

Supplementary evidence to that presented by AuSIL at the May 2nd Committee Hearing for the HOR Inquiry into Indigenous Languages in Australia.

1.

Mismatch between the content of the AuSIL submission and the tenor of the questions posed during the presentation of evidence.

The AuSIL submission presented the plethora of ‘world-wide evidence’ (including evidence from Australia) that has accrued since 1953 to demonstrate that in order for children of minority language groups to progress most successfully through mainstream education systems, and to graduate equipped to participate equally in, and to contribute to the dominant society in which they have a place, their first steps to learning and literacy should be in the language spoken in the home. The research identified that “the meaningful recognition of indigenous languages, along with their deliberate and systematic incorporation into programs in the education, health, justice, and job training sectors, along with reasonable cross-cultural training and orientation of service providers” are critical to Closing the Gap.”

Questions focused on the apparent failure of the limited number of schools offering limited bilingual programs in the Northern Territory, to retain long term consistent attendance rates, to demonstrate greater success rates in NAPLAN scores and to turn out fully literate and educated graduates. This largely sidestepped discussion of universally recognized issues that research has identified as essential to governments attaining the desired outcomes of an equal quality education for all: - the structure, duration of program, Government support, and the qualifications and preparation for teaching, of the staff (non-Indigenous and Indigenous) in bilingual programs.

AuSIL submitted evidence on the accumulation of compelling reasons why the absence of properly delivered bilingual education in schools will continue to hinder movement towards the Government’s expressed goal of “Closing the Gap”. It was not the place of AuSIL, being observers of, but not directly involved in the Northern Territory schools, to either present details, or to critique the specifics of programs running.

It would be remarkable if Australia were to be the only country in which what is universally known to be advantageous to the linguistic, cognitive and educational development of children, did not apply. - We are not ignorant of what is happening in Government funded education in the communities in which we often live over long periods, and from which former students of the school system come to us seeking programs that will help them negotiate language, and other elements of the wider world for which the education systems have left them ill-prepared. Such students often also seek support to acquire further literacy skills in their own first languages for their adult purposes. These include dealing with health, spiritual, justice and other life issues for which the school systems through which they have passed has left them lacking a matured mastery of either their own or the dominant language.

Unfortunately it does seem to be the case that the presentation of compelling evidence that bilingual education is essential for children of minority language groups if they are to develop

mastery of the dominant language, and are to be equipped to function successfully in mainstream society as well as to maintain their identity and roles in the minority groups to which they belong, has been taken to indicate a simple belief that bilingual education will solve all the problems that confront these minority groups.

2.

Apparent dismissal of "evidence" presented.

The evidence presented in the original AuSIL submission covered long term, well substantiated research from around the world as well as Australia, on issues surrounding the provision, or non-provision of bi-lingual education. Evidence supporting the case for seriously pursuing bi-lingual education was presented in the form of

- a) references in the original submission
- b) a booklet presented to each member of the Committee
- c) a hard copy of a table contrasting NAPLAN scores recorded in the final year in which forms of bi-lingual education were operating in certain NT schools, and scores on the same outcomes in the two years following the closure of those programs. [See Separate Attachment.]

(A copy of language material prepared in cooperation with NAAJA to assist in communicating with Indigenous speakers was also presented. [See Separate Attachment.]

The evidence presented in the submission spoke also to the detrimental effects on Indigenous communities, and on the wider society of which these communities are a part, when sizeable groups of people fail to acquire adequate literacy to function as fully independent and contributing members of the society.

It was dismaying therefore to have encountered a statement from a member of the Committee, later in the day, to the effect that no 'empirical evidence', and a "real dearth of cogent analysis" had been presented to that point. Three of the possible implications to be drawn from that statement are:

i)

Much/all of what had preceded that point in the day, had been based on an emotive/naïve affiliation to bilingual education as the solution to all problems facing Indigenous communities.

ii)

The substantiated empirical research appended to the submissions that had been sent in, had been and was still being, ignored as of negligible consequence: - being of neither "empirical" value nor "cogently analysed".

iii)

The evidence earlier presented in the day had rested on the basis that properly developed, funded and presented bilingual education should produce absolute, immediate and sustained outcomes that matched the following statement:

*" bilingual education equals better attendance at schools equals greater proficiency in English as well as better cultural identity, culture-land et cetera "**

The evidence AuSIL presented highlighted Bilingual education as a matter of taking a step in the right direction, with a long term view for the students of today and the communities of tomorrow.

To dismiss that evidence is to ignore for the students of today and their parents, the right to expect that a child will not be presented with an **impediment to his/her cognitive development** through a learning system that, from the beginning, teaches the child to expect reading to be a confusing, and even meaningless experience. Such learning is not easily overcome. Many of the children who pass through systems in which this is their experience join the ranks of those who are economically and socially disadvantaged. That is unjust for the children. It also has consequent effects on the economic and social health of the wider society.

[More correctly, in remote communities where English is not required, even by adults, for daily functioning apart from interaction in a very limited number of domains, and where English is not demanded of young children who can have all their social and physical and emotional needs mediated through their own home language, English should be offered as a Foreign Language.]

