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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS
PO Box 6021,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

I offer this submission as a linguist with nine years experience working in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory. My work and education experience includes:

- 2002: 6-month contract with Katherine Language Centre working on various endangered language projects
- 2003-2004: completed Honours at University of Queensland, including documenting the endangered Alawa language
- 2004-2007: linguist in Ngukurr community, coordinating the activities of the Ngukurr Language Centre
- 2008-2010: lecturer/trainer at Centre for Australian Language and Linguistics, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
- 2010-present: casual Kriol-English interpreter (NAATI accreditation – Paraprofessional level)
- 2010-present: PhD student at Australian National University (Documentation of Marra)

In these roles, duties include:

- facilitating community projects to document and revitalise endangered Aboriginal languages
- facilitating language revitalisation programs in schools
- delivering formal and informal training with Aboriginal and Islander language workers and linguists
- carrying out academic research on Aboriginal languages
- working as an accredited Kriol-English interpreter

In the attached submission, I address each of the terms of reference of the inquiry. I am happy to provide you with further information or meet with the committee.

Kind Regards,

[redacted]
Greg Dickson

Submission: Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.

> *The task ahead is to convince the NT Department of Education and the Commonwealth Government that Yolŋu languages and our knowledge systems are as important to us as English and its ideas… Until this happens assimilation is still the name of the game, and reconciliation is an empty word, an intellectual 'terra nullius'* (Marika 1999: 119).

> *Above all, let us permit native children to keep their own languages, -those beautiful and expressive tongues, rich in true Australian imagery, charged with poetry and with love for all that is great, ancient and eternal in the continent. 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. In most areas of Australia the natives have been bilingual, probably from time immemorial. Today white Australians are among the few remaining civilized people who still think that knowledge of one language is the normal limit of linguist achievement.*
> (Strehlow 1958 in Hoogenraad 2001)

Executive Summary

The quotes above eloquently capture sentiments presented in this submission in which each of the terms of reference of the inquiry are addressed. Section 1 provides broad statements about the impact – real and potential – that Indigenous languages bring to the national psyche. Section 2 presents more individual perspectives on the value Indigenous languages have for Indigenous people and how they contribute to Closing The Gap. Section 3 discusses Indigenous languages in education, focusing on programs for students who speak an Indigenous language as a first language. In this section, bilingual education in the Northern Territory is addressed in some detail. Brief comments on English comptency and interpreting are given in sections 4 and 5, while sections 6 discusses the Commonwealth Government's Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) funding program. Finally, Indigenous language policy is addressed in section 7, covering in detail recent policies restricting the use of Indigenous languages in Northern Territory schools.

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

The diversity of Australia's Indigenous languages is astounding with around 300 distinct languages unrelated to any others found on the planet. Across the continent there is great diversity among Indigenous languages such as the marvellous sound systems of Arrernte and its neighbours, the unique triangulating kinterms used in Kunwinjku in western Arnhem Land, Meriam Mir - the single Papuan language found in Australia (Mer Island, Torres Strait) and every language in between which has its own unique ways of describing local features such as environments, flora, fauna, totems, family structures and more.

This diversity and intrinsic value of Indigenous languages goes largely unnoticed and unrecognised in Australian society. This is ironic given that Australia's linguistic diversity parallels its widely valued and recognised biological diversity. Take, for example, the support given to the ailing Tasmanian devils, the protection of koalas, the value attributed to our diverse and beautiful landscapes, and the concern of the effect introduced species have on our native ones. Note the inconsistency with the comparative lack of value attributed to our linguistic landscape and diversity.

This apparent lack of concern for Indigenous languages on a national level is possibly attibutable to their intangible nature – they can't be seen or touched and their inherent beauty is not instantly apparent. It's often when we start to learn about or are fluent in an Indigenous language that we realise how special and how deserving of attention and recognition they are. The ignorance that so many Australians have of our Indigenous linguistic landscape is a key factor in the devastating loss and ongoing denegration of Indigenous languages.

Our Indigenous languages have the capacity to contribute to our national identity and they already do to a limited extent. Most Australians are proud of "funny" placenames like *Wagga Wagga, Wollongong* and *Woolloomooloo*. But the link between Indigenous placenames or words and Indigenous languages as full and autonomous language systems is rarely made.

