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All talk, no action

The benefits are proven, so why aren’t Indigenous languages taught in schools?

by Lisa Waller

Briefly
- Students get better results if they can learn in their first language
- A House of Representatives committee inquiry is investigating the benefits of teaching Indigenous languages
- Teachers have a role to play in encouraging Indigenous language programs.

Enabling Indigenous children to be strong in their own cultures and languages from preschool is necessary to ensure high mainstream educational outcomes, including fluency in Standard Australian English, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has told the federal Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities.

“The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages is not an open question – its benefits have a large evidence base, provide the rationale for the embedding of first language learning in national and state/territory government policies and is at the heart of the nationally agreed reform agenda for improvement of Indigenous education outcomes,” the AEU’s submission says.

In July 2010, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, and the Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean, jointly referred the House of Representatives standing committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to investigate the links between Indigenous languages and improving education, community wellbeing, interpreting services and strategies to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

The committee is inquiring into how the use of Indigenous languages, particularly in early education, can help to improve education and vocational outcomes where English is a second language. It is also investigating the Indigenous languages policies of Australian governments and the effectiveness of Indigenous language maintenance and revival programs. It follows the committee’s recent inquiry into Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system, which found language is an important component of cultural connection, strengthens intergenerational relationships and assists in community building.

Many people who made submissions to that inquiry referred to language as playing a significant role in the wellbeing of young Indigenous people. The committee is expected to release its report by mid-2012.

AEU Deputy Federal Secretary Darcel Russell says meeting the diverse education and training needs of Indigenous students has long been a high priority of the union and its members.

The AEU’s 25-page submission to the inquiry advocates its foundation principle that the public education system in all states and territories must provide access to quality and culturally appropriate preschool, primary, secondary and post-school education in every Indigenous community, and strive for equitable outcomes for all Indigenous students.

A right to learn your language

Russell says the submission draws on the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and articles 13 and 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, concerning the rights of Indigenous children to learn and speak their languages.

The submission also brings together federal, state and territory government policies, national and international research and its members’ experiences teaching in remote Indigenous communities to advocate for the reinstatement and expansion of bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory. It has called for English-as-a-second-language...
curricula, teaching methods and trained teachers to work with Indigenous children throughout Australia who do not come to school speaking Standard Australian English (SAE).

“The international research on bilingual education provides clear evidence that children learn best in their first language, particularly in the early years of school, until they get stronger in their second language,” the submission says.

There are very few opportunities for people, including teachers, going to work on communities where languages are still spoken by children to learn the languages formally. There is also little opportunity for Indigenous people outside the Northern Territory who want to undertake tertiary study of their languages.

In her submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities, the chair of Indigenous Linguistics at the Australian National University, Professor Jane Simpson, calls for government to support the development, resourcing and running of tertiary award and a two-week summer school for speakers and learners of Indigenous languages.

Pitjantjatjara at UniSA
The University of South Australia is one of only three Australian universities that offer Indigenous language courses. It runs a non-award summer course that teaches oral and aural skills in Pitjantjatjara.

Course co-ordinator Paul Eckert says the 40 students who take the course each year are people who have professional roles working with Anangu, either living on the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in the far north of South Australia, or who are based in Adelaide and make regular trips to the Lands. They include teachers, nurses, doctors, psychologists, public servants and social workers. Eckert says the course receives very positive feedback and there is more demand for places that the university can meet.

“Most of the students have already been exposed to communities,” Eckert says. “It's not surprising that they're really wanting to further their language skills, it's all about communication. Language is so important. Not everyone will become fluent, but they're making an attempt to learn the language.

“Anangu really appreciate when people recognise that their language is an important part of their life and their culture and make an effort to learn and to use their language,” he says.

Pitjantjatjara is a vibrant, living language with 3000-4000 speakers in total, which provides an opportunity for it to be supported well through language courses at tertiary level and through bilingual education.

Eckert says UniSA is very supportive and would like to be able to run a second short course. Three Anangu tutors are involved in teaching the summer school, but Eckert says more government investment is needed to develop their skills and to provide training and support for more Anangu tutors so the university can expand the program.

“People learn some language and they also learn skills for continuing to learn the language. It's a toolbox of ideas for moving on with language learning,” Eckert says of the course. “It's a great start... I have something to learn from you guys and we have something to teach you.”
English learning improved
Russell says that the clear and obvious implication – which is reiterated throughout the union’s submission and is embedded in existing federal and state policies, programs and reform agendas – is that bilingual programs strengthen the learning of English, rather than acting as a barrier to it.

“As stated in our submission, there is a plethora of government policy that supports the teaching of Indigenous languages. We would like to see a range of robust models developed, resourced appropriately and implemented,” she says.

“Governments need to actually implement the policy frameworks that are already in existence. Resourcing and a long-term approach are needed.”

The AEU has strongly opposed the Northern Territory Government’s 2009 policy, Compulsory Teaching in English for the First Four Hours of Each School Day since it was first announced.

It has told the inquiry that “in the face of the national and international evidence supporting bilingualism in education, and existing government policy… the NT policy disregards decades of research; shows no respect for Indigenous languages and cultures; and works against the language and cultural rights expressed in the Declaration and written into Australian government policy”.

The submission underlines that bilingual education is not only beneficial to students’ education. It is valued by local communities because it ensures the survival of languages, and as the NT Government acknowledges, “it provides an honoured place for Indigenous languages in the curriculum and an honoured place for Indigenous teachers”.

“The international research on bilingual education provides clear evidence that children learn best in their first language…”

Excerpt from the AEU’s submission to the standing committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

Wiradjuri program in Dubbo
The 137 submissions received by the inquiry reflect the diversity of Indigenous language teaching needs and programs throughout Australia, from bilingual to language revitalisation programs in places like Dubbo, NSW, where Wiradjuri is being taught in schools with high Aboriginal enrolments.

That program, which involves Wiradjuri elders, adult language learners and teachers, is highly valued by the local Indigenous community and is achieving impressive educational outcomes. It has recently been expanded from primary to early high school.

Russell says it is extremely important for governments to support programs which recognise the diversity of Indigenous languages.

“The school is a vast resource and teachers are great role models, so valuing language, learning language and taking a positive approach to languages are all important. In addition, valuing and working with local Indigenous teachers and education workers promotes a positive message to the whole community.”

Lisa Waller is a journalist and a PhD candidate researching the relationship between news media and bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory.

Resources
- The AEU’s submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities can be found at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/languages