

**To the Honourable Members - House of  
Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Wednesday, 1 November 2000

FATSIL is the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. FATSIL was incorporated in 1993 with the aim to set national priorities for Indigenous Australian languages. FATSIL has set its goal to progress the development of and to assist in the maintenance of indigenous languages.

Language is at the very core of cultural identity. It links people to their land, it protects their history through story and song, it holds the key to kinship systems and to the intricacies of tribal law.

Language and culture stand together as the pillars supporting the intrinsic sense of identity and membership of any race of people.

In 1992 another House of Representatives Standing Committee compiled the report, *A Matter of Survival*. The recommendations from that report have played an important role in promoting and maintaining our languages. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the progress that has been made to this point and to make recommendations to this committee on the best directions to take in the future.

Our aim is to have indigenous languages recognised as a core issue to be considered in the development of all policy and legislation relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

Language relates to each of the 6 items in the terms of reference for this inquiry in the following ways.

1. In places where indigenous language services are available they have been found to be vital to the effective delivery of educational, health and social services for urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and strengthening of cultural identification within communities.

2. Because of the relationship and importance of languages to all aspects of indigenous culture, the development of language maintenance and revival programs impacts on people in a broad range of service delivery and community organisations.

Language programs also involve the establishment of effective partnerships with Local, State and Commonwealth Governments as well as their departments.

3. Language education and promotion is proving vital to the establishment of positive identity for indigenous youth. This in turn relates to education and employment and impacts on a range of social problems.

4. The maintenance of our languages needs to be encouraged through a concerted effort of promotion to the broad community, through increased support for

established programs and a dramatic increase in the recognition given to its role by Government policy makers.

5. Lack of self confidence is a key element in academic under achievement, inevitably contributing to reduced employment opportunities, and by further extension to the broader social problems which afflict many indigenous people today.

6. The provision of language interpreter services is an area of particular relevance to people moving to urban areas from more remote regions and needing assistance to seek housing.

### **Educated outcomes.**

How do students learn and reconstruct for themselves a sense of belonging and identity? Language in this context is a critical tool to establish and locate individual, community and collective identities. This identity cannot be imposed by educational authorities. It has to be controlled and owned by the community themselves.

Schools can play an important role in the development and reinforcing of positive models of contemporary indigenous identity. This can be achieved through the development and promotion of indigenous language and cultural programs and the delivery of real learning outcomes. The development of total immersion and bilingual/bidialectal education experiences also need to be explored. These programs have been shown to have great benefits in improved retention and progression of students. Standard Australian English is a foreign language to many indigenous Australians including urban dwellers who speak Aboriginal English. International research and experiments here reveal that persons who learn literacy in their own language more easily acquire literacy in another language (in this case - standard Australian English).

Our aim is to see students develop positive concepts of self identity and appreciation of the placement of indigenous people in contemporary society. It is that strength that can be used to encourage their own involvement and desire for achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy within the broader education system.

### **Identity.**

As the basis for the development of self-identity, language provides a continuing bond, built up over time between people, their families and their culture.

Practical support and encouragement from all levels of Government in supporting language use and development will be a major step in helping to alleviate those problems stemming from lack of self identity and self confidence.

**We ask this committee to consider the following recommendations.**

### **Recommendations**

1. That the Commonwealth Government work with all State and Territory ministers of education through the MCEETYA framework, to develop national guidelines for the delivery of Aboriginal Language programs in educational institutions schools. These should include:

- The funding for the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language syllabuses consistent with the Australian Indigenous Languages Framework
  - Guidelines for the development of evaluation and assessment frameworks that are appropriate and suitable for all indigenous communities throughout Australia
  - That inquiry be undertaken to assess the best models for the delivery of nationally accredited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and Teacher Education courses. These courses should allow for the articulation of students through all levels of higher education.
- 2 That the Commonwealth Government, through DETYA, work with the Aboriginal Community Pre school sector, in the development of early childhood language programs. These programs, which should be seen to articulate into school based language programs, must be part of an integrated approach to the teaching of Languages to Aboriginal students.
  - 3 That the Commonwealth Government undertake a review of all laws which impact on the copyright and community ownership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and resource material. This review should work towards legislative changes that will ensure the delivery of legal security for communities in relationship to their control and ownership of languages.
  4. That the Commonwealth Government explore the most effective means to assist in the delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal communities. This must include:
    - The provision of bilingual health, welfare, education and para legal workers.
    - The development of cross cultural awareness programs to all staff who deliver such programs to Aboriginal communities.
    - Support for the training and testing of Indigenous people, provide interpreting and translating services in all languages including Aboriginal English.

