



**Submission to**

**The Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

**Inquiry into Language Learning in  
Indigenous Communities**

**September 2011**

The Central Land Council's (CLC) response to the Committee's terms of reference is provided below.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by a discussion on the importance of language learning and particularly the need for Aboriginal languages to be supported in the Northern Territory's education system.

**Response to the terms of reference**

**The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages**

A range of social and economic benefits can result from sustained attention and recognition of Aboriginal languages. These include benefits in terms of:

- raising self-esteem of Aboriginal people
- improving educational outcomes of Aboriginal children, particularly in areas where English is spoken as a second language
- enabling more effective engagement with Aboriginal people through improved relationships with Aboriginal people
- increasing the capacity for productive social and economic participation of Aboriginal people through higher educational achievement and improved communication
- celebrating Australia's unique Indigenous cultures and valuing cultural diversity in Australia
- enhancing Australia's international reputation, particularly in terms of adherence to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights

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<sup>1</sup> References to particular programs and concepts in the terms of references are discussed in further detail in the body of the submission.

## **The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

Enormous opportunities are available through working with Aboriginal languages to improve the Closing the Gap targets, particularly those related to education and employment.

Early intensive instruction in a child's mother tongue, is an effective means to directly achieve improvements in reading, writing and numeracy in early childhood education. This, in turn, improves prospects for Year 12 attainment and employment.

Life expectancy is a complex interplay of health, economic and social factors and can be taken as an indicator of wellbeing and social equity. Individual self esteem is a critical factor. Language is integral to Aboriginal identity and culture and a source of pride that can be enhanced through recognition and support.

## **The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education**

Aboriginal languages are particularly important in early education because if they are not learnt then there is little chance of them being passed on. There are currently no adequate opportunities or resources to learn Aboriginal languages sufficiently as a second language.

Aboriginal languages also need to be included throughout the education system. The grounds for including Aboriginal languages in education include:

- establishing a strong foundation for learning across the curriculum
- improving outcomes in English
- building student confidence and desire to learn
- engaging the community in the operations of schools

## **Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language**

Major effort is needed to improve education outcomes in Aboriginal communities where English is a second language.

A key focus should be the continued and expanded support for professional development of teachers in these schools in the area of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Measures the CLC recommends for improved educational outcomes are:

- Indigenous Language and Culture (ILC) Programs should be compulsory rather than optional in all NT schools
- Particularly in remote settings, ILC Programs should be developed with the respective Aboriginal community with options for (1) Aboriginal language literacy and/or oracy; (2) bilingual programs; or (3) programs where the Aboriginal language is taught, but not as the language of instruction across the curriculum

- NT schools should be adequately resourced to undertake ILC Programs
- Major efforts should be undertaken to raise the profile and status of Aboriginal staff in schools, including making available appropriate professional development and training
- All staff in remote schools should have access to ESL expertise; preferably on-site, but where this is not possible, through the regional office
- Non-Aboriginal staff, and particularly Principals, are in-serviced upon commencement in order to gain an understanding of the importance and priority Aboriginal people place on language and culture programs; as well as gaining an appreciation of the level of expertise of Aboriginal staff

### **The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities**

The benefits of attaining competency in English are self-evident and well recognised by Aboriginal people in Central Australia. The call for bilingual education is as much about children developing competency in English as about maintaining Aboriginal languages.

Ensuring English language competency in Aboriginal communities requires a more holistic approach that gives on-going access to education beyond the school years. A good practice model exists at Nyirripi for adult education in Central Australia. Here the Community Learning Centre provides English literacy and numeracy programs through applied and pre-vocational courses and informal mentoring supported by a tertiary education institution.

### **Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services**

The indications from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal languages in Central Australia suggest that the amount of research and education for maintenance of Aboriginal languages has greatly decreased over the past decade. A large deficit now exists in terms of employment opportunities and professional development opportunities for Aboriginal language practitioners. A lack of highly skilled interpreters in Central Australia reflects this gap.

A key measure to reverse this trend supported by language practitioners is the establishment of a well resourced and professionally supported Aboriginal Language Centre in Alice Springs. Such a centre would:

- support and strengthen Aboriginal language learning in Central Australia
- support schools' Indigenous Language and Culture programs
- develop the necessary skills and expertise needed for interpreting
- work strategically with existing programmes, such as Aboriginal land management programs, to obtain maximum benefits for Aboriginal language maintenance
- support research on Aboriginal languages and develop employment opportunities for Aboriginal language workers

### **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages**

The few language maintenance programs in Central Australia are largely *ad hoc* and dependent on key individuals and uncertain sources of funding.