There are indications, however, of increased recognition of Indigenous languages that this attention contributes to our national identity. Examples include:

- Australian of the Year recipients who speak an Aboriginal language as a first language: Galarrwuy Yunupingu (1978), Mandawuy Yunupingu (1992)
- National TV shows in Indigenous languages e.g. *Bush Mechanics* (Warlpiri, ABC TV 2001), *Women of the Sun* (Yolŋu Matha/English, ABC/SBS 1981)
- Top-selling, award-winning recording artists who speak and sing in Indigenous language/s (e.g. Yothu Yindi, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu)
- Indigenous language-speaking AFL stars: e.g. Liam Jurrah, Liam Patrick (both Warlpiri)
- Award-winning feature film *Ten Canoes* (2006 - Ganalbingu and other languages)
- Theatre productions, e.g. *Ngapartji Ngapartji* (Big hART, 2007 - Pitjantjatjara language)
- National advertising campaign (Qantas 2009 – Kala Lagaw Ya language)
- Award-winning journalism (Sydney Morning Herald, 2009 "Language is Power – Let us have ours", in English and Gumbaynggirr, received UN Media Peace award, 2010)
- Tertiary education courses e.g. Graduate Certificate in Yolngu Studies (Charles Darwin University), Cert 1, 2 and 3 in Aboriginal Languages e.g. Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr (TAFE NSW)
- Academic writing in Indigenous languages, e.g. Bani, E. (1987), 'Garka a ipika: masculine and feminine grammatical gender in Kala Lagaw Ya', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 7(2):189-201.

The above examples demonstrate social, cultural and economic benefits that are gained from recognising and valuing Indigenous languages. These benefits are evidenced at local community levels, regionally, nationally and internationally. The examples provide a window into what is possible when the potential of Indigenous languages is harnessed.

In contrast, the evidence of what happens when Indigenous languages aren't valued is tragic. Historically, pre- and post-Federation governments in Australia have presided over extremely high rates of language decline, loss and endangered of Indigenous languages. As a result, many Aboriginal people have lost their language and are now going to great efforts to revive and reclaim them, and while this is a positive action, it also commonly causes feelings of anger and loss. There is evidence of psychological trauma and loss of self-esteem for Indigenous-language speaking people who are and were forced into English-only classrooms and social institutions. I personally have worked with many elders who were physically punished and emotionally abused as children for speaking their traditional language. This has made recent efforts to revitalise languages more difficult

because of having to address Indigenous people's psychological trauma associated with historical treatment of Indigenous languages.

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

2.1 Closing the Gap and Indigenous languages

The Commonwealth Government's Indigenous reform agenda, *Closing the Gap* has, at its heart, a sincere desire for Indigenous Australians to have a quality of life equal to non-Indigenous Australians. In applying the *Closing the Gap* agenda of equality, it is of concern that ideas on what constitutes "closing the gap" will vary depending on ideologies of groups and individuals. Many people hold assimilatory views and may naïvely feel that *Closing the Gap* necessarily equates to Indigenous people learning English at the cost of maintaining their own Indigenous languages, in order to function successfully in our English-dominant society. People with such ideologies may not feel that Indigenous languages have any role in the *Closing the Gap* agenda. I attribute such ideologies to naïve understandings of bilingual and multilingual competencies, discussed further in §4 and argue that such ideas are misguided.

A broader and more accurate view of "equality" sees Indigenous people as having the right to use their languages freely and autonomously, throughout all aspects of their lives, as English-speakers do: having the right to education in their own languages, government service provision in their own languages, access to media and literacy in Indigenous languages etc. Only when Indigenous peoples rights to use their languages in all domains and in all levels of sociey, as native English speakers do, can we claim that equality is achieved. It is also worth noting that speakers of migrant languages generally have better access to language service than do speakers of Indigenous languages.

Indigenous people do not have linguistic rights enshrined in legislation or the constitution. The Commonwealth Government officially supports the United Nations' *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which incorporates language rights, but there is no legislation protecting the linguistic rights of Indigenous people.

As demonstrated above, Indigenous languages have the potential to reap economic, social and cultural benefits to Indigenous communities and regions, with flow-on effects nationally and internationally. It is clear that this fits in with the *Closing the Gap* agenda.

