



# THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND CULTURES:

## A Mid-Study Impression Paper

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## INTRODUCTION

On the 27th of May, 2011 the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Victor Dominello MP announced in a press release that “the NSW Government will investigate how to create further Aboriginal cultural and linguistic opportunities as a key way of closing the gap”.<sup>1</sup> The Minister further stated that “this investigation will include thorough analysis of existing best practice and various trends in promoting indigenous language and culture”.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of this public announcement the NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs of the NSW Department of Education and Communities undertook the commissioning of a literature based research study with the aim of exploring the linkages between Aboriginal languages and cultures, Aboriginal community well-being and Aboriginal engagement with the education system.

Accordingly, on the 15th of August, 2011 I commenced work on this commissioned project, which apropos of the project’s formal briefing document carries the working identifier ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’,<sup>3</sup> though I have subsequently assigned the more descriptive title – ‘The importance of teaching and learning Aboriginal languages and cultures’. Before I move on to discuss the framework of this project with you, at the outset I would like to make it clear that the content and context of the final report that this project will culminate in, and indeed this mid-study impression paper, represents wholly my own analysis, interpretation, perspective and conclusions as the resident Indigenous investigator undertaking this study. These documents should not be read as a formal representation of the position of the NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs or the NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

I would like my mid-study impression paper, and my final report, to be read and reviewed as contributions to the cultural knowledge bank of Indigenous academia. In this regard Indigenous academia can be conceptualised as a scholarly avenue for the generation of Indigenous knowledge that specifically seeks to:-

- speak back against the absolutism of Westcentric knowledge,
- speak forward, voicing the intellectual legitimacy of Indigenous ontology’s and epistemology’s.<sup>4</sup>

Within Indigenous academia we actually have a very strong obligatory protocol which requires us to introduce ourselves culturally, especially to our Indigenous readers, so that our familial, community and cultural nation identities are known up front. I am deeply committed to respecting this protocol, so I offer the following background about myself.

In terms of my cultural identity I am a member of the La Perouse Aboriginal community of Sydney, NSW. My family have lived within this community for many generations, indeed my maternal Grandmother, Emma-Jane Foot, was born on the beach at Lapa in 1884. Through my mother, Iris ‘Boronia’ Williams, I am Dharawal by way of my grandmother and Dhungutti by way of my Grandfather, Athol Callaghan. Through my father, Thomas ‘Tom’ Henry Williams, OBE, I am again Dharawal by way of my Grandmother Dolly Anderson, and Gomilaroi by way of my Grandfather, Thomas Henry Williams. I also feel a strong cultural

1 V Dominello, ‘Minister announces investigation into Aboriginal cultural and linguistic opportunities’, media release, Parliament House, NSW, 27 May 2011.  
2 *ibid.*  
3 NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs, ‘Aboriginal languages project brief’, NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney, NSW, 2011.  
4 B Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, Sage, Los Angeles, 2012, & LT Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London, 1999.

affiliation with the Ngurelban/Bangerang peoples of Victoria because of my Great Grandfather Hughie Anderson. As a strong community person I feel deeply and spiritually invested within the cultural identity of this study.

As for my identity as an Indigenous academic, my key areas of specialisation are Indigenous education, Indigenous research and Indigenous studies. In 2007 I graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy with Deakin University on the basis of my thesis entitled 'Indigenous values informing curriculum and pedagogical praxis'.<sup>5</sup> My thesis offers an Indigenous lensed analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics of mainstream education and the cultural position of Indigenous education therein. On the basis of my thesis I am known as an advocate of independent Indigenous education. I would, however, like to assure you that this position does not preclude me from offering support to any effort made within mainstream education to advance our languages and cultures. It is my personal view that any strategy that seeks to genuinely advance our ways of knowing, doing and being is welcome and deserving of encouragement and constructive assistance.