Effectiveness of language maintenance could be enhanced through long term secure funding for targeted language programs. Programs should be developed through a well resourced language centre in collaboration with community members, language professionals and associated universities.

### **The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments**

It is not obvious that the Commonwealth's Policy "Indigenous Languages – A National Approach" is having any effect in Central Australia other than perhaps in the area of Indigenous interpreter services.

While the five key policy objectives are sound, the CLC is not aware of any action in Central Australia under the policy objectives of bringing to national attention Indigenous languages, reinforcing use of critically endangered Indigenous languages and strengthening pride in Identity and Culture.

Any positive action in Central Australia under the national language policy would be welcome.

Objective 5, "Supporting Indigenous Language Programs in Schools: To support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools" in particular is actively subverted by the NT Government's policy of enforcing English only in the first four hours of school.

With respect to Indigenous language programs in schools, the CLC calls on the Australian Government to provide funding and resources to ensure effective Language and Culture Programs in NT Schools and enable bilingual education where wanted by the Aboriginal community.

This would involve employing Aboriginal language speakers to teach and providing professional support for their training and the development of resources.

## 1. Introduction

The Central Land Council (CLC) is a Commonwealth statutory body which operates under both the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act and the Native Title Act. It represents more than 24,000 Aboriginal people in southern part of the Northern Territory.<sup>2</sup> The council is made up of 90 members elected by communities across the CLC region, which covers around 776,000 square kilometres.

Aboriginal language learning is a very important issue to our constituents who say that “without language we are lost” (L Wilson interview August 2011). Many of the CLC’s constituents speak an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. They may or may not speak Standard Australian English. The importance of maintaining Aboriginal languages is strongly felt by many Aboriginal people in Central Australia who are keenly aware of the threat of language loss.<sup>3</sup>

In parallel, there is a strong awareness of the need to learn to communicate in Standard Australian English. Take for example the response of Aboriginal people meeting at Yuendumu to discuss the Committee’s inquiry:

Everyone wants kids to learn English, there is no argument with that.....  
Everyone needs English to understand Centrelink, courts, licences, ITEC,  
bank, technology, TV programs, for visiting Alice Springs, for travel, for  
different jobs... (Yuendumu meeting, August 2011).

The CLC believes that the maintenance of Aboriginal languages in Central Australia is integral to the well being of Aboriginal people in the region, and that the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages and Standard Australian English should be supported through the education system.

This position is driven by the strong representations consistently made by Aboriginal people through CLC Council meetings; Executive meetings and daily interactions.

### Languages in the CLC region

In the CLC region there are three main language families which each comprise a number of languages as well as the individual languages of Warumungu, Gurindji and Mudbara which are spoken to the north and north-west of Alice Springs (Turpin n.d.).

**The Arandic** language family, centred around Alice Springs and extending to the south and east, includes:

- Eastern and Central Arrernte
- Western Arrernte
- Central and Eastern Anmatyerr
- Alyawarr
- Kaytetye

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<sup>2</sup> CLC website found at <http://www.clc.org.au/>.

<sup>3</sup> Note that it is not Standard Australian English but varieties of creole that are supplanting traditional languages in many remote areas.

**Ngarrkic** language family to the north and west of Alice Springs and includes:

- Warlpiri
- Warlmanpa

**Western Desert** language family south and west of Alice Springs extending into Western Australia and northern South Australia includes:

- Pitjantjatjara
- Yankunytjatjara
- Luritja
- Pintupi Luritja
- Pintupi
- Kukatja
- Ngaatjatjarra
- Ngaanyatjarra

The language spoken around Tennant Creek:

- Warumungu

The languages spoken around Kalkarindji and Daguragu:

- Gurindji, Malngin, Mudbara, Bilinara, and Ngariman

## 2. Aboriginal languages in NT schools

In the Northern Territory, the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages in schools has taken place through bilingual programs in a minority of schools since the 1970s. More recently, other Indigenous Language and Culture (ILC) programs have been offered in schools where the official language of instruction has been English.

### Bilingual Education

Bilingual education is supported by the CLC where requested by the Aboriginal community. Many Aboriginal people in Central Australia consistently express their view that their languages should be taught in schools:

Both ways should be taught in schools.... We're concerned that all our languages will die out (L Wilson, interview, August 2011).