2.2 Strengthening identity and cultural knowledge through Indigenous languages

Indigenous people provide statement after statement after statement that language is in integral part of identity and that it connects them directly to their culture and cultural knowledge. For example, award-winning Warlpiri educator Steve Jampajinpa Patrick articulates language as one of the five key elements of being Warlpiri in his theory of *ngurra-kurlu*:

> For example, if Language becomes weak then people will not know the proper terms to address each other respectfully. This means Skin becomes weak because the social relationships are not being reinforced. If Skin is weak then people will not be able to follow the Law which establishes the rules and responsibilities that people must show towards each other and country. If people do not know the Law then it is not possible to run Ceremony. If people

> do not run Ceremony they will not know the rules and ecological knowledge to look after country. If country is sick then it cannot support people. The whole of *ngurra-kurlu* will fall apart if one piece is neglected. (Patrick, Holmes and Box 2008: 10)

On the specific topic of language, Patrick says:

> Language is like a tree: it makes you stand firm in country, gives you a sense of identity … I was born Warlpiri and I will die Warlpiri but if you lose language then you are gone … Language is a defence; it is *kurdiji* [a shield]. It is strength. (Patrick, Holmes and Box 2008: 21)

Indigenous people frequently express similar sentiments, whether they are native speakers of an Indigenous language or not. Take, for example, a former linguistics student of mine at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, whose language Gadhang (Hunter Valley, NSW) is no longer fully spoken:

> Language is important to me and my family and my community because it is a way to express ourselves. It gives us a sense of identity and pride in who we are and where we come from. … Keeping words alive that have been used by our Ancestors is an ancestral right and it distinguishes something special about Aboriginal people from non-Aboriginal people. Language is a part of culture and knowledge as a means of empowering people. Language contributes to the well-being of Aboriginal communities, strengthens ties between Elders and young people and improves education in general for people of all ages. (Perry 2010: 62)

Commonly held beliefs like those of Patrick and Perry are supported by quantitative research evidence, such as the recent finding by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that correlates speaking an Indigenous language with improved well-being and health outcomes:

> The report found that in 2008, almost half (47%) of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (aged 15–24 years) in remote areas spoke an Indigenous language. These young people were less likely to engage in high risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use, than those who did not speak an Indigenous language. They were also less likely to report being a victim of physical violence. (ABS 2011)

3. **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education** and **Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language**

In the Northern Territory, where I have lived and worked for the past 9 years, thousands of Indigenous students do not speak English as a first language and many do not yet speak or understand English well. In this section, I will focus specifically on education programs for students like these, who speak an Indigenous language as a first language. Due to space considerations, I will not address language revitalisation or language revival programs (education programs for students who do not speak their heritage language as a first language).

3.1 Bilingual Education: principles, advocacy and benefits

Bilingual education programs are structured programs using two languages of instruction. One of the two languages will be the students' mother tongue, or first language. The other language is the 'target' language – usually a national or regional language of imporance. The educational principles and benefits of using Indigenous languages as a language of instruction were well-articulated by Senator Trish Crossin in a senate speech in 2009. It provides a clear summary for audiences unfamiliar with the issues and is recommended reading. For example, Senator Crossin illustrates the premise of using Indigenous languages in early education, specifically how they are used to develop literacy skills:

> … in order for a child to competently learn how to operate in another languages, they are best off learning how to read and write in their native language – that is, to assess that you read from left to right and from top to bottom and that words on a page relate to a picture. Children best pick up these skills when the language they are speaking relates to the words on the page and when the people around them teaching also speak in their own language (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 7428).

Senator Crossin goes on to explain the multi-faceted benefits of bilingual education to economy and employment, language maintenance, education – importantly, *including* English education - and social and cultural benefits.

Senator Crossin's sentiments are aligned with those of former Federal Minister of Education, Kim Beazley Sr, who oversaw the introduction of bilingual education in government schools 37 years ago, stating:

> The bilingual program does two things. It expresses respect for Aboriginal languages, hence for the rights of Aboriginal people. It effectively teaches English and enables Aborigines to that extent to cope with Australian society. (Commonwealth of Australia 1974: 1)

Bilingual education, or, the use of mother tongue in education, has been shown repeatedly by national and international research to be a successful pedagogical approach when implemented and delivered appropriately (see e.g. Grimes 2009). It is also an approach that was embraced and strongly supported by many Indigenous communities when offered to them in the 1970s and 1980s. Indigenous people and communities responded by drastically increasing the number of qualified Indigenous teachers and transformed schools into culturally-appropriate places of learning for their children. Bilingual education programs featuring Indigenous language have always been somewhat controversial. Critics of such programs seem to struggle ideologically with notions of giving Indigenous languages such a core role in education. Such views are linked to the general lack of value placed on Indigenous languages on a national level, as articuled in §1.