The 'Aboriginal languages project' as delineated in the briefing document I am working to centres on a set objective to "provide an understanding of the connection between teaching Aboriginal languages and culture and benefits to community wellbeing and engagement with the education system".<sup>6</sup> The brief thus requires that the researcher "...compile existing evidence, synthesise and interpret that evidence for the NSW context, and make recommendations with regard to this objective".<sup>7</sup> In particular, the terms of reference for this project call for the undertaking of a:

... desk-top survey of existing and up-coming information locally, nationally and internationally on linkages between Indigenous language use and learning of culture, and benefits for the individual and community wellbeing, participation in cultural activities, engagement in learning and other activities and opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst my approach thus far has been to adhere as closely as possible to the inferred idea behind a desk-top survey, which carries within it the suggestion of a limitation to web accessible literature only, I have found that it is important to extend beyond this in-order to include significant non-web based academic monograph and periodical literature, and also Indigenous anecdotal commentary. Whilst abstract level reference to these items can certainly be found via web-based databases and catalogues, the items themselves must either be individually purchased as e-books or e-articles, when available in this format, or personally accessed via library collections. Because of the integrity of this material I have made a point of moving beyond the immediate confines of my internet connection so as to create for myself a far wider and infinitely more comprehensive 'candidate' list of potential resources.

My method for locating potentially relevant material has been to begin by conducting a first round or initial literature search via appropriate web browsers, databases and catalogues, using general keywords such as Indigenous, Aboriginal, language, culture, education, health and so on. These keywords have been run in a variety of combinations in order to make an intentionally broad sweep of literature. The idea behind this was to enable me to gain a renewed sense of the sheer volume of material that has been released on our languages and cultures, which I can certainly confirm, is substantial. I also wanted to gauge what percentage of this wider body of material held promise in terms of the specific delimiters of my study. I am pleased to report that this strategy was both informative and fruitful in giving me a solid impression of what is, and what is not, out there.

Once I'd collated together an ample body of literature, selected on the basis of a first glance read-through, I then moved on with the process of deeper reading, weeding and sorting. My approach with this has been to measure the informational value of each source against a hypothesis and a series of key guiding questions that I'd crafted for myself as an evaluative tool. I will be reporting in detail about the functional amenity of this hypothesis and attendant questions in my final report. This then more-or-less brings me to where I am now within my study. As I begin the work of framing the story behind the literature, I am simultaneously conducting second round, targeted literature searches, with an eye to catching any material that might have been overlooked in the first round, and to ensure accuracy when identifying gaps in existent literature.

Finally, in introducing this paper, I would like to clarify that as a mid-study paper this document provides an impression only of the probable final scope and direction of the report that I will be producing. Similarly this document provides an impression only of the depth and breadth of the literature that I will ultimately consult and utilise in order to present a thorough understanding of the triangularity between the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures, Indigenous cultural health and wellbeing, and Indigenous educational engagement and participation. In this regard, this impression paper should not be read as definitive; it is merely offered in the spirit of public transparency. The analysis deriving out of this paper is interim only; it will without doubt be more thoroughly substantiated by the end of the study, or even altered somewhat depending on the ultimate sway of the literature.

5 ST Williams, 'Indigenous values informing curriculum and pedagogical praxis', PhD thesis, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, 2007, <http://www.deakin.edu.au/dro/eserv/DU:30023289/williams-indigenousvalues-2007.pdf>

6 NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs, op.cit., p.1.

7 ibid.

8 ibid., p.2.

## Author's approach to writing

In reading my paper you will notice two principal characteristics in my style of writing. Firstly, you will notice that I write as though I were talking directly to you, the reader. Secondly you will notice that I frequently utilise collective pronouns such as our, us or we. In the case of my predilection for writing as though I were talking, this is a deliberate action on my behalf because I feel that this style sits more accurately within the cultural framework of Indigenous literacy, which values the power of storying as one of several cultural knowledge repository modes. It is my way of invoking the spiritual energy of our ways of yarning for storying. As to my use of collective pronouns, I imagine that you have picked up already that it is my way of expressing my cultural synergy with the 'topic' at hand. 'I am', 'we are', the 'topic', so I make no separation between myself as author and myself as 'subject'. In analysing and interpreting I always look into and draw from the spiritual core of my own cultural being.