A CLC member speaking at a recent Council meeting at Kalkaringi said:

I want to talk about bilingual. In every human body there is a vital part that we call tongue that we use for language. What our tongues produce, our language, shows who you are, it shows your culture, it shows your land, it shows what you are. With your paper and policies you can change the tongue of the person, so if we are going to keep our language, why change bilingual now? (K Granites, August 2011).

While bilingual models vary, the model that was typically offered in NT schools from the mid-1970s, is one where the language of instruction in the early years of school is the children's first language. Children are then taught Standard Australian English (SAE) as a second language. Accordingly, children learn to read and write initially in the Aboriginal language that they speak and understand. As they gain proficiency in oral English, children are then taught to read and write in English. The amount of time set aside for English increases as children progress through year levels. By Year 4, the proportion of time for each language is typically equal, and the proportion of English continues to increase over subsequent years.

Bilingual education is inherently bicultural. The teaching and learning of Aboriginal language is strongly connected to country of significance to the language group. Visits to traditional country have been an integral aspect of bilingual programs in the NT.

Bilingual education, by definition, necessitated team teaching between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, and the involvement of other community members, especially elders, in planning, learning and teaching activities (Yuendumu School Language Policy, 2007, pp.19-20).

The principle underpinning the use of bilingual programs over monolingual English programs is that children have the opportunity to learn about reading and writing in a language they speak and understand. Once they have an understanding of oral English, children can more easily transfer the knowledge they already have about reading and writing in their first language, to reading and writing in English. This ultimately aids, rather than hinders, English literacy development. Barbara Martin, a long term Aboriginal Teacher at Yuendumu explains:

They need to learn to read in their first language first so that the writing has meaning for them. Later on when they understand more English they can read in English as well (Barbara Martin, interview, August 2011).

The benefits of bilingual education over monolingual education for children whose home language is different to the dominant language are well documented (Black, 1993, Crawford 1997, McCarty and Bia 2002; UNESCO 2003). While it is not the intention of this paper to review the evidence in relation to bilingual education exhaustively, it is worth noting that international studies support the benefits of bilingual education not just in the development of literacy, but in academic achievement in other areas.

Highly respected linguists based at George Mason University near Washington D.C in the USA analysed the variety of education services provided for language minority students in US public schools (Thomas and Collier 2002, p.7). They found that bilingual programs were the most effective, and that bilingually schooled students outperformed comparable monolingually schooled students in academic achievement in all subjects, after 4-7 years of dual language schooling. They further argued that parents who refuse bilingual/ESL services for their children should be informed that their children's long-term academic achievement will probably be much lower as a result, and they should be strongly counselled against refusing bilingual/ESL services when their child is eligible.

In the NT, the available evidence supports the contention that students in bilingual programs generally attained better literacy and numeracy scores than their peers in non-bilingual schools. Indeed this is supported by NT Department of Education reports (Devlin, 2009, p.8). However, bilingual education was far from consistently supported by

either politicians or the NT bureaucracy throughout the period of its implementation. The resulting lack of consistency in implementation poses a difficulty in seeking to measure its outcomes.

There was a great deal of enthusiasm for the establishment of bilingual schools from many communities in the 1970s and 1980s. Bilingual Schools were initially resourced to produce rich and relevant first language resources through engagement with community members. Teacher Education programs were resourced such that Aboriginal student teachers could study within their communities and within the school environment. Non-Aboriginal teachers arriving in bilingual schools would be in-serviced such that they worked with Aboriginal Teacher Assistants in the classroom as co-teachers.

Due to their intrinsic role in teaching in the classroom, Aboriginal staff were highly valued and provided respected role models for children. However, staff involved in bilingual schools also describe a scenario in which there was continuous opposition from the NT government and the Education Department towards bilingual schools. Resources were gradually stripped away, and requests for adequate English as a Second Language teaching support were not met (ABC, Four Corners, 2009).

The NT Government first attempted to dismantle bilingual education in 1998. While this attempt was not successful, the number of bilingual schools, then renamed 'two way schools', decreased. The effectiveness of those that remained was largely dependant on the enthusiasm of the Principal for the program, such that programs waxed and waned and resources for programs were continually threatened (Simpson et al, 2009, pp11-12, 19-20). Given the lack of support for bilingual education, its potential benefits have never been fully realised. What is most remarkable is that bilingual education managed to continue over this period. This is evidence of the fact that long term Aboriginal staff were committed enough to continue to work despite all the setbacks.