3.2 NT Policy: Compulsory teaching in English for the First Four Hours

Bilingual education in the Northern Territory has had a difficult history. In 2008, a significant move was made by the Northern Territory Government which has essentially ended its 37-year history. In 2008, the Northern Government announced the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* (NT DET 2009), heavily restricting the use of Indigenous languages in education, in particular, seriously limiting their use as language of instruction and also limiting Indigenous language literacy practices. This has had significant negative effects for Indigenous languages and Indigenous language-speaking students, in particular,

the abolition of bilingual education programs. The policy has been criticised widely by politicians (e.g. Senator Trish Crossin, NT opposition leader Terry Mills), educators (including English teaching professionals), Indigenous leaders, Indigenous language speakers, linguists and human rights advocates, including the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2010) and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD 2010). The introduction of the *First Four Hours* policy has coincided with a decline in attendance in most former bilingual schools despite recent policies developed by Federal and Territory governments designed to improve attendance (Dickson 2010). The *First Four Hours* policy has diminished the role that Aboriginal educators play in the education system and has not led to an obvious improvement in student outcomes. Note that many studies, including some carried out in the NT, show that bilingual education programs can lead to improved student outcomes in all areas (Grimes 2009).

Statements supporting bilingual education and the use of Indigenous languages in education abound from Aboriginal educators across Northern Territory:

> What we want is both-way teaching in the school – not only for two hours a week but everyday there should be both-way teaching… That policy of speaking English only at the school is the wrong thing – it is not good for our children … they will forget their language (Rembarrnga speaker Miliwanga Sandy (Beswick Community) in Gosford 2009).

> I am a qualified bilingual teacher… I speak several Yolŋu matha languages and English fluently. I have thirty-two years teaching experience… I have been told that I am not allowed to use the children's language anymore… I already know that the children won't understand what I'm saying, they will laugh at me, and they may even misbehave because they'll be bored and won't know what the lessons are about… What a strange role model I will be, a bilingual Yolŋu teacher, using only one of my languages!... The decision to make English the only important language in our schools will only make the situation for our young people worse as they struggle to be proud Yolŋu in a world that is making them feel that their culture is bad, unimportant and irrelevant in the contemporary world (Yunupingu 2010: 24-25).

> When a new principal comes to a Warlpiri school they are not to come and change the Bilingual Program. Never. Lajamanu school should always teach in both Warlpiri and English (Warlpiri Teachers at Lajamanu 1999: 54).

> The children need to learn their own language… kids need to be able to read and write Tiwi because that is what they will speak forever. Understanding in other subject areas is facilitated by covering that area in both Tiwi and English (People of Nguiu 1999: 17).

> The task ahead is to convince the NT Department of Education and the Commonwealth Government that Yolŋu languages and our knowledge systems are as important to us as English and its ideas… The current system does not take into account our Yolŋu Garma curriculum or Yolŋu 'both ways' pedagogy and curriculum. Our job as educators is to convince the people who control mainstream education that we wish to be included. Until this happens assimilation is still the name of the game, and reconciliation is an empty word, an intellectual 'terra nullius' (Marika 1999: 119).

> Areyonga School is a bilingual school, where we teach the children to first learn to read, write and do maths in Pitjantjatjara. Our kids do not understand much English when they start school. If we each them only in English, they will not understand… Our children who are good at reading and writing in Pitjantjatjara are also the same ones who are good at reading and writing English… How can you tell us the teachers must use only English even if the children don't understand what they are saying? We want our children to become literate in both English and Pitjantjatjara. This is very important to us. Our bilingual program works… (Areyonga community 2008).

Under the First Four Hours policy, Indigenous education in remote NT can be seen to be reverting to pre-bilingual education days where "Aboriginal people had menial roles in classrooms… limited to cleaning blackboards and disciplining children" (Harris 1999). Warlpiri teachers from Lajamanu community describe pre-bilingual days at Lajamanu School:

> When the school was English only, no Warlpiri people came to the school. The Yapa [Aboriginal] teachers only swept the floors, sharpened pencils, they did no teaching. (1999: 51)

Sadly, evidence shows that Lajamanu School has suffered since its bilingual education program was removed in 2009 under the *First Four Hours* policy. Attendance figures have barely risen above 45% since mid-2009, down from 60% (and above) between 2006-2008 (Dickson 2010).

3.3 Summary of benefits of using Indigenous languages in early educations program such as bilingual education

Using Indigenous languages in education where students speak those languages as first languages can lead to the following benefits:
• Implementing Indigenous-appropriate pedagogy
• Strengthening, resourcing and maintaining Indigenous languages
• Increasing employment and training for Indigenous educators
• Empowering Indigenous students and communities
• Adhering to the linguistic rights of Indigenous communities
• Increased attendance
• Improved literacy outcomes in English and students' mother tongue
• Improved outcomes in all areas of the curriculum
• Aligning educational institutions with community education goals and aspirations

For Indigenous language speaking students, their first languages have fantastic potential to deliver strong educational outcomes in all areas of the curriculum, as it is the language of their cognition and thinking. Furthermore, they have the right to be educated in their mother tongue under international conventions such as the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (e.g. Article 14).

4. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities

This term of reference represents somewhat of a moot point. I know of no-one – Indigenous or non-Indigenous – who doesn't recognise the importance, value and benefit that comes with English competency. In the previous section, I discussed in detail the

benefits of and Indigenous advocacy behind bilingual education. It should always be clear that bilingual education, like the word *bilingual*, inherently refers to *two languages*. In the NT context, 'bilingual' refers to English ***as well as*** the relevant local Indigenous language. I am not aware of anyone, even those with extensive experience in Indigenous language education, who has lobbied for monolingual education in an Indigenous language in schools and am not aware of anyone who has claimed that English is of little value and not beneficial.

It is naïve to believe that Indigenous language education programs such as bilingual education and developing English language competency is somehow incompatible. In fact the opposite is true: bilingual education is shown to be a successful ESL teaching methodology. It is a myth that Indigenous language education and developing English competency is incompatible, yet this myth is perpetuated in political rhetoric and public discourse. The following media extracts demonstrate ignorance in public debate:

> Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard says she supports the decision by the Northern Territory government to effectively scrap bilingual indigenous education… "For indigenous Australia, English is the language of further learning and English is the language of work… If we want indigenous kids who are growing up today right across the Northern Territory, right across the nation to have a chance ... to get a good job then people need to read and write English, they need to do that fluently and proficiently." (The Age, 19/11/08)

> Indigenous Australians must be taught English ahead of their traditional languages if they are to get jobs, Indigenous Employment Minister Mark Arbib says. Senator Arbib said while he wanted to see traditional languages kept alive, the focus had to be kept on English. "It is going to be impossible for us to solve indigenous employment unless English is taught as the first language." (Sydney Morning Herald, 19/9/10)

Views like those of Prime Minister Gillard and Minister Arbib can be attributed to the "monolingual mindset" held by many Australians. Pioneering anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow articulately describes this pervasive attitude and its flaws in the quote used in the opening of this submission (see page 1).

The idea that a person, community or even nation can only function successfully with one main language is nonsensical and ridiculous. One only has to look at the plethora of research demonstrating that bilingual people have higher cognitive functions than monolingual people. One only has to look at places like Wales and Catalonia where a non-national language (Welsh, Catalan) operates productively alongside a national language (English, Spanish). One only has to look at successful developed nations that are officially bilingual or multilingual such as Switzerland, Canada and Singapore to see that monolingualism is not a necessary requirement for building a strong nation.

It is a myth that Indigenous people do not recognise the importance of English. It is a myth that bilingualism and multilingualism is detrimental to individuals, communities or nations. It is a myth the bilingual education is incompatible with quality English teaching and learning.

5. Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

- The are many opportunities for improving the Indigenous language interpreting industry. For a good summary of current issues, I strongly recommend to the committee the recent report by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, *Talking in Language: Indigenous language interpreters and government communication* (2011).

- In the Katherine Region, there is no written translation service available for the Kriol language, spoken by around 20,000 people. A service was previously provided by the Katherine Regional Aboriginal Language Centre (Diwurruwurru-Jaru Aboriginal Corporation) which was de-funded in 2010. Government and other bodies seeking written Kriol translating services struggle to find translators. The NT Government's Aboriginal Interpreting Services focus on oral interpreting, not written translation services. A coordinated, quality translating service in the Katherine Region would fill an obvious gap, fostering better communication and raising the status and functions of Indigenous languages including Kriol.

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

6.1 Overview of available programs

The main programs relate to those funded by the Federal Government's *Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records* (MILR) program or programs delivered by state and territory education departments for school-based Indigenous language programs. Minor contributions also come from philanthropic organisations, universities and other research institutions (e.g. AIATSIS) and international language documentation funds such as Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen (DoBeS, Netherlands) and the Endangered Languages Documentation Program (ELDP, UK).

6.2 Effectiveness of current programs – working with Ngukurr community

Given the large number of Indigenous languages found in Australia and the extremely high levels of language endangerment and language loss, current programs only scratch the surface in addressing community needs and resourcing needs of Indigenous languages. I demonstrate this below using the Ngukurr community as an example. I have worked on various language programs with the community since 2004, which includes experience working the MILR funding program.

