

Indigenous Languages in Australian Schools

Dr Nola Purdie

As the nation focuses on the plight of Australia's Indigenous people, it is timely to be reminded of the impact of colonisation on Indigenous languages.

In 2005, the authors of the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report* concluded that the situation of Australia's languages is very grave and requires urgent action. Of 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, it was found that less than 20 could be considered as strong. Three or four languages were showing signs of moving into endangerment because they were spoken only by small groups of people, most of whom were more than 40 years of age. There are many languages that are not fully spoken by anybody, although words and phrases are used.

Currently, many Indigenous communities are working hard to maintain or revive their languages. Within schools, also, there is increasing activity related to the teaching of Indigenous languages.

The *National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-08* was developed by a working party of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and was endorsed by all Ministers of education in March 2005. The value of *all* languages is affirmed, including Australia's Indigenous languages.

Such recognition must be heartening for many Indigenous people. Their languages have a unique place in Australia's heritage and in its cultural and educational life. For Indigenous learners, they are fundamental to strengthening identity and self-esteem. For non-Indigenous learners, they provide a focus for the development of cultural understanding and reconciliation.

Ten national projects are being funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, through the School Languages Programme. One of these projects is directed towards strengthening the quality and sustainability of Indigenous language programmes in schools. The purpose of the project is to provide a snapshot of the current national situation in Indigenous languages education in Australian schools. The project is the first phase of support for Indigenous language programmes in schools and the outcomes will inform further action undertaken at a national level. The project is being undertaken by a team of researchers led by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

So, what is the current state of Indigenous languages in Australian schools?

Over 16,000 Indigenous students and 13,000 non-Indigenous students located in 260 Australian schools are involved in an Indigenous language programme. Most of these students are located in government schools in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, New South Wales, and South Australia. Each of these states receives strong systemic support for their programmes in terms of one or more of: the provision of curriculum documentation and resources; initial teacher preparation; and ongoing teacher professional development and support.

More than 80 different Indigenous languages are taught.

About 28% of the programmes are first language maintenance programmes, and include bilingual programmes undertaken by students in the early years of schooling.

About 12% of programmes are second language learning programmes, whereby a language is taught to learners in the Languages area of the school curriculum. In this type of programme, students have little or no assumed knowledge of the target language.

About 50% of programmes are language revival programmes. Such programmes include language revitalisation (about 28%), whereby the language is still spoken by a small group of older speakers within the community; language renewal (about 4%), whereby the language is no longer spoken in its full form but there is sufficient linguistic heritage within the community to develop a language programme; and language reclamation (about 18%), whereby there has been a break in the transmission of the spoken language but there is sufficient evidence from archival material for language reconstruction and learning.

The remainder of the programmes (about 10%) are language awareness programmes, whereby the little bits and pieces that are known about a language are incorporated into another area of learning. The focus is on teaching *about* Indigenous languages and on exploring socio-historical issues.

Most teachers of Indigenous languages in schools believe that, in addition to building Indigenous students' cultural identity and self esteem, the positive experience of learning about their traditional language and culture flows through into students' overall learning. Having Indigenous language programmes in schools goes a small step towards raising the profile of, and maintaining, Australia's Indigenous languages. The benefits may also flow through to non-Indigenous students as they learn to value the languages and cultures of Australia's first people, thereby aiding the process of healing and reconciliation.

On the world scene, schools have played an important role in saving a number of endangered languages – the Maori, Irish, Welsh, Hawaiians, Navajos, and Mohawks, for instance, have been able to establish immersion schools where the language of instruction is the heritage language. The situation in Australia is more difficult, however. The task of creating and teaching an entire curriculum in a minority language takes a great many people and resources. The establishment of similar immersion programs in Australia is probably out of the question because there are so many languages, most of which are no longer 'strong'. Nevertheless, many schools have worked closely with community members and have received strong systemic support to enable them to develop strong programmes and demonstrate positive student outcomes.

The development of successful programmes in schools begins with careful negotiation with Indigenous people. It is essential to recognise protocols related to language ownership, maintenance, and revival. The recruiting and training of Indigenous teachers and the provision of ongoing support to them, the development of appropriate curriculum materials, the use of new technologies, and the funding and resourcing of school programmes are all matters to be tackled with energy and sensitivity. Encouragingly, the evidence appears to be pointing in the direction of a swell of interest and activity across the country as teams of Indigenous community members, linguists, school principals and teachers work together to build strong programmes in schools.

A final report on the project is due mid 2008.

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Yindjibarndi language teacher Allery Sandy works with students at Roebourne Primary School



Yawuru speaker Doris Edgar (left) works with the two 'apprentice' Yawuru teachers and a language consultant from the Broome District Education Office