The following quote is from recent research that was referenced in the AuSIL submission. These conclusions are based on an examination of world evidence from 1953 up until 2011:

Gove, A. and P. Cvelich. 2011. *Early Reading: Igniting Education for All. A report by the Early Grade Learning Community of Practice. Revised Edition.* Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute.

Introduction, P. VI

“Children need to learn to read early to have success in school; success in school is a key factor to escaping poverty. Reading is a fundamental ability for higher learning. The best opportunity to teach children the skills of reading is in the early grades (1–3), or earlier if possible. If this window is missed, then children who have not begun to read and understand what they read will continue to fall behind unless swift action is taken.”

“Reading undergirds the entire learning experience for a child; it needs to be the foundation of any education enterprise. Findings from early grade reading assessments and evidence-based interventions shared in this report can produce improvements not just in reading, but in education quality in general. Early grade reading is an exemplar for improving the overall quality of education.”

3.

Re barriers to cross cultural communication within the Justice, and other Government and service systems:

Over the years, AuSIL members have worked with Indigenous people to provide translations of Police cautions etc. in various languages. At the same time, the training of Indigenous translators will always be handicapped unless there is an increase in understanding on the part of those members of the dominant society who work in those areas. A recognition that the process for Indigenous people to deal successfully with the wider world should not be one way only. Each side must be prepared to adjust.

The Committee Members themselves demonstrated how great the gap of understanding exists on the side of those of us in the dominant culture, and how successfully that obstructs the free flow of communication and understanding even when dealing with Indigenous people of high intellect who also have apparently ‘mastered’ English.

AuSIL representatives entered the room during the hearing of evidence from the Friends of Bilingual Learning. They were absolutely stunned to hear the last question to be directed, somewhat forcefully, to Mr Maratja Dhamarrandji. The delivery of the question itself caused shocked such that the content of that question was completely erased and all that remained was the memory of the impossible situation into which a man of standing was placed.

Unfortunately, “verbatim” transcripts mask a great deal that is significant. The shocked silence of the respondent trying to decipher the question – particularly a respondent not comfortable to ask that the question be made clear, is not evident. The uncomfortable silence as Mr Dhamarrandji sat there stunned was eventually broken when the chairman asked if Mr Trudgeon would like to answer that question and Mr Dhamarrandji nodded his agreement to that suggestion. [See Appendix 1]

The point of highlighting that incident is not to attack the Committee Members for whom we have great respect and to whom we attribute quite sincerely, recognition for their commitment to this Inquiry because of their genuine concern about what is happening, and about the need to work towards better solutions in the interests of, not only the Indigenous peoples of the land, but in the interests of the well-being of Australia as a healthy and honourable nation. - The point is to illustrate how vital is the kind of information contained in the evidence sheet on the work AuSIL is doing with NAAJA to prepare their lawyers and justice workers for more successful attempts to support their clients.

It is also to point out that not only NAAJA lawyers and justice workers need to be aware of these issues, but all government health, law and service providers – including politicians, should be required to have some background training in these linguistic complexities if we are ever to achieve health, justice and equity in our land. The training of Interpreters should not be assumed to be one-way process in which the non-establishment party is required to come all the way while the establishment members remain complacent in what to them is ‘natural’ – because we are anchored in a limited and complacent monolingual understanding of the world.

Unfortunately this deficit on our (members of the dominant monolingual culture) part was gruellingly demonstrated again during the afternoon when evidence was being taken from the representatives of Shepherdson College. Again and again and again unsuccessful attempts were made to rephrase questions that to us appeared ‘simple’ questions, so that they communicated to the Yolŋu respondents. Those ‘simple’ questions were not phrased in simple straightforward language - because we, being well versed in the coding of our world in our way, find it very difficult to code in any other way, what we want to say. The silences that followed each failed attempt to have a question understood were frustrating all round. The frustration, and I would add

helplessness, in the hearing room was apparent to all. Such situations and their damaging outcomes will never change unless we, on our part recognize that, in the world as we experience it today, the deficit of understanding is not only on the one side of the communication divide.

4.

A reply to what was evidently a key question from one member of the Committee

The question was as to whether the respondents had read “One Drop in the Bucket, the story of Mount Margaret Mission:

The respondents had not read that particular record but had read other documentary publications about that period, including Linden Girl. Not all present a rosy picture. One respondent had also worked with people whose mid-year lives were being adversely challenged, despite the English language acquisition with which they had emerged from those mission days. These people were struggling in a world in which they never fully found a place. Some even took their own lives. Not all emerged with an equal confidence to engage with and operate in the English speaking world.

It is natural that children raised in a protected/fenced off environment, where only one language surrounds them throughout their growing and education, will speak that language. *But to speak a language is not the same as having a language through which we as human beings find our identity.* Our developing self-esteem comes from identifying with a familial- social grouping in which we carry the obligations, and exercise the rights, that anchor and secure us to a base from which, we can begin to engage successfully with a wider world as opportunities present.

5.