Residents of Ngukurr identify with at least seven traditional Indigenous languages, all of which are critically endangered. Within the community, there is strong support for the maintainance and revitalisation of traditional language and culture and the community has developed an art centre, music programs and, through the Katherine Language Centre (also known as Diwurruwurru-Jaru Aboriginal Corporation), established the Ngukurr Language Centre facility in 1999.

Between 2004 and 2008 I was employed by the Katherine Language Centre, primarily as the linguist based in Ngukurr at the Ngukurr Language Centre annexe. At the time, the Katherine Language Centre was one of the best-funded language centres, supported by the Federal Government through the MILR scheme. The role of the Ngukurr linguist was to assist community members and elders and facilitate the programs they want for the community. The Ngukurr linguist also serviced nearby communities of Urapunga and Minyerri. Programs identified by community members were numerous and varied, including:

- School-based language revitalisation programs in three communities, for seven languages
- Audio and video documentation of languages (oral histories etc.)
- Training in areas such as computer, Indigenous language literacy, English skills, language teaching
- Resource production such as books/readers, audio CDs
- Employment for local language workers
- Visit sites of significance to maintain contact with sites and document stories

While the funding received from MILR was gratefully received and vital in establishing programs at the Ngukurr Language Centre, the level of funding available was insufficient in addressing stated community needs. At the time, Ngukurr was one of the better resourced communities for language programs, yet was still restricted in delivering desired programs and outcomes. MILR funds provided for:

- One linguist position who coordinated programs across seven distinct Indigenous languages
- Casual wages for language consultants
- A vehicle and administration/operational costs

In order to increase the scope of activities, additional support beyond what MILR provided was sourced, including:

- A CDEP program employing 4-6 part-time language workers.
- Accredited language worker training through Batchelor Institute.
- Support from the Department of Education for school programs (wages for casual Indigenous language teachers)
- Kriol Awareness Courses for non-Indigenous residents (costs partially covered by participant fees).

MILR funds and auxiliary funds could, in real terms, offer only limited support to the seven traditional languages of the region and the programs desired by community members. Despite the difficulties, the Ngukurr Language Centre achieved a lot with its limited resources. Programs ran relatively well, with good community support, including:

- A language revitalisation program at Ngukurr School (4 lessons per week) involving 5 languages, up to 10 language workers/teachers and over 200 students
- A language revitalisation program at Urapunga School with 2 lessons per week involving 1 language, 2 language workers/teachers and around 40 students
- Supervising and training a team of 4-6 CDEP-supported language workers and working with up to 30 casual language consultants over the course of a year
- Coordinating and delivering weekly Kriol lessons for non-Indigenous staff in conjunction with two community elders
- Supporting and tutoring around eight students enrolled in Certificate 1 or 2 in Own Language Work at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
- Creating, transcribing and translating recordings in several endangered languages of the region
- Miscellaneous duties such as translation jobs, supporting interpreters, general administrative tasks, etc.

As the linguist facilitating these programs, with resources stretched to capacity, after three years I experienced “burnout” and left my permanent position in the community. The programs mentioned above - while being effective and delivering some positive outcomes - were only scratching the surface in terms of providing real support to languages and people of the region. In terms of being able to bring actual language revitalisation to the languages of the community - where an obvious increase in their use among younger

generations is evident - this was generally out of the equation. The resources we had could do little more than offer band-aid solutions to the core problems behind language loss itself. However the programs were still of great benefit in terms of the social value, economic value, resourcing and capacity building that they brought to the community.

Since 2008, I have maintained strong relationships with the community. There has been very little in the way of language programs in recent years and the Katherine Language Centre has since been de-funded, resulting in the Ngukurr Language Centre annexe being closed for two years. There is currently no MILR funding being provided to support any of the 20+ languages of the Katherine Region. Ngukurr elders formed the Ngukurr Language Centre Aboriginal Corporation in early 2011 with the aim of gaining funding and resuming programs.

The lack of programs in Ngukurr in recent years was a catalyst for me to commence PhD studies focusing on the Marra language. With only a few elderly speakers remaining, there is a window of only a few years to document the linguistic and cultural knowledge these elders hold. With no government or philanthropic language programs running, the work I am doing with Marra people to document their language is the only significant language program in the community. It is supported financially by my PhD scholarship and the Australian National University, a small grant from the Endangered Languages Documentation Program at the University of London and supplemented by private funds. Sadly, the Ngukurr Language Centre facility is yet to source funding and Ngukurr School has no language program to support local languages.

Indigenous languages and communties all over the country are under-resourced in a similar way. All too often programs rely on support and dedication of Indigenous and non-Indigenous linguists and language workers who use limited resources to their full capacity. They invest time, energy and money into supporting Indigenous languages because of its social and cultural value and deliver outcomes despite inadequate financial support.

