

The Secretariat
Committee of Enquiry into Indigenous Language Learning

I understand that there is a Senate enquiry into the teaching of indigenous languages.

I have been involved in Aboriginal education for more than twenty years, the past ten of which have been spent working in the Northern Territory.

From my training in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) and my teaching experience in Indonesia and Australia I am convinced that English literacy comes easier to those who are literate in their own language. In Java, for instance, school students learn to read and write in Javanese until they are about nine years old. Then they learn Indonesian Bahasa which is the commercial common language of the region. Then they usually learn English for tourism and commercial purposes. Standards of literacy are quite high and students develop practical use of English very quickly.

The NT used to have successful bilingual programmes in a number of schools but unfortunately decided to cancel them and ban other language lessons during the first part of the school day. While there may not be many trained indigenous teachers yet there are many who have worked for years as Assistant Teachers who are literate and could manage to teach in their own language at the early levels. Throughout the Northern Territory most Aboriginal people prefer to converse in their own languages rather than English. For children to become fully literate in English they need to be able to perceive their own language in written form in order to appreciate English as a written and spoken language.

There are numerous collections of bilingual and Aboriginal language resources in a great number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages which may be reintroduced into schools and libraries. At present Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education has many of them available on line through their library.

If our Members of Parliament are sincere in their desire to “close the gap” in indigenous disadvantage it would be a very useful step in acknowledging the value of indigenous languages and culture to have local language lessons returned to Northern Territory schools where appropriate.

Yours truly

Margaret Opie B.Sc.App., Grad. Cert. TESOL