A reply to a second key question from the Committee

The question asked was, “*Do you have a governance board or some sort of structure that includes Indigenous people?*”

We would re-emphasise that for our organization the Indigenous people with whom we work, are our strategic advisors with regard to the programs we develop and present. Such programs are developed either in response to direct requests/invitations from Indigenous groups, or in conjunction with the Indigenous people with whom we are already working. At each bi/tri-ennial conference organizational goals are re-assessed and formulated on the basis of these requests, the human (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), technical and financial resources available or accessible. Of course the interaction with Indigenous colleagues and groups is ongoing.

Appendix 1

CHAIR: Can we explore further the bilingual education equals better attendance at school equals greater proficiency in English as well as better cultural identify, culture-land et cetera—because those are the linkages we are getting all the way through. Can you come back, Brian, to that school that you were talking about when you were school principal. You had a bilingual school with 82 per cent attendance rate—90 per cent in one class with one teacher—and now according to the evidence given to us not more than three-quarters of an hour ago, is that it is 50 per cent. Can you explain that?

Dr Devlin: It is not easy to explain simply the fall-off in attendance in remote schools in the Northern Territory. There are obviously a variety of factors. There is one advocate—a PhD student at ANU—who has gone public with his assertions that there is a clear link between the demise of bilingual education and the fall in attendance. I will sidestep your question slightly because I do not want to assert that there is a single reason for the fall in attendance—there is a complex of reasons—but it is a fact that in the years when bilingual programs were being accredited by the department of education—

“CHAIR: I might interrupt. We have had plenty of people that have asserted that. You are one of the few people who has said that it is a complex issue. We have had plenty of evidence from plenty of people, who, without any real empirical evidence, have asserted that to us consistently, time and time again. When put to the test there has been a real dearth of cogent analysis and evidence to say that that is the case. So I genuinely want to get to this answer. We want to give a good report with strong recommendations that is based in fact and empirical evidence. We are getting pithy, if not simplistic, comments from people time and time again in submission after submission. If there is any evidence we could point to from people like you—you guys are well placed and know all the players in the field—we would love to get that evidence.”

NAPLAN SCORE COMPARISONS

Bilingual Era and Post-Bilingual period

as asked for by the Committee during the hearing

Data taken from the My Schools website

NT School	indicator	still bilingual	no longer bilingual		% of drop ↓ in performance
		2008 scores	2009 scores	2010 scores	
Lajamanu	Yr 3 reading	96	43		56%
	Yr 3 writing	184	89		52%
Maningrida	attendance	49%	39%	38%	22%
	Yr 5 writing	290	209	160	45%
Milingimbi	attendance	64%	64%	65%	stable
	Yr 3 reading	120	218	13	89%
	Yr 3 writing	221	160	175	21%
	Yr 3 punctuation & grammar	159	177	26	84%
	Yr 3 numeracy	303	257	219	28%
Yuendumu	Yr 5 numeracy	351	220	N/A	38%
	Yr 7 writing	377	253	265	30%

Data from: www.myschool.edu.au (accessed 27 August 2011)



Helpful hints for cross-cultural communication in the Top End



1. Use active voice, avoid passives

Change a passive voice statement to an active statement by supplying an actor (the doer). If the actor is unclear use 'they' or 'somebody'.

Instead of saying

Say

"He *was arrested*."

"The *police arrested* him."

"If you tease the dog you *will be bitten*"

"If you tease the dog *he will bite you*."

"You *will be paid* extra for overtime work"

"If you work overtime *they will pay you* more money."

"He broke the law so he *was jailed*."

"He broke the law so *they put him in jail*."

"His money *was stolen*."

"*Somebody stole* his money."

2. Avoid abstract nouns

Replace abstract nouns with verbs (doing words) or adjectives (describing words).

An abstract noun is something that is intangible, like an idea or feeling, and cannot be detected with the senses.

"It has no *strength*"

"It is not *strong*" (adjective used)

"That was due to his good *management*."

"That happened because he *managed* things properly." (verb used)

"His *patience* has run out."

"He will not be *patient* any more." (adjective used)

"His *anger* caused him to be violent."

"He was violent because he was *angry*." (adjective used)

Instead of saying

Say

3. Avoid using negative questions

"Isn't he the boss?"

"Is he the boss?"

"You *never did* that before, did you?"

"Have you done that before?"

4. Avoid the auxiliary verbs 'to be' or 'to have'

Replace auxiliary verbs with a simple verb.

"I *have been looking* for you."

"I *looked* for you."

"You *have done* a good job."

"You *did* a good job"

"When he *had finished* work he felt hungry."

"He *finished* work *then* he felt hungry."

"I *am telling* the truth."

"What I *say now* is true."

5. Define words that are not familiar to the audience

Use the word, then attach a short descriptive statement.

"This is crown land."

"This is crown land, which is land that the Government owns."

"You have been given bail."

"The police gave you bail, which means you promised to come back to court next time."

6. Avoid multiple clauses in a sentence

Break into several sentences.

"Early resolution of disputes, including through mediation, that contribute to building safer community environments, is encouraged."

"The government wants to make communities safer places. This can happen if people resolve disputes quickly. Mediation is one way to resolve disputes."