In 2008, in response to the poor NAPLAN results of students in remote NT schools, the NT Government announced that the first four hours of instruction in NT schools would occur in English. This effectively spelt the end of bilingual education in NT Government Schools. The NT Government implicitly blamed bilingual education for the poor results, despite the fact that less than 20% of students of remote schools were enrolled in bilingual schools. Moreover, according to available evidence, students in bilingual schools were generally performing better than their peers (Devlin, 2009, p.13).

Those who criticise bilingual education often portray the attention given to Aboriginal languages in schools as being at the expense of English language development. In fact, a major aim of bilingual education was to improve English language outcomes. The poor English literacy and numeracy outcomes of remote Aboriginal schools in the NT are not in dispute. A commitment to address these outcomes is essential. However, this commitment should not be based on the erroneous belief that the solution lies in largely removing Aboriginal languages from schools. Indeed, if any valid conclusions were to be drawn from the available evidence, then the opposite course of action would be endorsed. Indeed, one of the six key principles expressed in the 2008 National Report into Aboriginal Languages in Schools was that "Learning an Aboriginal language and becoming proficient in the English language are complementary rather than mutually exclusive activities" (Purdie et al, 2008, p.190).



Additionally, providing space in the curriculum for Aboriginal languages has many benefits beyond improved English literacy outcomes. These will be explored in more detail below.

### **Indigenous Language and Culture Programs in schools**

Approximately 30 NT government schools in Central Australia currently offer Indigenous Language and Culture programs which are an optional component of the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF). This is set to continue because the Australian Languages Curriculum has been introduced as part of the national curriculum. Importantly, these programs vary greatly in their scope, focus, and delivery.

While there has been limited opportunity for systemic evaluation of these programs, Josie Douglas, an Indigenous Research Fellow at Charles Darwin University in Alice Springs, undertook a study of ILC programs at two Central Australian schools over the period 2007 to 2008.

ILC programs at both these schools had a strong focus on Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and connecting to ancestral country. Indigenous Ecological Knowledge is described as “[k]nowing about country and all the relationships and responsibilities that people have to country” (CLC website). These ‘country visits’, whereby staff, students and community members left the classroom to visit places of significance to their language groups, were central to the program. They enabled intergenerational transfer of knowledge in the students’ first language that was context and site specific (Douglas, 2011, pp.6-13). These activities were then followed up in the classroom and used as the basis for learning across many curriculum areas.

Douglas found that ILC programs improved community engagement and attendance and, most significantly, were of particular benefit to children from “not strong families” who are often disengaged from school.

Furthermore, Douglas found that the ILC programs were the main entry points for science education, and that natural and cultural resource management knowledge and activities were a focus. This was particularly significant given the minimal science education and resources available in remote schools. The ‘on-country’ activities were found to provide a stimulus for English and Maths learning in a context with which children were familiar and engaged.

These activities were also significant with respect to engendering knowledge and understanding for students who are expected take on responsibility in the future to look after their traditional lands and sacred sites in accordance with Aboriginal law.

As mentioned the scope, focus and delivery of the ILC programs varies across schools. This variation is due largely to the amount of support from the School Principal as well as the resources available to these programs which are ad hoc and diminishing. Douglas emphasises the vulnerability of ILC programs and the ambivalence with which these programs are viewed in policy domain (Douglas, pp.29-32).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the remaining NT DET Teacher-Linguist position based in Alice Springs to support schools in Central Australia was recently vacated. At this stage it appears NT DET do not intend to refill this position.

While the ILC programs remain subject to the inclination of individuals in the school system the outcomes in terms of language maintenance and language learning will be patchy. If no interest exists then programs do not happen at all. Explicit and sustained support backed by resources is required.

ILC programs should be compulsory in all NT schools, with the scope and content developed with the respective Aboriginal community. Options would include Aboriginal language literacy and/or oracy; and whether to have a bilingual program or a program where the Aboriginal language is taught, but not as the language of instruction across the curriculum.

### **Community capacity to support Aboriginal Languages**

Opponents to the integration of Aboriginal languages into the state sponsored education system often argue that it is the responsibility of families to maintain language. School occupies only limited hours of the day and week and like other ethnic groups in Australia Aboriginal children could attend dedicated Sunday-school type classes.

