Submission to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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Introduction

This submission to the *Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities* by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs is based on my extensive experience with Aboriginal people in remote communities in Central Australia, where I have worked since 1975 on many projects relating to Aboriginal languages, cultural history, art, and anthropology. I have been the researcher and compiler of two major Aboriginal language dictionaries (Alyawarr, and Central & Eastern Anmatyerr). With Anmatyerr people I developed the first of the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) picture dictionaries, and between 1997-2005 I was the coordinator of the Central Australian Dictionaries Program at IAD in Alice Springs. Currently I am engaged in research projects that take a wider view of what language is, and include, in addition to spoken language, other communication systems that are important in Indigenous communities, such as sign language and drawing. I have had many opportunities to witness first-hand the enthusiasm that Indigenous people bring to all the work entailed in creating resources for the maintenance and preservation of their languages. I have also seen some of the disappointments, the frustration and the indignation that comes if programs fail or are not supported adequately.

My experience is with the Arandic language group from Central Australia, and I have worked with speakers of the following languages: Northern & Southern Alyawarr, Central & Eastern Anmatyerr, Eastern & Central Arrernte (sometimes referred to as Mparntwe Arrernte) and Kaytetye. In many of these communities, despite rapid changes and language loss, many children still speak their Indigenous languages. Some of the communities in this region where I have worked include Utopia and its outstations; Ti Tree; Mt Allan; Laramba (Napperby), and Alice Springs.

The local situations vary greatly with respect to the strength of local languages, educational opportunities, the size of the communities and the infrastructure they attract and support. They range from the small outstation communities in the Utopia region to the northeast of Alice Springs (where the population of a single community may be significantly less than

100), to the urban centre of Alice Springs, which is attracting an increasing drift of Aboriginal people from remote regions. I predict that pressures on people from outstations and homeland centers to move to 'growth centers' and urban centers will have a detrimental effect on small local languages, as the community basis for these is eroded and people find themselves dispersed in larger communities where, as often as not, a version of English is likely to be the *lingua franca*. Educational needs in these different situations vary: the needs of first language speakers of Indigenous languages (L1 speakers) differ from those of English-speaking Indigenous people seeking to restore ancestral languages (L2 speakers).

Despite rapid change and erosion of language knowledge, many Indigenous people remain steadfast in their hope that language and culture will be respected, maintained, and passed on to future generations. The following statement by Veronica Perrwerle Dobson (AM), Arrernte elder and co-compiler of the Eastern & Central Arrernte Dictionary, is typical of the sentiments of Indigenous people about the importance of language work:

> *Angkentye akerte impene anthurre anwerne pipeke intelhiletyeke. Ingkernenye mapele arerlte-anetyeke, 'Nhenhe awerre angkentye anwerne-kenhe arrwekele arle aneke. Nhenhe anteme angkentye anwerne-kenhe angkentye arrpenhe ulkere anteme.' Alakenhe renhe anteme itne arerltanetyenhenge. Angkentye kele pipele inteme anwerne, aparlpe iletyakenhe angkentye lterrke akwete atnyenetyeke. Alakenhe ikwerarle ayenge ahentye anthurre anepaneme arrpenhemele areye, ingkernenye ulkere mapele arlke anteme nhenge pipe alakenhe renhe mpwarerltanetyeke. Arrpenhe mape apeke ithwenge akaltye-irrerltanetyeke pipe alakenhe itnekenge-ntyele.*
>
> The language is very important, so we must keep writing it down so that the younger generation can see it and say, 'This is our language from our elders. This is our language now, it's a bit different'. That's how they see it – the old language is written down now so that we won't lose it and so that it will remain strong. That's what I like to see – keep the language strong by writing it down. The younger people can do these things, like making language materials, so that people who come along later can use these resources and learn their mother tongue. (Veronica Dobson, pers. comm. to J. Green 2002)

The preface to Anmatyerr Picture Dictionary written by April Campbell Pengart from Ti Tree, also expresses this view:

> *Kwerl rrpwety nhenh map anyent-irrek angetyek amparr. Nwern apek Anmatyerr book angkety-akert mpwaretyek. Kwer ngkerneny map apekarl kalty-irrretyenhek angety Anmatyerrel atanthetyek, inang aparlp-ilekerr.*
>
> At first the schools from these places got together to talk about the idea of making an Anmatyerr language book. We wanted to make the book so that future generations of children could learn to write Anmatyerr – so that they would not lose their language (Green 2003).

