

**Trevor Stockley**

**Aboriginal Languages Teacher**



TO: The Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
Committees Inquiry into the Effectiveness of the National Assessment  
Program - Literacy and Numeracy.

RE: NAPLAN - An ineffective, blunt and destructive tool for testing  
English literacy and numeracy in children who speak an Aboriginal  
language as their mother tongue and learn within bilingual programs.

Dear Senate Committee Members,

I write in relation to the continued and unfair use of NAPLAN  
(standardised) testing recently, yet again, being applied to Yolngu  
children in north-east Arnhem Land, whose mother tongue is a  
traditional Yolngu Matha language, and who learn English literacy (and  
numeracy) as their second language.

These Yolngu children learn within an established and community  
supported bilingual education Yolngu Matha program, where Yolngu  
children rightly learn their initial understandings and skills of oracy,  
literacy and numeracy in and through their own Yolngu language and  
culture.

Well-supported and resourced quality bilingual education programs, in tandem with regular attendance and good health, are recognised internationally as best practice for the continuing maintenance of Indigenous minority languages such as Yolngu Matha. It is also best practice in the education of Yolngu children to utilise and respect their own Indigenous languages, which leads to greater skill and understanding in their second language in all subject areas in later years. As well as being best practice for education for their children, bilingual programs are regarded by many Indigenous language speakers, by the World Bank (1) and by the United Nations, as a positive and active indicator of Government good intent towards Indigenous people and are economically very sensible. Although Australia is a signatory to the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2) 2009, it is noticeably lagging behind in its lack of understanding and support in arresting the serious and continued decline of Australian languages, with only a rare few languages which are still being spoken on country and are still being learnt by children as their first language, as their mother tongue.

It is wrong, unfair and unnecessarily onerous to expect these young Yolngu Matha speaking students and early developing learners of English as a second language, to undergo NAPLAN (standardised) testing. It is unrealistic to then expect them to achieve comparable scores in English literacy and numeracy, with students in Australia who have English as a mother tongue and a western culture, which supports the language used in NAPLAN tests. Standardised testing is not a proper measuring tool of any child's learning achievements being based on misguided, one-size-fits-all education theory. NAPLAN testing clearly does not fit the learning situation of these Yolngu children.

To then publish these skewed, incomplete and incorrect results, on the world-wide web My School site, including the astounding comparisons with schools which are clearly not similar (schools which are socio-economically, racially, linguistically and culturally different) must appear to parents and older Yolngu learners, as an intentional attack on them, their children, their languages and

their culture. NAPLAN testing brings to bear an *unnecessary* and *subjugating bias* against Yolngu Matha speaking children, who are English second language learners and this is an unintentional and thoroughly unacceptable consequence.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Affairs embarked on an extensive Inquiry process into language learning in Indigenous communities, which included 23 public hearings, over 220 witnesses and 154 submissions. The Committee published its findings in the report 'Our Land Our Languages - Language Learning in Indigenous Communities (September 2012). I draw the Senate Committee's attention to this excellent report and all its recommendations (3) but note the following selected recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Regarding the role of Indigenous languages in preserving heritage and improving outcomes for Indigenous peoples which dove-tails effectively with present government policy of 'closing the gap'.
- **Recommendation 9:** Regarding the development by the Government of an implementation plan for the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2009) to which it is now a signatory.
- **Recommendation 13:** Regarding the Education Minister developing tools for the mandatory first language assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander children upon entering early childhood education.
- **Recommendation 14:** Regarding the provision of quality bilingual school education programs in Indigenous communities, from the earliest years of learning, for children whose first language is an Indigenous language (traditional or contact).
- **Recommendation 15:** Regarding NAPLAN - that the Education Minister develop an alternative assessment tool to the current (inadequate) NAPLAN testing tool, for students learning English as a second language.

After thirty four years experience of learning and teaching Aboriginal languages, it is with respect that I offer this plain advice to the Senate committee members. NAPLAN standardised testing is not only the wrong and inappropriate evaluation tool to be administered to Yolngu children who are learning in their Aboriginal mother tongue in bilingual programs in the NT, but it is also soul destroying and destructive of the children's belief in themselves, their teachers, their parents and their Yolngu culture and Yolngu languages.

To continue to use NAPLAN tests on young Yolngu students who are English second language learners, is to subject these children to a culturally, linguistically and educationally inappropriate evaluation tool and an insidious testing regime.

Please feel free to contact me over any issues in this submission.

Regards,

Trevor Stockley

I speak Gumatj (Yolngu Matha) and worked 1979-1992 at Yirrkala and Laynhapuy Homeland schools (NT), focusing on Yolngu control, the inclusion of Yolngu knowledge in a balanced curriculum, implementing Yolngu ways of working and community-based teacher training. I have worked at Cairns TAFE as a curriculum writer and teacher for the Diploma of Indigenous Australian Language Studies. My community language revival work in north Queensland includes work as a specialist Aboriginal languages teacher and program writer for the Warrgamay and Gudjal Language Retrieval and Revival programs. I have delivered Language Awareness workshops for the Warrgamay, Djirrbal, Ngadjan, Girramay, Nyawaygi and Gudjal language groups and written accompanying Handbooks and Soundbooks. I am a contributing author (Chapter 8) to the "RE-AWAKENING LANGUAGES Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages" (2010).

(1) **'Indigenous languages in education: what the research actually shows'**

Charles E. Grimes, Ph.D.

Australian Society for Indigenous Languages, Inc. 2009.

(2) **'Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'**

United Nations, 2009

[www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

(3) **'Our Land Our Languages - Language Learning in Indigenous Communities'**

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Straits

Islander Affairs,

Canberra, 2012