6.3 Maintenance of Indigenous Language and Records (MILR) program

Regarding the MILR program specifically, it is extremely valuable to Indigenous language programs across the country. Having said that, opportunities for improving the program are evident as discussed below:

6.3.1 Negligible increase in available funding

Total funding made available by MILR has increased minimally since the program's inception during the ATSIC years. Since the establishment of Federal funding programs like MILR, the ability for communities and languages to delivery more and better programs has increased, driven by having better trained language workers, linguists, better quality resources available etc. But while the capacity for delivering successful programs has increase, funding availability has not kept pace.

6.3.2 Supporting Language Centres and provision of operational funding

There is anecdotal evidence of a recent trend within the MILR program towards preferring to fund projects and programs rather than providing for the operational costs of Language Centres. In my experience, well-run Language Centres act as vital institutions for communities to access language resources, programs, archives and expertise. They are independent bodies that can play strong advocacy roles and deliver a wide range of

programs. The value of Language Centres is acknowledged by the Federal Government's *Indigenous Languages – a national approach* policy (see Action 1, bullet point 3) which is discussed in §7.1 below.

Many communities and community members I have worked with desire to establish a language centre of their own for their language, region or community. It should be noted that a number of Language Centres supported by MILR have experienced governance or operational difficulties and that may be contributing to the MILR program preferring to provide project funding rather than operational funding. The deviation away from funding languages is also likely to be a function of the limited funds/allocation the MILR program has available. I believe that a decrease in support for Language Centres would be detrimental to the long term resourcing and development of Indigenous languages which they provide so well for.

7. The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian Governments

7.1 *Indigenous Languages – a national approach*

The *Indigenous Languages – a national approach* (Australian Government 2009) policy is an extremely welcome initiative with many strong actions to provide genuine assistance for Indigenous languages. However, I feel that the Commonwealth Government will struggle to meet its stated objectives, given the low levels of funding allocated under programs such as MILR, the apparent decreasing support given to language centres and the minimal support for the establishment of new language centres. For example, I do not see evidence that Action 1, bullet point 3, "Support greater coordination and assistance amongst Indigenous language centres to maximise their impact nationally and to reach languages not currently supported" is being implemented successfully, at least here in the Northern Territory where we have seen existing Language Centres become unproductive and/or inoperative and not having their roles replaced by other or new organisations.

Additionally, my own experiences, as discussed in §6.2, demonstrate that the MILR program and other government programs do not sufficiently meet the stated objectives of the *Indigenous Languages – a national approach* policy. In many or most cases, communities and languages receive insufficient levels of funding to meet the needs of their community or language.

7.1.1 Omission of Indigenous language literacy

While, the *Indigenous Languages – a national approach* emphasises the importance of Indigenous languages, it is silent about the role that Indigenous language *literacy* can and does play in the maintenance of Indigenous languages and in Indigenous language education. In this regard, it is reminiscent of the Northern Territory Government's *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* policy in that the oral use of Indigenous languages addressed but mention of literacy practices in Indigenous languages is limited or omitted. Is this attributable to the persistent myth that Indigenous languages are only oral languages? Or is there some apprehension about Indigenous language literacy – that some feel it is of little value? Or is it because written language is in many ways more powerful and of higher status than oral language and our policies are unwilling to raise the status of Indigenous languages so that they parallel other languages with literacy traditions?

In practical terms, Indigenous language literacy is a powerful component of Indigenous language education. For example, in bilingual education programs, where literacy is initially taught in the students' mother tongue. Once students are competent readers and writers in their first language, it is relatively easy for them to transfer literacy skills on to an additional language. The foundational principle is that initial literacy is acquired more easily when the language being used is the student's first language. The national policy unfortunately omits any specific mention of literacy practices in Indigenous languages.

7.1.2 Language Centres and Deductible Gift Recipient status

A brief but important point: I strongly support Action 2, bullet point 4: "Consider Tax deductible status to Indigenous languages organisations through the Register of Cultural Organisations for maintaining and reviving Indigenous languages". It is currently not possible for Indigenous Language Centres to obtain Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. This is unfortunate and seemingly unfair as comparable non-profit organisations such as Aboriginal Art Centres easily meet the criteria of the Register of Cultural Organisations. Language Centres potentially miss out on significant private donations and grant opportunities due to being unable to obtain DGR status. Improving the legislation regarding the Register of Cultural Organisations to allow Indigenous Language Centre is a relatively small but important matter.