Such arguments overlook a number of factors, such as:

- the high level of disadvantage in Aboriginal communities and concomitant capacity and resource issues
- the broader positive educational outcomes available from Aboriginal language teaching in schools
- that Aboriginal languages are under significant pressure, only spoken by limited populations and have very few language resources
- the language of other ethnic groups are, largely, spoken by millions of people in their respective countries and have a relatively large corpus of language resources
- that Aboriginal languages are a unique part of Australia's heritage valued both nationally and internationally (as evident in tourism, film and music industry and major international events such as the 2000 Olympic games)

The Australian Government's statement on *Closing the Gap* highlights the unacceptable disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people, particularly in remote communities in the Northern Territory (Australian Government, 2009). As noted, the need to take action to maintain Aboriginal languages has been expressed repeatedly by many Aboriginal people living in these communities. The capacity of individuals and families to offset the systemic and overarching issues of language loss, however, are so limited that it is grossly unhelpful to suggest this should be the sole strategy to maintain Aboriginal languages.

For instance, Douglas also highlights the importance of ILC programs for children from 'not-strong families'.

Teenage parents are themselves often the children of young parents, who [in-turn] now find themselves to be grandparents. These young grandparents may not yet have moved into the mature roles and responsibilities normally performed by grandparents (Douglas, 2011, p.19).

Douglas points out the combined effect of welfare economies and demographic trends on intergenerational interaction in remote communities. Great-grandmothers are often

over-burdened with child care responsibilities. Additionally, a lack of resources, such as vehicles, licensed drivers and fuel, as well as endemic ill-health, limit people's access to country, which is one of the most pertinent contexts for Aboriginal language use.

Given these circumstances, many families in remote NT communities are unable to ensure intergenerational transmission of language and culture without structured external support.

### **3. Benefits of Aboriginal language teaching in schools**

In addition to improved English literacy outcomes, there are many other advantages of incorporating Aboriginal languages into schools.

#### **Effectiveness of schools in Aboriginal communities**

ILC programs assist schools to work more effectively. This is particularly so in the context of remote NT communities where most children come to school speaking only Aboriginal languages. Such programs provide children with the opportunity to work from the known to the unknown across a wide range of curriculum areas, assisting children to make meaning.

ILC programs foster the involvement of the wider community in school life and forge links between home and the school environment. This can result in increased recognition of the importance of the school within the community. Language and culture programs engender a team-teaching approach which places equal value on the respective knowledge base of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. As such Aboriginal staff are able to take on greater responsibility and demonstrate leadership within the school environment. This last point is worthy of further analysis.

The opportunities for employment in Aboriginal language teaching are massively under developed. A widely recognised issue is the high rate of turnover for non-Aboriginal teaching staff on remote NT communities. Turnover rates are unacceptably high and a 2009 review of the NT Dept of Education and Training (DET) found that:

It is clear that one of the continuing major challenges for DET is the recruitment and retention of staff. Although a full analysis of the extent of these challenges was limited due to a lack of confidence in data provided on this issue, local reports from schools, principals and regions universally identified this area of concern" (Ladwig and Sarra 2009, p.40).

A 2008 "Four Corners" report stated that the average stay of a non-Aboriginal teacher on a remote NT community was eight (8) months. Douglas, in her case study of two remote schools in Central Australia, notes that in the year 2007, there were three different Principals at one school, and six different Principals at the other (Douglas 2011, p.28).

The learning process is severely disrupted by major changes in routines and programs that take place as staff turnover in schools. One constant in these schools during such periods is the Aboriginal staff. However, the experience and knowledge of these staff are often not valued by the new non-Aboriginal staff when they arrive at a school.

Interviewees said that new principals and teachers who haven't been to remote communities before are often 'shocked' with the facilities. They treat the school like they are 'walking into a disaster zone or ground zero' (Douglas 2011, p.29).

This attitude leads to Principals beginning a change process and then leaving before it is completed. This is very wearying for Aboriginal staff who are often not consulted about changes and re-live this cycle over and over again.

These factors demonstrate the need for a more consistent approach to the incorporation of languages in schools, an approach that:

- transcends the changes in non-Aboriginal staffing
- utilises the knowledge and expertise of the long term Aboriginal staff
- supports the gaining of further qualifications by Aboriginal staff in schools

Such an approach would lead to improvements not only in English as a Second Language and Aboriginal language outcomes, but in education outcomes across the school curriculum.

### **Language, identity, self-esteem and *Closing the Gap***

The concept of language as identity can be a difficult one for monolingual English-speaking Australians to grasp. MK Turner, an Arrernte elder from Alice Springs explains:

Language grew up in the Land and became part of us. It holds people together... Language is the custodian and soul of the land. Language identifies who we are and what we are" (MK Turner, 2005).

In the Warlpiri context, the interconnectedness of land, language, ceremony, kinship and law and its importance for the healthy function of people and country is explored in Pawu-Kurlupurunu (2008). This interconnectedness is further supported by many studies that conclude that all these factors cannot be separated from Aboriginal health and well-being (Davies et al 2010, p.29). Self esteem and identity are major determining factors in relation to education, health and well being. Accordingly, maintaining language is integral to 'closing the gap'.

