Yirkalla.'*The children do better in reading and writing if they learn in Yolngu Matha first. Also using Yolngu matha helps children understand difficult ideas in English, this helps them learn English concepts better. This is a very important part of bilingual education, allowing the children to think in the language they think in, the language they come to school with'*

Measures to ensure improved educational outcomes in those communities where English is a second language

Please also see our comments above. The Evaluation Of Literacy approach (ELA) currently is finding in fact that by the time the children reach Grade 5 in the bilingual schools they achieve better results in 'active reading skills in English. It is not surprising that the NT Government was unable to produce any research at all which supported their policy change which was effectively an abandonment of the bilingual school system.
Overseas studies including in the neighbourhood country of Tonga consistently show that bilingual schools are a more effective educational model. We quote from a 2008 personal email to one of our members from a Tongan tertiary student. '*Most primary schools in Tonga have bilingual programs. Research by 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki PhD, also found that 'Tongan children are achieving better in doing the bilingual programs i.e. their learning outcomes are much better while at the same time strengthening their identities, and developing towards to the fullness of their abilities and their gifts'. She did her research in the primary schools in Tonga*. Kalo Sikimeti Sydney (See also the work of Kimmo Kosonen from Thailand)

The East Timor Experience. Some of our members are also personally acquainted with the work of our Sisters of St Joseph colleagues in the Timor Leste literacy programmes.,including the positive impact their advocacy in partnership with the local people, has had on Government in promoting the Tetum language, and the energy and creativity of the books produced to enable this end.

Nor do we have to look overseas for such examples, as the Tiwi Islander and other Aboriginal communities ran what were in effect extraordinary small publishing companies, with productions full of creativity and originality and interest as bilingual learning flourished. We are justifiably fearful that these wonderful resources and their effects may be lost.

Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translation services

In SA there have been up till the last very few years just 2 (TWO) extremely overworked Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunyjatjara interpreters. Of course this has been an impossible situation for the many people speaking these languages as a first language -South Australians and NT people

in Adelaide or elsewhere for medical or legal reasons.(As well as very difficult for the interpreters themselves.) In the 1990s one of these interpreters made herself available for several years on the Court circuit on the APY Lands where people facing Court told her that this was the first time ever that they had really understood what was going on as they faced Court charges.

Despite much advocacy it has not been till the last few years that the Government and Government departments have taken this matter of interpreting Aboriginal languages, seriously. It has been good to hear that in this time, suitable people in SA have been actively sought for training as Interpreters – with the necessary funding, recruiting and enabling required. However just last year one of our members who has lived in SA regions where most Aboriginal people have English as a second language, was approached informally by a person responsible in one of the main Adelaide hospitals, saying the situation was still desperate at times and seemingly not aware of the networks. Staff awareness in hospitals is also a vital area so that staff realise the need and call upon Interpreting existing services, rather than going ahead with procedures for Aboriginal people for whom English is a second language and who may well be too ashamed and shy to let it be known that they don't understand.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programmes for Indigenous languages.

Finally we briefly mention the language revival programmes which are being funded by Government bodies and other entities and which are proving such a revitalisation for individuals, families and communities. In our own state of South Australia, Ngarrindjeri, Kaurna, Wirangu are among the communities to benefit with excellent spin off effects including among the youth including in the youth traditional Aboriginal and modern rap/song creation and practice leading to increased pride in identity and culture and language knowledge.

We quote again from the ABC Awaye programme summary, noted above: "In contrast, Aboriginal communities throughout the rest of the country are attempting to recover their lost languages." Sadly such Government interest and encouragement with the languages '*which have been sleeping'* as the people say - with the healthy turn around effected in individuals and communities serve also to heighten the astonishment of **WHY?** – concerning the matter which has formed the bulk of our submission above - **Why work at destroying languages which are currently fluent even among the young, by Government policies – both Territory and Federal Governments in the NT - which have forcibly stopped the bilingual programmes.**

In conclusion our members express our strong hope that this Inquiry may not just result in another report which is left sitting on shelves. On the contrary, because of its crucial nature and the awareness already of its Committee members which led to its establishment, we trust that this will be an effective Inquiry lead to an increase of the necessary funding to recreate bilingual schools in Australia and a general pride in the uniquely Australian languages and practices – **still being practised**. – as well as those currently happily being revived.
Please do all you can to enable the NT and Federal Ministers and Governments reverse this damaging policy.
We thank you for holding this vital Inquiry and for reading our submission with attention.

Primary Author and Signatory

Michele Madigan
for the *Sisters of St Joseph SA Reconciliation Circle* c/- Box 57 Kent Town SA 5071 [redacted]
[redacted] August 18, 2011