Comments such as those above can be found in many publications and reports and in the results of several inquiries into Indigenous languages, and into Indigenous languages in relation to education, that have been conducted over a time span of almost 40 years. Some are included in the references listed at the end of this submission. Many of the recommendations made in those reports are directly relevant to this Inquiry. For example in the 1999 Northern Territory Department of Education's *Learning Lessons* report there are 151 recommendations covering many issues relating to Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.

The points that I raise in this submission are relevant to the following Terms of Reference in this Inquiry:

• 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

Although many of my comments refer to the role that Indigenous languages play in the formal school context, this is in no way meant to downplay the critical importance of language learning in many other contexts outside of the school environment (See Kral 2007, 2010, 2011).

The 1999 *Learning Lessons* report recommended that there be support for 'two-way learning' programs in schools where the local community wants such a program, and assessment demonstrating the essential elements for its effective delivery are in place' (*Learning Lessons*, Recommendation 98, p 12). In the Central Australian region opportunities to teach Indigenous languages in schools now fall under the non-compulsory Indigenous Language and Culture (ILC) programs that are part of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. These are potentially at one end of the spectrum: at the other are the fully-fledged bilingual or 'two way' programs that have ceased to exist after a Northern Territory Government decision in 1998 to phase out support for them (see Hoogenraad 2001, Simpson et al 2009).

None of the communities that I have worked with have ever had bilingual or 'two-way' schools. However there has been long-term enthusiasm from local people to have some version of language and culture taught as part of the more mainstream education offered. If *well supported* it is my observation that the benefits, even of small ILC programs, are many. They contribute to *strengthening Indigenous identity and culture*, and they *improve educational outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language*.

A) In 1974 Geoff O'Grady and Ken Hale authored a report about bilingual education for the Northern Territory Department of Education (O'Grady & Hale 1974). In that report they wrote that '*the success of any education program depends upon the extent to which the school is an integral part of the community it serves'* (cited in Hoogenraad 2001). In 1999 we have the following statement:

> 'By far the greatest emphasis in arguments favouring the [bilingual] program's retention was on its value in reinforcing and strengthening Indigenous identity in all its forms. Indigenous teachers, parents and students themselves all put to the review the importance of English acquisition, but not at the expense of their own culture and language.' (*Learning Lessons*, p 120)

Those observations are just as relevant today as they were then, and I believe that they hold across the spectrum of language-in-school models: full bilingual education on one end of the continuum and small-scale ILC programs on the other.

Language and culture work provides one area which has intrinsic status and worth, and in which people of all ages can find a role on their community. One of the benefits of ILC programs is that they result in more involvement of community members (other than Indigenous school staff) in education. This can take the form of providing logistical support for Indigenous elders to be involved in classroom activities. It may also involve a range of community members in school activities that are conducted outside the classroom, such as country visits.

'Poor attendance at school, for whatever reason, remains the most significant direct cause of poor learning' (*Learning Lessons*, p 19). Interruptions to staffing are found to be correlated with losses in enrolment and attendance (ibid, p 78). Anecdotal evidence suggests the inclusion of language and culture in school curricula improves school attendance. It potentially provides additional incentives for children to attend school and to excel and to develop self-esteem.

B) One of the largest areas of Indigenous employment in remote Aboriginal communities is education. ILC programs promote self-esteem and confidence in Indigenous school staff, as subject matter close to their hearts is given status and recognition, as is their particular expertise. These programs also provide a way for non-indigenous staff to forge meaningful friendships and professional collaborations with local people. This could well be one of the factors in retaining staff over the long-term (both indigenous and non-indigenous). Those who make attempts to learn about local culture and participate in cultural activities become more engaged and are more likely to enjoy their teaching experiences in remote Indigenous communities. Hence they stay longer.

C) ILC programs provide opportunities to create bridges between local knowledge systems and other aspects of the school curricula. This is particularly relevant in the area of Indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) where the opportunities for creating exciting and

innovative classroom methodologies based on local knowledge and examples are many. The importance and unique value of IEK, many aspects of which remain unknown to western science, has been widely recognised in recent years (see Fordham et al 2010).

Indigenous languages are the 'most vital of cultural resources' (Evans 2011) and they are fundamental to the on-going transmission of such knowledge. While there is not a simple equivalence between language and culture, once a language ceases to be spoken it is very hard to restore it as a relevant means of communication in a community. With language loss comes the loss of specific cultural and scientific detail: the names of plants or animals, ways of describing their relationship to habitats etc. Significantly, broader ways of thinking, abstracting and reasoning are also sacrificed. To support languages is to support the 'heritage of human thought' (cited in Evans 2011:229).