7.2 Northern Territory Government policy: Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours of Each School Day

Since it was first announced in 2008, this policy has been widely condemned a wide range of stakeholder: Indigenous-speaking educators, elders and community members, Indigenous academics, English-teaching professionals, linguists, human rights advocates and agencies and a number of politicians (e.g. Labor Senator Trish Crossin, NT leader of the Opposition Terry Mills). It has been criticised for:

(a) being developed without consultation, in particular without consulting Indigenous communities and educators involved in delivering bilingual education programs for 20-30+ years (e.g. Areyonga Community 2008)

(b) conflicting with (at the time) current departmental statements and strategies (e.g. Northern Territory Legislative Assembly 2005 and the *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006-2009* which committed to "strengthen the bilingual program and improve its effectiveness and sustainability to deliver outcomes" (Northern Territory Government 2009))

(c) ignoring research evidence supporting English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching methodologies such as bilingual education

(e) being justified with inaccurate and misleading data and research findings (e.g. Dickson 2010, Devlin 2010)

(f) being justified because of data relating to bilingual schools which in fact represented a small minority of remote schools (nine out of over 70). The majority were already delivering "English-only" programs.

(d) breaching human rights and linguistic rights obligations (e.g. Simpson, Caffery & McConvell 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission 2010)

(f) contributing to declining attendance rates in former bilingual schools (e.g. Dickson 2010)

(g) devaluing Indigenous languages and impacting on the maintenance of Indigenous languages

(h) devaluing Indigenous educators and increasing the reliance on recruiting new teachers and exacerbating problems of high turnover of teachers in remote communities (e.g. Four Corners 2009)

The policy was developed on claims that bilingual education programs, which represented only nine schools – a small minority of remote schools in the Northern Territory - led to poorer benchmark testing results, poorer attendance and poorer enrolment figures (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training 2008). With these claims, it can be inferred that NT DET believe that the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* policy will lead to improved benchmark testing results, enrolment and attendance figures. There is no evidence that this has occurred. On the contrary, there is evidence that the policy has contributed to falling attendance rates in some schools (Dickson 2010).

The policy is deeply flawed on many levels. Some attempts have been made by NT DET to improve on the policy as detailed below.

7.3 Northern Territory Government policy: Literacy for Both Worlds

In early 2011, NT DET briefly replaced the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* policy with a new *Literacy for Both Worlds* policy. Unlike the preceding policy, it acknowledged that most remote NT students were by nature bilingual learners and defined concepts such as bilingual, multilingual and biliteracy. Unlike the preceding policy and the national policy discussed in §7.1, it also explicitly identified roles for Indigenous language literacy in education delivery:

> Some remote and very remote schools, in consultation with their communities, will identify early print literacy in both home language and English as intended student literacy outcomes. They may opt to use a biliteracy approach to the end of Year 2 to achieve this. (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training 2011a: 1)

This policy, which addressed a number of the criticisms noted in §7.2, was removed from the NT DET website days after it was posted and the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* policy was reinstated.

7.4 Northern Territory Government policy: Literacy Framework for Students with English as an Additional Language

While composing this submission, a new policy was drafted by NT DET called *Literacy Framework for Students with English as an Additional Language* (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training 2011b). My initial assessment is that while it is clearer in expressing support and value for Indigenous languages, the substance of the policy does not vary considerably from the *Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours* policy. For example, all references and definitions of bilingualism, biliteracy or multilingualism have been removed (cf. *Literacy for Both Worlds* policy). While it does provide a pathway for re-introducing bilingual education programs, incorporating Indigenous language literacy education, it imposes a rigorous approval process, or as Simpson (2011) describes:

> Director of School Performance can only approve it if the community can show that the School will jump through many many hoops:

Hoops:

- committed support from the community for this instructional approach in the initial years of school education.
- there is a sufficient number of instructionally and culturally competent staff to properly implement the approach
- the school‘s ethos and learning programs aim to promote positive and active representation of children‘s (and families‘) first language and cultural heritage.
- suitably adaptable and culturally responsive curriculum, teaching and learning resource materials are available or could be produced at reasonable cost.

You achieve this? Wait….

- the school leadership team is committed and able to take a proactive role in engaging community and family resources to support the approach.
- there is a commitment to professional support of the approach to the specific community/school.

A let-out for any principal who doesn’t want a bilingual program.

It remains to be seen what the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training will develop in the future, but current policies point to an ongoing lack of clear and significant support for Indigenous languages in NT Schools, perceiving them as little more than impediments to English acquisition, useful only for ad-hoc oral interpretations performed by Indigenous language speaking teaching assistants.

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