

House of Representatives Inquiry in language learning in Indigenous communities

Submission from: Michele Rowe

Please note that the terms of reference have been addressed both separately and combined in different parts of this submission, as indicated.

Personal experience and background: International and Australia

I welcome this opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities in Australia as an important part of closing the gap for social cohesion and inclusion. My response to these proposals is based on experience of teaching and living in Australia and different parts of the world for over three decades, since 1978. This experience includes teaching in the remote Indigenous community, Wadeye, in the Northern Territory from 2004-2008; teaching in the East End of London from 1989-2004, and 2010 to present; and teaching in Amsterdam from 1979-1989, in English and in my second language Dutch. At Wadeye, I held the positions as a teacher linguist and ILLS/ESL teacher, supporting the Indigenous language and ESL program. In London I have held positions as EMA (Ethnic Minority Achievement) Coordinator, supporting ESL programs within a bilingual multicultural context, coordinating family literacy, numeracy and sure start programs and teaching adult ESOL at a Further Education College. Before returning to the UK, I completed a master of applied linguistics at Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory.

In 2003, I was awarded an educational sabbatical from the UK to look at bilingual and ESL programs in New York, Bangladesh and remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory with a focus on social and academic inclusion for communities most at risk. I was granted this leave, following an award granted to the school where I was teaching in London, where 99.8% of students (98.9% from Bangladeshi origin), who were learning English from the earliest stages, had reached age appropriate outcomes and beyond, after ten years of consistent program development. This was achieved within a bilingual context that included recruiting teachers and teaching assistants from children's own communities to support learning in their own languages alongside the transition to English. What set the school and the area of London, Tower Hamlets, in which I was teaching apart, was that in other areas of the UK, Bangladeshi students, who had not had this same level of support to learn English as an additional language, performed at the bottom of most national league tables.

This practice of supporting first and additional language acquisition to accelerate academic achievement has been widely researched in the East End of London, with reference to work in Tower Hamlets as well as internationally. Research consistently shows that as well as strengthening community engagement, teaching in first language, not only results in students achieving age appropriate outcomes, but also increases their metalinguistic competence in both English and their community languages (NALDIC, 2009; Kenner, C., Gregory, E., Ruby, M. 2007, Cummins, 2001). Further longitudinal research from the United States also shows that students who only learn English in a monolingual context not only run the risk of losing their first language but also do not readily develop the cognitive skills to make them fully proficient in both languages (Thomas, W.P., & Collier, V.P., 2002). This research has important implications for supporting the acquisition of English for Indigenous students within the context of maintaining and enriching their Indigenous languages.

Reference points 1 - 5 and 7: from a Northern Territory perspective

Following my sabbatical, I returned to Australia to work at Wadeye, to try and support educational developments and address the huge gap in Indigenous student achievement that had widened since I left Australia in the 1970's. After four and a half years, one of the biggest problems I had found was not only the high turnover of non Indigenous teachers that affected continuity and development, but also the lack of understanding of first and second language acquisition. An expectation for students to achieve national benchmarks in English through numerous initiatives in short time scales of "stop and start" programs, provided little scope for continuity and progression for generational change. Furthermore, the Indigenous language program, in comparison to English was marginalized. Where English had a range of outside experts and school based coordinators, the Indigenous language program in comparison received limited support and had had periods without being supported at all.

The understanding that supporting language learning in first language bridges learning in a second language, is something that is understood internationally, but from my experience, not by most teachers recruited to teach in remote Indigenous communities. In prioritizing the learning of English, with the best of intentions, for Indigenous students to access the same opportunities as other Australians; this results unfortunately in compromising Indigenous language programs and not acknowledging the importance of linking student's first language to learn English as an additional language.

Unfortunately, too many teachers that work on remote communities, do not have the training or experience of teaching in high ESL schools, and using first language to strengthen the transition to second language learning as well as the links between family and community learning. This not only ignores children's wealth of language learning and cognitive development before coming to school but also results in a void in linking home-school learning, learning for continuity and strengthening students cultural heritages and identity. The advantages of learning two or more languages, when the

transitions between both are understood, also results in students having a double advantage of learning literacy and developing their language skills in their first language as well as their second language.

As Indigenous Australians, traditionally spoke several Australian languages as a means of communication, trade and maintaining the complex tribal and traditional structures within their communities, the belief that Indigenous people 'find it difficult to learn English' lays much deeper than a perceived linguistic incompetency, but more one of displacement, disconnection and disempowerment that has resulted in the removal of structures that defined Indigenous Australia as a multilingual continent. As so many Australian languages have been lost in Australia, within such a short space of time, the importance of securing languages where they are the strongest, not only lies at the heart of providing clear models for second language transference, but also underpins important building blocks for addressing reconciliation and the continuity of cross cultural knowledge before this is also lost forever.