## Key terminologies

For many years now I have favoured use of the term 'Indigenous', even though clearly I am an Aboriginal person of NSW. The word 'Indigenous' itself is essentially a generic collective identifier or descriptor that names and coalesces as a single entity the vast conglomerate of culturally distinct First Peoples from within the various nations of the world. Whilst the United Nations, who is a key organisation in terms of Indigenous rights advocacy, has not formally adopted a specific definition of what it is to be Indigenous<sup>9</sup> they do point to an often quoted definition provided by Jose R. Martinez Cobo which reads:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.<sup>10</sup>

This is actually a fairly well rounded definition because it sweeps within it the essence of the core factors that we primarily cite when identifying ourselves as Indigenous. These are:-

- our ongoing connectedness to our lands because of our ancestral relatedness that makes us First Nations peoples of these lands,
- our shared experience of invasion, colonisation and historical subjugation,
- our status as cultural minorities within broader contemporary nation states.

Although all three factors may not uniformly apply to all cultural nations who identify as Indigenous they do sit well with the majority both internationally and nationally, and they certainly provide me personally with a spiritual bond and sense of brotherhood that underpins why I prefer the term Indigenous. It is my way of asserting recognition of our socio-cultural unity as spirit peoples and our socio-political unity as subjugated peoples.

In this mid-study impression paper, and in my upcoming final report, I will be using the term Indigenous as a collective representation of our peoples and cultures at the international and national levels. I am extremely conscious that many of our peoples within Australia prefer the expression 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' but as this is a study that scopes international, national and local (NSW) First Nations knowledge and experience I have chosen to stick with the term Indigenous, but I do use the collective descriptor 'Aboriginal' when referring to us, the First Nations peoples of NSW. It must be remembered that both 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are actually culturally nonspecific descriptors that originated because of colonisation, though I believe strongly that we have de-colonised these terms well beyond the original notion of 'native' or 'primitive' by re-framing them as spiritually unifying and culturally affirming identities.

The other key terminology that you will find I use over and over again is 'country'. Country is a term that we Indigenous peoples, particularly here in Australia, use as a single word expression to denote our spiritual inter-being with the land, the sea, the sky, and all life and geologic forms therein. Country, in the cultural context of our language meanings, infers far more than the physical land or environment, it carries a profound psychological context. When we use the word country we are without doubt referring to our lands, but we are also simultaneously acknowledging the presence of our spirit Elders who gave us these lands and who now dwell within them. We are referring then to our own psycho-spiritual mind. The idea of country is enmeshed with the idea of culture, identity and land, and they are extrapolated together so powerfully that one is inseparable from the other.

9 United Nations Dept of Economics & Social Affairs, *State of the world's Indigenous peoples*, United Nations, New York, 2009, pp. 4-7. [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP\\_web.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP_web.pdf)

10 JR Martinez Cobo as cited in United Nations Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, *ibid.*, p.4.

## Contents structure

With any study that attempts to investigate issues pertinent to our languages and cultures it is best in my view to begin by backgrounding our story with a cultural introduction into:-

- who we are,
- how we conceptualise language and culture,
- what our cultural and linguistic survival status is, given the extraordinarily horrendous nature of our subjugated histories.

For our Senior People and my Indigenous Sisters and Brothers who read this paper I offer an impression of this background in the spirit of knowledge affirmation. For non-Indigenous readers I offer this background impression in the spirit of socio-cultural and socio-historical erudition.

The next logical step in creating an Indigenous story on the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures is to look into issues surrounding:

- the imperative to protect Indigenous languages and cultures
- the business of revitalisation and reclamation
- the dynamics of language, culture and education
- the dynamics of health and wellbeing, culture and education

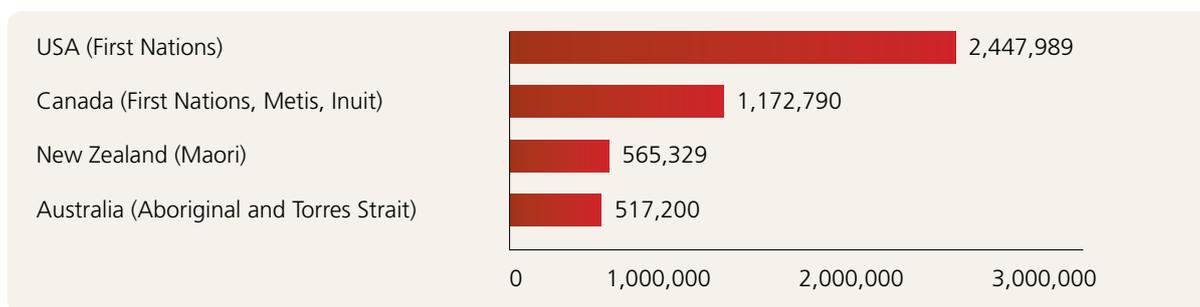
Again, with respect to these issues, to our Senior People and my Indigenous Sisters and Brothers who read this paper I offer my impression of these issues in the spirit of stimulating our cultural dialogue. For non-Indigenous readers I offer my impression of these issues in the spirit of opening your understanding to Indigenous perspective.

