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Response to Draft Report Indigenous Education Review

Given the restrictions on the length of submissions we have focused on some major which we hold need addressing by the Reviewer.

As members of a group called Friends of Bilingual Learning (FOBL) you will understand our extreme frustration at a review endorsing English/English literacy as the focus of instruction in schools with emergent bilingual¹ students, ignoring the fact that children who speak a language other than English when they come to school will learn much better in the early years if they can learn in the language they can already think in.

The review takes the erroneous view that second language learning is the same as first language learning (p7). Second language learning through schooling takes time. (Collier, V. 1989; Cummins, J. 1980) This makes inescapable consideration in children's learning of what they can understand in their first language and what they can understand in their second. Naturally this will be different at different levels of schooling as students acquire more English. There is extensive research and pedagogy to inform the English language learning pathway for these students, yet a coherent understanding of this is not evident in the Draft Report.

Bilingual and bicultural learning from an Indigenous perspective: getting down to the basics: language is sacred.

Indigenous educators have written much about their profound love of their languages, integral connections to their land and cultural practices and its use for learning in school (see Ngurruwutthun et al 1991). The recently released National Indigenous Language Survey 2 report also reflects this connection with language for Indigenous people throughout Australia and recommends again for their place in schools. (NILS2, 2014)

The late Dr M Yunupingu, a founding member of FOBL, and a strong proponent for bilingual and bicultural learning explained how two languages work together for children in emergent bilingual learning environments:

I want to talk about Yolŋu strength; either in the English or Yolŋu matha speaking domain. We learnt from our elders that language is sacred. Yolŋu kids think in their own

¹ We use emergent bilingual to describe students in remote Indigenous communities who come to school as speakers of Indigenous languages and who learn most of their English at school.

language which can then inform them about English, its meanings and its values. I consider Yolngu children in Yolngu schools to be as clever as anyone else in the wide world, and I don't want that cleverness left outside the classroom door. Not for my kids or my grandkids. They should have equal rights, the same rights as any kids in the world, whether they are Chinese, or Balanda, the equal right to learn in their own language.

In Yunupingu (1999) he writes about Double Power, 'the double power of the Yolngu and the Balanda way' (p4).

We would caution against a solution for the inclusion of Indigenous languages in education that only refers to Language or Language and Culture programs. The role of first language in the learning of emerging bilingual students needs to be addressed separately.

The review makes no reference to the history of Western Education and what has been achieved during 50 years of government schooling in remote Indigenous communities. Their first generation of trained teachers has passed through the workforce and yet their experiences and expertise has not been included in the Draft Report. We refer the reviewer to www.educationmob.communitystories.net, to the Ngoonjook journal and publications such as Aboriginal Pedagogy and Bat and Shore (forthcoming). A more rigorous consultation process may also have enabled richer input into the Review. Indigenous visions for their children's education have been presented/included in many school-community agreements/documents/consultations/local curricula. These could have been analysed. We would encourage the Review to correct this in the final version of the report.

Bilingual learning from a western perspective:

Getting down to basics: The role of first language (also referred to as own or home language, mother-tongue)

The role of first language for thinking described by Yunupingu (1999) is amply supported by western research.

"Children learn better if they understand the language spoken in school. This is a straightforward observation borne out by study after study (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Dutcher, 1995; Patrinos and Velez, 1996; Walter, 2003). Even the important goal of learning a second language is facilitated by starting with a language the children already know. Cummins (2000) and others provide convincing evidence of the principle of interdependence—that second language learning is helped, not hindered by first language study. This leads to a simple axiom: the first language is the language of learning. It is by far the easiest way for children to interact with the world. And when the language of learning and the language of instruction do not match, learning difficulties are bound to follow." (World Bank 2006:3)

“The most powerful factor in predicting educational success for minority learners was the amount of formal schooling they received in their L1.” (Thomas and Collier, 1997, reporting on an 11-year study of 42,000 minority language speakers in the USA. www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/resource/effectiveness/)

The language used in school can destroy children’s education. In many countries of the world, large numbers of children start school, only to find their teachers are speaking to them in a language they don’t understand. In other places, teachers start by communicating with children in their own language, but as soon as written words and numbers are introduced, teachers use a language children don’t understand. Children learn to copy and often memorise the words and numbers, but don’t understand them and can’t apply them usefully. In these situations, many children drop out of school altogether, while others fail their examinations and spend years repeating grades.