As expressed at a meeting of Aboriginal people in Nyirrpi in August 2011 in response to the Committee's inquiry:

To really close the gaps in education and employment, they should put Warlpiri language and culture first to make a strong Warlpiri community instead of breaking it down.

Further benefits of incorporating Aboriginal languages in schools include its benefits for identity and self esteem. Teacher Barbara Martin, explains:

Our language is identity. We are Warlpiri because we speak Warlpiri. To close the gap in health, life expectancy and education our people need strong identity and self esteem or else they won't care about themselves.

## Sustainable livelihoods

An advantage of incorporating Aboriginal languages into schools that is largely overlooked is its potential for contributing to sustainable livelihoods.

One activity that is increasing in prominence within Central Australia is Aboriginal Land Management. The links between language, land and well-being, as expressed by Turner above, come together in the area of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge.

A significant part of the CLC's recent work has been to help Aboriginal people maintain traditional knowledge by supporting Indigenous Ecological Knowledge programs. The CLC was appointed by the Natural Resource Management Board (Northern Territory) in November 2007 to host a program to support intergenerational transfer of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge across the CLC region over a three year period.

The final project report for the program discussed the Indigenous Ecological Knowledge embedded in language and songs. Notably, several of the projects were in partnership with schools who integrated intergenerational country visits into the schools' language and science programs.

The report emphasises the critical importance of language to the Indigenous Ecological Knowledge activities undertaken. It notes that:

While a language might be in daily use, the degree of language attrition in less commonly utilised domains of language such (as) in songs and specialized language relating to ecological knowledge is high. ... Younger generations have also indicated that they are exposed to language particular to ecological knowledge only when they are on country with senior knowledge holders and language speakers" (Natural Resource Management Board (NT) 2011, p.54).

This reference to knowledge of country being embedded in specialised language goes some way to shedding light on the fears expressed by local Alice Springs elders when discussing language loss:

[L]ike if we all lost language we won't know our country.... If we lose our language we can't describe the landscape, the plants, the animals properly.... We can't see clearly when we try to do that in another language" (L Wilson, interview, August 2011).

And further:

People who don't know language won't know much about the land. ... In English there are not the words to describe" (MK Turner, interview, August 2011).

The CLC works with traditional landowners to enable them to manage their land using a combination of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Western science. Well established Ranger programs are integral in this regard. They also provide employment through the *Working on Country* program.

There are seven established CLC Ranger groups operating in Central Australia. Other Ranger groups are in the development phase and demand for Ranger groups in other

communities is strong. Rangers work with elders and traditional owners in a way that ensures core environment and cultural values are protected and managed.

In a speech to the Sydney Institute on August 9, 2011, the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Jenny Macklin, referred to the 'Working on Country' program and the opportunities that will come from carbon pricing. She referred to "the carbon farming initiative that many Aboriginal people in remote parts of the country... see as a real chance for them to look after their country and also earn money as a result of carbon trading" (ABC Radio, 10 August 2011).

The potential for Indigenous Ecological Knowledge to generate sustainable economic development is finally becoming more widely recognised. The opportunities that exist today were barely conceptualised ten years ago, and are continuing to evolve. Indigenous Ecological Knowledge is embedded in Aboriginal languages.

The loss of these languages represents a real threat to sustaining Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. Accordingly, full potential of the economic and social benefit that is derived through projects such as the Working on Country Program is diminished in the present policy context that allows Aboriginal languages to languish outside the formal education system.

#### **4. Adult Education**

While language in schools is the main focus of this submission, it should be noted that many informed people and organisations consulted by the CLC have expressed the view that current approaches to accredited training across all discipline areas on most remote communities in Central Australia are not meeting the needs of a large number of adults.

Notably, there is a view that students rarely progress beyond Certificate 2 level in any field due to issues with English literacy. It was also noted that the structure of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector whereby Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) work in competition and require a certain number of students to deliver courses on site, leads to the situation where typically individuals may complete several courses at the Certificate 2 level which are largely unrelated. Accordingly, they do not lead to employment, nor do they contribute to a rounded education.