In the *Learning Lessons* 1999 report the Northern Territory is described as having 'one of the most abundant sources of material on the depth and richness of Indigenous culture and language, both contemporary and historical, in Australia'. It is stated that 'We should be at the leading edge in the production of educational curriculum material in this area, but we are not' (*Learning Lessons*, p 129). The report recommended that 'Indigenous viewpoints, perceptions and expectations about social, cultural and historical matters are reflected in the curricula, teaching and administration of all NT schools (Recommendation 106) and that 'options for producing high-quality curriculum material, which would add to the understanding by students everywhere of the value of our unique Indigenous cultures and languages and their interaction with Western culture' be examined (Recommendation 107).

Although the Learning Lessons report was written well over 10 years ago, it appears that the logistic support for achieving these objectives has been consistently undermined, and is now more fragile now than it was even then.

D) The teaching and learning of Indigenous languages provides a way of improving Indigenous livelihoods and generating sustainable development options and employment opportunities. One example of this is the Ranger program (one of many Working on Country projects funded by the Federal Government) and in the Ti Tree region there is an active Ranger program employing both men and women, some of whom have received their education at the local Ti Tree school. At the local level their efforts to 'look after country' depend partly on an intimate knowledge of local geography and flora and fauna. This knowledge is best described and maintained in local languages, and the knowledge is reinforced through consultation with community elders.

E) Another example that is coupled with a broader definition of 'language' is the Aboriginal art industry, worth an estimated $500 million annually to the Australian economy (Oster 2009). The production of art remains an important economic and career pathway choice for Indigenous people in remote communities. Support for traditional multimodal narrative practices, or traditional 'verbal art' in education has the potential to promote innovation in the arts by drawing on this rich traditional heritage, involving senior

people who are acknowledged as experts, and at the same time supporting innovation through the use of new media and technologies.

F) ILC programs provide opportunities to take advantage of the cognitive benefits of multilingualism. 'A monolingual mind-set an easily get foisted on minorities who traditionally regarded multilingualism as the norm' (Evans 2011: 214). Way back in the 1950s the eminent linguist T.G.H Strehlow wrote that he considered Australians to be amongst 'the few remaining civilized people who still think that knowledge of one language is the normal limit of linguistic achievement'. 'Let us permit native children to keep their own languages', he wrote. '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' (Strehlow 1958: 27).

Although it is difficult to get reliable data on the effects of various types of programs on specific educational outcomes the *Indigenous Languages and Culture* (2006) report found that children in two-way schools performed marginally better on the Australia-wide MAP (Multi-level Assessment Program) testing than children in schools where no Indigenous language was used. To understand why this is so requires further research. It could be that a multilingual environment improves general levels of communication between students and staff, and assists in problem solving of the kind presented in the various National Assessment tests. Or it could be that this environment has a general confidence building effect for students and teachers alike.

The 1999 *Learning Lessons* report affirmed 'the value of Indigenous language and culture' and highlighted the 'importance of learning of Standard Australian English oracy and literacy as a crucial element of the schooling process' (Recommendation 100, p 12). There is an un-tapped potential to improve students' oral skills in English by building on their skill in local languages. Oral narrative practices provide the foundation for literacy, and they 'serve as important input for the child during those years in which he/she develops narrative competence' (Klapproth 2004: 142). In turn this will potentially lead to improved literacy outcomes in English.

G) It is important that the needs of L1 speakers in early childhood education are recognized, balancing the learning of standard English in pre-school with the maintenance and revival of Indigenous languages which are spoken in the home environment. Development of language enrichment curricula for pre-school and primary school needs to be developed along with curricula for high schools.

Understanding the foundations of literacy that indigenous children bring to the school environment – for example the ways that they use geographical space (left to right conventions versus the use of cardinal directions) or the ways that text-building conventions are used in early childhood storytelling – has the potential to strengthen educational outcomes.

H) A systematic effort is required to understand and identify effective teaching practices. The vast majority of teachers teaching in Indigenous schools are not trained to teach in the complex language environment they find themselves in. In some communities little or no English is used outside the school context. English may be a second language (where the Aboriginal community uses one or more Aboriginal language or a Creole as their vernacular), or a second dialect (where the vernacular of the community is an Aboriginal dialect of English) (see Simpson & Wigglesworth 2008).