Whilst, the opportunity to learn Indigenous languages is being focused on as a part of the Australian National Curriculum, I look forward to the opportunity for the decision to reduce bilingual and Indigenous language maintenance programs in the Northern Territory, to also be addressed within the terms of reference of this inquiry. I look forward to this inquiry not only raising the importance of teaching children's first language as central to the process of raising self esteem and cultural identity but also in connecting communities to close the gap for social, academic and vocational opportunities, as has been proven consistently by international research.

Reference points 1- 5, 7- 8 from a non Indigenous Australian multicultural perspective

During my early years of teaching in Melbourne in the 1970's, I taught in inner city schools that were teaching Italian and Greek to second generation migrants to not only strengthen children's identity in regards to their cultural and linguistic heritages but also the identity of Australia as a diverse multicultural nation. These initiatives, in Melbourne, have since extended to teaching Chinese and Vietnamese in several schools in communities that have high ESL communities. Once again, I hope this inquiry makes headway in raising the same awareness to embed Indigenous language learning, so that the stake of Australia's first Australians in Australian society becomes one of placement rather than displacement, and an integral part of Australia's identity as a multicultural and linguistically diverse nation beyond what is currently entrenched as a monolingual mindset towards Indigenous education.

Reference points 1 - 5, 7 - 8: from an international perspective

Having lived on the Continent for many years, I have been able to experience the focus on learning more than one language as a fundamental part of the school curriculum, not only in acknowledging the cognitive and linguistic advantages but also in the importance

of connecting children cross culturally and socially as global citizens. My own three children, now adults, had the advantage of having their early year's education in Dutch schools, and were taught English as well as Dutch as a fundamental part of the curriculum. As a result, my children as most European children are multilingual and fully proficient in three and four languages.

In recent years, learning foreign languages has also been extended to English Primary schools in the acknowledgment that English only learning puts children at a cognitive as well as a global disadvantage.

The revitalization and maintenance of Welsh in Wales also reinforces the importance of heritage languages other than English only programs as central in linking children not only to their heritages but also the versatility of their linguistic diversity. As a result, bilingualism in Wales is embedded across all community infrastructure and services.

Where New Zealand has also taken similar steps, in regards to Maori languages being an integral part of the curriculum with non Indigenous as well as Indigenous students learning Maori, Australia not only remains disconnected to its linguistic and cultural heritages but also remains impoverished in its national identity.

Reference point 6: Measures to improve interpreting and translation services

My experience of the support for community languages in the UK and Europe is also widely different to that I have experienced in Australia. In London, for example, most councils publish council documents, information pamphlets and community newspapers in languages spoken within their communities, not only as a means of ensuring equal opportunities and inclusion but also in acknowledging linguistic diversity. This level of bilingual support and translation also exists at council departments, health clinics and legal services through direct translation services provided by department personal. This is not only *not* provided in many remote communities but also frequently illustrated as an example of the incompetency of Indigenous people and communities for having a need of this service. This appallingly results in what seems to be an overwhelming attitude of 'we'll be damned if we do, but damned if we don't', and thus being a double edged sword that inhibits and excludes.

Where these services are provided in Indigenous communities, Indigenous people who provide translation are usually overstretched and under resourced. This results in these services being at best ad hoc rather than being fully integrated and available. Unless, these issues are addressed as a means of equal access and basic human rights, communities will not only remain marginalized from these services but also marginalized from opportunities to be fully functional within the structures and processes that provide these services.

Conclusion:

Once again, I welcome the opportunity of this inquiry and I hope that this sets Australia not only on a path to reconciliation that provides clear and consistent pathways for Indigenous communities learning English, but also provides the opportunity for Australia to connect to its unique and rich cultural and linguistic heritages. I also hope that it results in educational and community practices being brought in line with linguistic educational developments that are being established internationally.

I would be happy to be contacted for any further information that may help this inquiry

References:

- Cummins, J. (2001) . *Bilingual children's mother tongue, why it is important for education*. Available from: <http://www.fiplv.org/Issues/CumminsENG.pdf>
- Kenner,C., Gregory,E., Ruby,M. (2007) . *Learning for second and third generation children*. Available from:
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/Bilingual%20learning%20for%20second%20and%20third%20generation%20children.pdf>
- NALDIC. (2009) . *Developing a Bilingual Pedagogy for UK schools. NALDIC (National Association of Language development in the curriculum) Working Paper 9, 2009, (updated June 2011)*. England.
- Thomas, W.P., & Collier, V.P. (2002) . *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement Santa Cruz* . CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, University of California-Santa Cruz.