One NGO reported that they have not seen many benefits in the accredited courses offered by RTOs and are looking for ways to fund on-site trainer(s) to enable a more holistic and coordinated approach to adult education. Such an approach would engage adults in activities that build English literacy and numeracy skills through their interests and in response to community needs and events. This would enable intergenerational teaching and learning including visits to country, and respond to the community's preference for a 'two-way' approach. As the students develop particular interests in certain areas beyond the skills of the on-site trainer a coordinated approach to further training could be implemented. A model of this nature is currently being implemented at Nyirrpi Community.

Through the WETT program, the CLC is currently working in partnership with Batchelor Institute of Aboriginal Tertiary Education (BIITE) to operate a Community Learning Centre at Nyirrpi Community. The Centre opened one year ago and aims to link people with services, information, and resources that meet the community's training and

employment needs within a life-long learning approach. The Learning Centre is also a space where the community can teach, celebrate and store Warlpiri language and culture. While an evaluation of its first year of operation is yet to be completed, interim reports show that it is being well-utilized with over 40 people participating in the Centre's activities (CLC Supporting Aboriginal Development, pp.4-5).

Ensuring English language competency in Aboriginal communities therefore requires a more holistic approach that gives on-going access to education beyond the school years. The model that exists at Nyirripi for adult education provides a good example for what works in the remote Aboriginal context, whereby Community Learning Centres teach English literacy and numeracy programs that are supported by tertiary education institutions.

### **Aboriginal Teacher Education**

A common theme in the literature and with those consulted by the CLC is that "[m]any Aboriginal teachers in remote schools are 'worn out' and the number of younger teachers coming in to replace them appears to be insufficient at present" (Purdie et al, 2008, p.72). Changes in Departmental policy and constant changes in non-Aboriginal staff mean that Aboriginal staff often find themselves having to "re-invent the wheel" over and over again. Some particularly strong people have shown an enduring commitment through lobbying the NT Government (unsuccessfully) over many years for greater support to teach Aboriginal languages in schools. There exists significant frustration arising from trying to maintain the teaching of Aboriginal languages and culture in schools in the face of the Department policies.

Many of today's Aboriginal teachers were trained in the early years of bilingual education, when there was a strong commitment to team teaching and to the training of Aboriginal teachers within schools. Batchelor College (Now BIITE) was funded to implement a Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program in which a Batchelor Tutor or Lecturer was based on site in the community, and often within the school itself. Much of the teaching/learning undertaken in the Teacher Education course was contextualised within the school and Teacher Education students were rarely required to leave the community to attend classes.

Yuendumu teacher, Barbara Martin, who was trained through the RATE program explained:

[N]ow young people are not coming though. They used to have a tutor based in the community at Yuendumu...five other older women and one man at Yuendumu came through a similar system...and got trained. This enabled them to keep strong connections with country, language and people through a two-way system. They became real teachers in the classroom through the bilingual program. But now ... the program is not strongly supported.

Another RATE - trained Yuendumu teacher, Nancy Oldfield emphasised that:

They need to help the next generation to come through so the older ones can retire (Warlpiri Triangle Education Workshop Report 2008, p.16).

There are many reasons for the decline in the number of trained Aboriginal teachers in schools. Among these has been the result of a lack of consistent commitment from the NT Education Department to the language and cultural knowledge brought to schools by

Aboriginal staff, and a corresponding lack of support for Aboriginal Teacher Training. The funding for RATE programs was gradually reduced, and the number of community based Batchelor staff was reduced accordingly.

BIITE itself moved its focus towards becoming a University for a period of time, and its efforts shifted away from helping students in remote areas to increase their literacy and numeracy towards recruiting Aboriginal students with tertiary-level entry standards of literacy and numeracy, which attracted students from interstate rather than the NT (Simpson et al, 2009, p.17). At the same time, there has been a raising of entry requirements to Teacher Education courses, which means that it may be many years before community members from remote schools are able to qualify as teachers.

However, in the interim there is an opportunity to implement greater professional development of Aboriginal staff in schools and to foster a culture of team teaching within schools. This will ensure that non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal staff learn from each other, and that Aboriginal staff are valued.

Given the high turnover of non-Aboriginal staff in schools, the knowledge and experience of long-term Aboriginal staff has to be valued and developed if there is to be an improvement in the outcomes of remote community schools. A policy change is needed that places greater weight on what Aboriginal teachers envisage for their school and curriculum. From CLC's consultations we found that all Aboriginal teachers want Aboriginal languages to be taught in schools.

## **5. Aboriginal language interpreting and translating services**

The importance of improving communication between Aboriginal people and government has been highlighted in many government reports including the *Stronger Futures* Discussion paper recently released by the Federal Government (*Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory*, p.24). In Central Australia, where many Aboriginal people do not speak Standard Australian English, and most Government workers do not speak an Aboriginal language, good communication often necessitates the use of interpreters.

