

**Submission to the inquiry into Indigenous languages being conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.**

**Literacy as the foundation of educational outcomes**

My submission is concerned with the widespread illiteracy or semi-literacy of many Aboriginal children in remote communities, and their associated alienation from primary schools. I will not address questions of language maintenance *per se*, although my experience, and the evidence of linguists, convinces me there is a positive relationship between the recognition and maintenance of local languages and the acquisition of English language and literacy. Bilingual programs show more successful educational outcomes than programs where the local languages are ignored or erased (see submissions by linguists Margaret Opie, Janine Oldfield and Dr Felicity Meakins).

I write as a trained and experienced primary school teacher, and also as a social anthropologist who has worked in remote south central Arnhem Land since 1975, at Bulman and related communities. I have an ongoing close relationship with two extended families in particular, and have watched many Bulman children grow into adulthood. While the adults—but not the aged—I met in 1975 were minimally literate and numerate, having attended a small cattle station school in the 1960s, many of those who have attended the government school established at Bulman in the late 1970s remain semi-literate at best. My opinions are informed, not by quantified data, but by extensive experience and observation.

The serious disadvantage of illiteracy, as well as lack of spoken English, is well recognized in the community, and by young men and women as they come to adulthood, especially those who have ambitions outside their home communities. While parents regularly say they want their children to be educated, there is widespread alienation from a school that is a 'whitefella domain'. The children's discomfort at school seems to override the desire for literacy.

It is important to recognize that, where there are established cultural differences, and low educational levels among adults, the task of acquiring literacy is a long-term one. Improving educational levels in a whole community requires community involvement. For instance, adults

have mentioned their desire for literacy classes, but these have not, to my knowledge, been addressed.

I will make some specific observations and suggestions that cut across the headings set out by your committee.

First, **there is a *complementary* relationship between fluency in native languages and in English**, attested to by linguists with evidence from bilingual programs. The Rembarrnga men and women I met in 1975 all knew several Aboriginal languages, were fluent in Kriol, and, apart from the old people, were reasonably fluent in standard English. For instance, 'MM', my first teacher of Kriol in 1975, was a girl of fourteen whose command of Rembarrnga, Kriol and English was such that she would explain the relationship between them to me, illustrating how Kriol could be spoken in more Rembarrnga ways or in more English ways. MM since studied at Batchelor College and has taught in a 'homeland' school for years. Such language competence was not unusual. If, as appears the case, language skills have declined as schooling became more standardized and accessible, questions are raised about the appropriateness and suitability of the education being offered.

Second, many factors feed into absenteeism from school, but the contrast with the eagerness for schooling that characterized the cattle station school attended by the Bulman children in the 1960s is thought provoking (Cowlshaw 1999: 170-75; 125-32 ). While there is much informal discussion and opinion available to explain the current situation, and many factors are alluded to, the relevant social dynamics are not well understood. What seems clear is that the intelligence and enthusiasm of Bulman children is being eroded by their experience of today's schools.

Third, and most important, improving education outcomes where English is a second language, and where children are differently socialised, relies on appropriately trained teachers. I have seen little recognition that teachers in remote schools require specific skills. The teaching of children whose language, as well as habits, homes and experience of authority, are very different from mainstream children raises difficulties for conventionally trained teachers. It is difficult to

understand why such training is not provided, for instance by employing linguists to train teachers in ESL or to regularly visit schools. Despite the long-standing recognition of educational failure, education authorities seem reluctant to improve teacher training in appropriate ways, and instead leave the burden of educational failure on the Aboriginal people themselves. The resistance to improved teacher education has been documented by Tess Lea (2010).<sup>1</sup> A system of rewards for success in remote schools, based on outcomes, would seem appropriate.

Finally, the educational and vocational benefits of extending English language competency amongst Indigenous communities are obvious to everyone involved. But what is required is long-term commitment to better practices rather than on discovering some particular program to solve specific problems.

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<sup>1</sup>. Tess Lea. 2010 Indigenous Education and Training: what are we here for? Chapter 10 in J. Alman and M. Hinkson (eds). *Culture Crisis: anthropology and politics in Aboriginal Australia*. UNSW Press. Pp.