## Who we are

Beginning with the question of who we are, the United Nation estimates in its leading publication 'State of the World's Indigenous Peoples' that we number around 370 million peoples worldwide, but account for only 6% of the world's population.<sup>11</sup> We Indigenous peoples can be found throughout Africa, the Arctic, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Pacific, Central America, North America and South America. We remain present, though not always rightfully recognised, in every continent on our planet. Further, we all have our own unique cultural names for our distinct cultural identities. For example, we are the San, the Inuit, the Ainu, the Wiradjuri, the Sami/Saami, the Maori, the Mayan, the Navajo and the Zapara. It would literally take pages upon end to create a full list of exactly who we are, but even then there would be a great risk of it being incomplete.

The image I want to affirm, or encourage you to form, is one of an incredibly vast network of distinct cultural nationhood's that absolutely exists alongside the conventional Western geographical images that have been created as human maps of the world. You should know too that each of our cultural nationhood's has, or has had, its own cultural ontology and epistemology, and language/s, bearing in mind that in many instances our languages also often involve multiple gender specific and/or spirit specific dialects. The most complete and reliable statistical data that provides a numerical account of our Indigenous populations appears to come through from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America [see Table 1 below]. It is interesting that these are the very four nations that stand out as the focus of much of the literature that I will be engaging with.

Table 1 – The Indigenous Populations of the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia



USA<sup>12</sup>, Canada<sup>13</sup>, New Zealand<sup>14</sup>, Australia<sup>15</sup>

11 United Nations Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, *ibid.*, p.8.

12 SU Ogunwole, *We the People: American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States*, Census 2000 Special Reports CENSR-28, US Census Bureau, 2006, p.2, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/censr-28.pdf>

13 Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Metis and First Nations*, Census 2006, catalogue no.97-558, author, Ontario, Canada, 2008, p.6, <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-558/pdf/97-558-XIE2006001.pdf>

14 Statistics New Zealand Tatauranga Aotearoa, *QuickStats about Maori*, author, 2006, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/maori.aspx>

15 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: 2006*, cat. no. 4705.0, 2007, [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/377284127F903297CA25733700241AC0/\\$File/47050\\_2006.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/377284127F903297CA25733700241AC0/$File/47050_2006.pdf)



In Australia, Canada and the United States there are vast numbers of autonomous cultural nationhood's within in each nation state. For instance, in Australia at the time of invasion it was believed that our cultural nations numbered somewhere around the 250 mark, with an estimated 600 plus languages.<sup>16</sup> In Aotearoa 'New Zealand' "... whanau ,hapu, iwi (extended family, sub-tribal groupings and tribe)..."<sup>17</sup> likewise exist. Despite this amazing diversity there are remarkable experiential similarities between us. In the case of each nation we Indigenous peoples suffered the full impact of foreign colonial domination and the subsequent hegemonic force of cultural subjugation. There are startling parallels as well in our contemporary health, social, economic and educational status, and it is upon this basis of similitude that we are able to learn a great deal from one another, especially regarding the protection and continuance of our languages and cultures.

## How we understand language and culture

Given that we are from such diverse cultural backgrounds it would not be unreasonable to assume that we hold relatively disparate views when it comes to understanding language and culture; however that really is not the case. One of the most spiritually oriented definitions I've come across came from the late Dr Marika, who was in my opinion one of Australia's greatest Yolngu Indigenous leaders, and I venture to suggest one of Australia's most eminent cultural theorists. Dr Marika said in her testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in 1999 that:

... the language of our old people is esoteric. It defines the land where they come from. It has boundaries. It has boundaries out in the sea also – the sea and the land; there is nothing different about that. I would like to tell you that the land has multilayers of literacy for Yolngu. It is text. It is what these old people sing and dance. It is what they educate our children about.

