

To: Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Submission to the inquiry into LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES
being conducted by the standing committee on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander affairs

Foreword

I am pleased to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, which is currently inquiring into language learning in Indigenous communities.

I am a fully qualified teacher who held the position of Outstation Teacher in a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory over the period of 2007 to 2011. During this period, students of ages varying between four and eighteen attended the outstation school. Throughout this time, students were taught using a combination of languages including two local Indigenous languages and English.

I wish to provide what I see to be as the benefits of maintaining and revitalising programs for Indigenous languages. I am basing my submission on the experience and understanding gained whilst living and working in a remote Indigenous community and the success which we experienced while teaching Indigenous languages.

The following submission responds to five of the eight terms of reference, namely:

- *The benefits of giving attention and recognition to indigenous languages*
- *The contribution of languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture*
- *The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early childhood education and measure to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where is a second language*
- *The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education and measures to improve English competency and education outcomes in Indigenous communities*
- *The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages*

I thank you for considering my submission. If required I am contactable via email

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Brea Speechley

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The Benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

There are many significant benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages. When attention and recognition are given to Indigenous languages in an educational setting, speakers of the language are acknowledged and given identity. This is evident through personal growth and confidence in individual abilities.

When speakers of indigenous language are empowered with the task of providing education in their first language this has a significantly positive affect not only on the educator but certainly the students.

When students are provided with the opportunity to be educated in their first language they are better equipped to form a solid foundation for learning another language, such as English. This is made possible due to students acquiring a greater level of competency in their first language, from which they subsequently will base the learning of a second or other language. Students require a solid foundation of their first language in order to successfully achieve competency in another language. For without a foundation of understanding in their first language, there is no concept for comparison.

On a personal level, I have witnessed children as young as four years learning not only one, but two indigenous language simultaneously. Providing these younger children with the opportunity to learn their first language, undoubtedly promoted confidence in each child, in addition to the ability to build a strong foundation for learning English.

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

We observed the concentration and retention rates of early childhood students increase dramatically where Indigenous languages were taught alongside English. We believed that this was due to the first hours of the school day being delivered in the students' first language. Students were no longer tiring before lunch and were able to complete a full school day.

Through the implementation of a cultural program which was delivered by local Indigenous elders in the students first language, we were able to observe an increase in the students academic abilities across all three

languages which were taught, in addition to the benefits gained from strengthening local Indigenous identity and culture.

Students were instructed in two Indigenous languages by a local Indigenous elder. This not only provided a foundation for a deeper relationship with elders and other family members, but also the additional benefit of students acquiring a broader understanding of their Indigenous identity and culture. This then transpired into a trend of students sharing this knowledge amongst family members; a clear example of Indigenous identity and culture being passed down to younger generations as well as within generations.

It is my opinion that in removing Indigenous languages from educational settings and denying Indigenous children the opportunity to become literate in their first language, we in fact, are not Closing The Gap, but rather creating a wider and deeper gap, that within this generation will not be possible to close. To ensure that the gap is closed, we need to be serious about empowering Indigenous people and providing them with every opportunity for success. This I believe is made possible by formally ensuring that Indigenous languages are taught and kept alive in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education and measures to improve English competency and education outcomes in Indigenous communities

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early childhood education include the advantages that come with indigenous people becoming empowered through the continued use of their own language. Through early childhood literacy education, students benefit from learning in their first language and then transferring this understanding and knowledge to another language. The confidence that grows in each child as they acquire basic language skills is paramount to their ongoing education.

Over a twelve-month period we observed a class of students who were exposed to two Indigenous languages in addition to English. Throughout this period, all of the students achieved a higher standard of achievement and understanding of English, as their skills in their own language development increased. Prior to the inclusion of the indigenous languages, the students were progressing at a much slower rate. We concluded that the increases in their skill acquisition was due to an increase in their understanding of basic

language features and structure which was then able to be converted to the skills required for beginning to learn the English language.

In order to improve English competency and education outcomes amongst indigenous students, it became obvious that students required exposure of their first language from the earliest age possible.

An additional noted benefit was the depth of the positive relationship that was built between the students and their teachers. Consequently, as the students achieved success in their learning, the staff involved also attained the necessary skills to further assist the students in their educational journey through the joint accomplishment of learning another language. This therefore, was also believed to be a factor in the positive progression of students meeting educational outcomes.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

I believe that for there to be a revitalisation of Indigenous languages in communities and educational facilities, there needs to be greater emphasis placed on the importance of Indigenous languages.

Positive promotion and a greater understanding of the benefits of teaching Indigenous languages is essential not only for the growth of Indigenous communities, but also the success of education amongst Indigenous people.

Effective maintenance of teaching Indigenous languages requires greater funding across Indigenous communities to insure that linguistic professionals are sourced, Indigenous language speakers are given the opportunity to teach and support the growth of their language and above all else, that children, are given every opportunity to become literate in their first language.