There is an urgent need for a training (perhaps available as a post-graduate qualification) in the teaching of English in Aboriginal schools in remote Australia which would not only cover ESL theory, but also the practical aspects of all teaching in these bilingual, bi-dialectal or multilingual situations, including team-teaching with Aboriginal teaching assistants who may be only partly literate and who may not speak standard Australian English.

There is a need to recognize that the learning/teaching environment is not only linguistically complicated, but that Indigenous health issues, such as a prevalence of diminished hearing, also have an effect. The *Learning Lessons* report stated that hearing-impaired students were assisted in their comprehension 'not just by amplification, but by the context of non-aural clues available to them from Indigenous teachers speaking in their own language' (*Learning Lessons*, p 120). Amongst these non-aural cues it is likely that there are elements of local Indigenous sign languages. This is another area in which Indigenous teachers have a communicative advantage in school contexts.

• The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages needs to assessed in the light of the problems faced:

I) In the school context the viability of ILC programs suffers because there is a lack of support for developing the teaching skills needed in the Indigenous part of curriculum. Currently there are no classes or courses through any institution for adults to learn Arandic languages, despite the available resources (Picture Dictionaries in many, Learners Guides, and encyclopedic large dictionaries). Professional development, support, and training of speakers of Indigenous languages as language teachers needs to be a priority. Support is needed for communities to go through informal and formal training to attain goals of Indigenous language maintenance and restoration.

J) The language component of curricula depends very much on goodwill and support from school staff. Such enthusiasm is often sporadic, but when it is activated is improves the relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous teaching staff. First language speakers of Indigenous languages often live in remote areas and have little access to government funding, grants and services for maintaining Indigenous languages. There is a

lack of on-going funding, and constantly applying for small amounts of funding to keep ILC programs going adds stress to the busy lives of teachers and principals in remote schools.

Summary

Support for language and cultural maintenance has social benefits for Aboriginal communities and for the nation as a whole. Support for the long-term development of Indigenous arts, culture, and languages is seen as a central part of Australia's culture and a major contributor to how Australian's see themselves. This support is crucial in addressing 'the broader Australian Government Indigenous reform agenda of Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage by contributing to the overall wellbeing of Indigenous people' (http://www.arts.gov.au/indigenous/MILR). The role that indigenous performance traditions play as one foundation of social and personal wellbeing is widely attested. For example Dockery (2009) writes that 'Strong attachment to traditional culture seems to be statistically associated with better outcomes across a diverse range of dimensions of socio-economic wellbeing' (Dockery 2009:23). A component of this capacity to achieve cultural maintenance is the notion that health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to Aboriginal law and culture and to their relationship with traditional country. The concept of health, therefore, encompasses not just the physical wellbeing of the individual but also the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community (Commonwealth Department of Health 1989; Kral & Falk 2004). Some international studies also suggest that there are strong correlations between perceived health and socio-cultural participation (Boelhouwer & Roes, 2004).

It is essential that the wider community recognise Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia. The way forward is not to regard support for Indigenous languages as a sideline issue, but rather to embrace the many potentials they offer. If this is not done it is not only a failure at the level of Indigenous languages seen for their local and individual importance and their national and international heritage significance: failure to do so speaks of a critical failure of the national imagination.

Recommendation: **Australian Indigenous people should be assisted in their efforts to provide services and support for their languages in ways that are appropriate to local language situations. Long-term support is needed to develop, maintain, record or retrieve those languages for the benefit of the speakers of those languages and their descendants, and for the nation's heritage.**

Recommendation: **That the Inquiry recognize and support systems of governance that promote the expertise of local Indigenous language experts.**

Recommendation: **That the scope of the term 'language' be extended to include modes of communication other than speech, such as sign languages.**

Recommendation: **That the Inquiry commission research that explores the correlation between Indigenous language programs, school attendance, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff retention rates in remote schools.**

Recommendation: **That the National Indigenous Languages policy acknowledges the contribution that Indigenous languages make to the development and implementation of employment pathways for Indigenous people, particularly in the environmental sciences and in the arts.**

Recommendation: **That the Inquiry commission research that explores ways that indigenous knowledge systems can be incorporated into school curricula.**

Recommendation: **That the Inquiry support ways of making Indigenous languages and knowledge attractive to young people, through the use of new technologies that broaden the impact of language maintenance and revival activities, and through support for arts projects and remote Indigenous media organizations.**

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