Adults often have powerful reasons for choosing a school language that children do not know. Nevertheless, it has been shown that if the school language is different from the language children use at home with family and friends, this is a major cause of educational failure for many children.

In many countries, inappropriate use of school language is working against efforts to strengthen the quality of education, wasting precious resources.”
(Save the Children: 2009)

Another worrying omission in the Draft Report is the lack of references to very well-known theorists and educators with expertise in bilingual learning, ESL, TESOL, Indigenous languages, home language/mother-tongue and minority student education . We suggest ‘the review’ begins with a book entitled *Indigenous Languages in education: what the research actually shows*, by Professor Charles Grimes. Another rather incredible omission in the report is any use of the Commonwealth House of Representatives Standing Committee on Language Learning in Indigenous Communities report entitled *Our Land, Our Languages* (Commonwealth Government, 2012). Although this document is cited in the reference section none of its findings or recommendations is discussed in the Draft Report. This report weighed up all of the evidence presented to the inquiry by way of submissions and interviews over a two year period. The committee found in favour of bilingual education as the most effective means of ensuring that children in remote areas learn English proficiently. We refer the reviewer to **Recommendation 14**:

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government work with state and territory governments to provide adequately resourced bilingual school education programs for Indigenous communities from the earliest years of learning, where the child’s first language is an Indigenous language (traditional or contact).
(Commonwealth Government, 2012, p. p 103)

Getting down to the basics; the learning of a second language at school

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

The reviewer needs to come to understand the difference between the acquisition of social language in emergent bilingualism through schooling and the acquisition of academic language skills required for being able to learn in a second language. Jim Cummins (2000b), an international expert on bilingual learning differentiates between social and academic language acquisition. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills developed for social situations, day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people. This kind of learning is context-embedded and occurs in meaningful social contexts. For Indigenous students in remote schools such social contexts usually only occur at school or when talking to English speakers visiting or residing the community.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to formal academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. Students need time and support to become proficient in academic areas. Research has shown this can take from five to seven years and even longer if a child has no prior schooling or receives no support in the development of their first language through schooling (Thomas & Collier, 2004).

Confusing language development with literacy learning.

The review has fallen into the old trap of confusing language development with the getting of literacy. Monolingual people from cultures with long literacy traditions often make this mistake as they have not had the experience of thinking and operating in more than one language. Language development and the learning of literacy are two related but very different processes. The Draft Report offers no research to support **Recommendation 10**, which recommends mandated approaches to early English literacy for Indigenous children in remote settings. There is with no reference to the English language learning the children are capable of at this stage of schooling and the relationship of this to literacy learning.

First Language Literacy/Biliteracy

While we acknowledge the functions of first language literacy would not be the same as for cultures with a longer literacy tradition, we cannot understand why you would tell communities who want to work with literacy in their own languages that they cannot. This would appear to be counter to the United Nations Declarations to which Australia is a signatory.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Articles 26 and 27

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a26>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 30

http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Articles 13 and 14

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>

The development of literacy practices in Indigenous communities is a complex process. The communities the Draft Report calls “Bush” have only been subjected to ‘western’ schooling for fifty years. At this point in time many Indigenous people read the Bible in their own languages, after many years of work in translation. Many people in communities now access some form of English material such as magazines and newspapers like the ‘NT News’ which do not require a high degree of literacy. Local community newspapers, Church and Land Council materials are also accessed regularly. There are very few people today who sign with an ‘x’. There is a significant uptake by younger people with social media - *Facebook* in particular is very popular with young people so this is a contemporary change in the way people are accessing information. Our point is that the getting of literacy, in the context where practices from rich oral traditions are mixing and melding with contemporary literate and digital societies is very complex and expectations that people want and need the exact kind of outcomes and practices as ‘white’ Australia is assimilationism come back to haunt us. Where is the evidence it will work now?