The importance of using interpreters, however, is not realised in the industry sector. This is evident from Major General David Chalmers comments following the Commonwealth's intervention through the NT Emergency Response (Smiles 2008). Currently many private and public sectors work with Aboriginal people without the use of interpreters. This needs to change for communication to improve.

Formal interpreting services are available in Central Australia through the Aboriginal Interpreting Service (AIS) and courses in interpreting are available through BIITE. The AIS, however, is not always able to meet demand for its services, and the quality of services it can provide varies according to interpreters' skill levels.

In Australia, the national standard for interpreters is National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) accreditation. There are few NAATI accredited interpreters for Aboriginal languages in Central Australia. While the AIS and BIITE put resources into the training and induction process for interpreters, the number of interpreters available who have strong grounding in both English and their first language is limited.



There have been issues with the sessional nature of employment of interpreters. This does not allow for adequate professional development or opportunities for interpreters to work together on complex language concepts. The AIS is moving towards part time and full time positions to start to address this issue.

However, vocational opportunities related to Aboriginal languages are set to grow because of:

- the increasing interest in Indigenous Ecological Knowledge
- Ranger programs gaining momentum and increasing
- expanding research carried out in the region by bodies such as the CSIRO and the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre

There is already a growing demand for development of skilled Aboriginal language interpreters and this demand is not currently being met. It is important for the Committee to understand that the window of opportunity for developing these skills is closing. An immediate response is needed and one proactive initiative would be the re-establishment of a Language Centre in Alice Springs to serve the needs of the region.<sup>5</sup>

There is a need to establish a language centre (which could be part of an existing educational or research institution) to assist in Aboriginal language learning. The centre would train and employ Aboriginal language teachers, translators and researchers; and promote the use of Aboriginal interpreters and knowledge of Aboriginal languages across private and public sectors in the Central Australian region. This would further support the vocational opportunities emerging through the study of Aboriginal languages.

Such a centre could train and employ Aboriginal language teachers, translators, language researchers and promote the use of Aboriginal interpreters and knowledge of Aboriginal languages across the Central Australian region.

## 6. Conclusion

In April 2009, Australia endorsed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* that was passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007. Article 14 states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

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<sup>5</sup> Previously, a language centre was operated in Alice Springs within the Institute of Aboriginal Development. However, this closed due to organisational and governance issues

Some have strongly expressed the view that their rights are not being respected by current NT Government policy:

We have the right to teach our children in their own language. It says so in the United Nations Declaration... We feel that this right has been taken away from us through the Northern Territory Government's 'four hours English policy' and the total removal of the bilingual (two-way) learning program (Yuendumu meeting, August 2011).

The CLC has provided this submission to give the Committee insight into the aspirations of Aboriginal people in Central Australia and to emphasise the importance of language to Aboriginal people. We make a strong call to have ILC programs compulsory in schools and for these to receive specific funding for Aboriginal language teachers and resource development, and for bilingual education to be available where the Aboriginal community requests bilingual education. A professionally supported Aboriginal language centre is desperately needed in Alice Springs.

This is a timely inquiry given that the window to act positively is rapidly closing as the fluent and culturally knowledgeable language speakers get older and older. Aboriginal languages are a unique part of Australia's heritage valued both nationally and internationally, as evident in tourism, film and music industry; as well as major international events such as the 2000 Olympic games. There is a pressing need for the Commonwealth to take immediate action to secure Aboriginal languages in Central Australia.

There is a strong sense that Aboriginal language is being weakened through the NT Government's policy on language in schools. It is difficult to understand how an argument against the inclusion of Aboriginal language in schools can possibly be sustained given:

- the importance of Aboriginal languages in schools for language learning in English as a Second Language and students' first languages
- its capacity for engaging students in areas of learning across the curriculum
- its importance in engaging the community in the operation of schools
- its importance for identity and self-esteem
- its value in sustaining livelihoods
- the additional vocational opportunities that arise as an Aboriginal language speaker
- the fact that own language education is a right of Aboriginal peoples
- the overwhelming desire of the vast majority of community members is a 'two way' approach to education in schools
- the utility of Aboriginal language as a primary entry point for science education
- the growing shared value placed in natural and cultural resource management

Furthermore it is clear that that the maintenance of Aboriginal languages in Central Australia is integral to the well being of Aboriginal people in the region.

As such the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages and Standard Australian English should be supported through the education system, including Adult education.

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