There are communities who have developed literacy practices that can be used for early literacy acquisition and well resourced and accountable programs have successfully taught early literacy skills through their own languages. The role of first language literacy was put forward in original recommendations for bilingual programs in the NT. Hale (1999) reflects on these:

“In relation to English, we recommended that all Aboriginal children be given instruction in oral English from the very beginning of their school experience, with the view that, at an appropriate time later, they would be able to transfer to instruction in English literacy with three important kinds of underpinning: (1) they would have experienced the feeling of success in attaining full literacy in the vernacular in a relatively short time; (2) they would have a firm understanding of and feeling for, the alphabetical principle; and (3) their relatively firm control of spoken English would provide the necessary basis for literacy work in English.”

We recommend that the reviewer reads the *Our land, Our Languages* report. Once he has done that he will need to rework Recommendation 10 regarding the approach to early

literacy and English for Indigenous children who speak an Indigenous language using the best available research data. If he is unwilling to do this he must provide research he has found which supports his, in our opinion, erroneous belief that learning literacy in a language you are just beginning to learn is anything other than having young children 'barking at print'.

We would also argue that there is a place for ongoing use of L1 literacy throughout schooling. For instance, in relation to translation skills that will be needed by future adults in these communities. Similarly deep understanding of relationships between their own language and culture and English are also required for skills in oral interpreting. Studies in this area can be elements middle and secondary year courses e.g. Australian Languages, studies in own languages and cultures and Integrated Studies.

A revision of **Recommendations 1, 8, 10 and 11** is necessary to make explicit a research links to language learning relevant to these emerging bilingual students.

The challenge for any schooling of emergent bilinguals in remote indigenous communities is the bringing together of community visions for their children with Western education expectations and relevant informed approaches to education in these contexts. We would welcome a much clearer reflection on this in the final version of the Review report.

Where misunderstanding about language learning and literacy development are evident

'This review has made a decision to focus on the English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system. Some people will find this a challenging position. The recommendation is based on the view that Indigenous children learn English: through rigorous and relentless attention to the foundations of the language and the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy. The review does not support continued efforts to use biliteracy approaches, or to teach the content of the curriculum through first languages other than English. This report recommends the explicit teaching and assessment of foundational elements of English literacy, including phonemic awareness, phonics and vocabulary. (p 7)'

In light of this we do not support **Recommendation 13** which calls for an internal review into the state of English as an Additional Language. If this report reflects the extent of knowledge within NT DoE and the government in this area then external expertise is essential. To call throughout for evidence based approaches and then not demonstrate this within the review is unconscionable. We are also puzzled by the contrast in what is presented in this Draft Report and correspondence FOBL received from the former Minister for Education of the current government which stated:

'The Northern Territory Government is committed to the delivery of quality programs for all students with a home language other than English. While ensuring an explicit focus on the teaching and learning of Standard Australian English, the home language is seen as a distinct and important area of learning in itself, as well as a valuable resource to support the learning of English and learning all other subject areas.

To improve the delivery of best-practice English as an Additional Language teaching, we have established the English as an Additional Language Unit. As part of its work, the Unit – including Indigenous language linguists- will be supporting remote schools to plan, deliver, monitor and assess bilingual and bi-literacy programs as agreed with local communities.'

(pc Dec 2012)

And finally this is probably an appropriate way to end this submission from another former Indigenous Principal from Arnhemland who sadly passed away in January.

Yolŋu in different areas have their own cultures which still exist and are very significant to us. This is very valuable to acknowledge. The Balanda do not understand Yolŋu lifestyles, beliefs and how we get involved in various ceremonies and see the world differently. It is very important for the Yolŋu to participate in implementing curriculum and to establish a firm foundation according to how Yolŋu see the world around them." Aboriginal Pedagogy (1991)

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[The Rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children](http://www.snaicc.org.au/policy-advocacy/dsp-default-e.cfm?loadref=194#rights)

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Child Care

<http://www.snaicc.org.au/policy-advocacy/dsp-default-e.cfm?loadref=194#rights>