... land and language go hand in hand. It is all linked together, because without language we cannot define our land.<sup>18</sup>

What I read in Dr Marika's words is that our languages are far more than merely the words that we speak to each other in order to effectively go about our daily life. Dr Marika actually explained that our languages are embedded within the very spirit of country, so that each word that we have and use keeps us in spiritual harmony with country. It is common, however, to regard language as a "... method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way".<sup>19</sup> Dr Marika's definition still captures the essential idea of communication, but it moves beyond conventional, perhaps largely Westcentric, understandings of what that might entail. That is because Dr Marika's reference to song and dance brings into our cultural understandings of language the reality of it being as much about human to spirit communication as it is human to human communication.

This way of understanding language can be seen mirrored in the voice of other Indigenous peoples. For instance, in her observations on Indigenous languages Indigenous Maasi expert on Indigenous affairs, Dr Naomi Kipuri affirmed that language "... is not only a communication tool, it is often linked to the land or region traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples; it is an essential component of one's collective and individual identity and therefore provides a sense of belonging and community".<sup>20</sup> This concept of language was similarly established in the opening words of the NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs 2004 'NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy', which categorically states:

to Aboriginal people, language is much more than just words. It is a direct link to land and country. It holds traditional songs and stories. It is about spirituality and deep meaning, and it reflects unique cultural concepts and ways of looking at the world.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, in reflecting on the words of Dr Marika's correlation between language, country and literacy I was reminded of the instructive account of Indigenous research methodologies offered by Indigenous Botswanan academic, Associate Professor Bagele Chilisa. Associate Professor Chilisa rightly noted that our methodologies accept, respect and assert "... literature as language, cultural artefacts, legends, stories, practices, songs, rituals, poems, dances, tattoos ..." <sup>22</sup> and all the other mediums and pedagogies we use to record our knowledge ways, including very importantly cultural storying. The implications of this are noteworthy in terms of helping to open up the conceptual breadth of what Indigenous languages constitute. That is because it is not unusual for us to perceive the meaning of language well outside the standard medium of speech in the same way that we perceive literacy, which clearly widens the notion of us as purely 'oral' societies.

16 E Bourke, 'Australia's first peoples: Identity and population' in C Bourke, E Bourke & B Edwards (eds) *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies*, 2nd edn, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, 1998, pp.38 -55; &

'The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia' in Australian Human Rights Commission *Social Justice Report 2009: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner*, [Tom Calma], 2009, pp.57 – 105, p.57 [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/sj\\_report/sjreport09/chap3.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/chap3.html)

17 LT Smith, op. cit., p.109.

18 Dr Marika as cited in House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Canberra, 1999. Testimony taken at Yirrkala, 6th May, 1999, [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/Committee/legcon\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/nt\\_emergency/report/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/Committee/legcon_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/nt_emergency/report/report.pdf)

19 *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 11th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

20 United Nations Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, op.cit., p.58.

21 NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs, *New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy*, 2004, p.1, <http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au/data/files//languagespolicyFINAL.pdf>

22 B Chilisa, op.cit., p.60.

There is a deep spiritual interplay between that which is spoken and that which is sung, danced or imaged. When we speak of language we often think in these wider terms. Our meaning of language thus implies more than a lexicon of words; it also implies a lexicon of sound vocabulary, a lexicon of movement vocabulary and a lexicon of image vocabulary. These vocabularies are highly complex, stratified and regulated by spirit law. The art work of the Papunya Tula artists' movement of the Central Western Desert region for instance has been described by Indigenous art expert Hetti Perkins as encrypted knowledge.<sup>23</sup> In using the phrase encrypted knowledge Hetti is emphasising the deeper communicative dimensions of Indigenous image language. These artworks can only be fully read, interpreted and comprehended by persons educated into the spirit vocabulary that is embedded as seemingly non-descript dots, strokes and swirls.

In a recent linguistic study of the spirit language of Inyjalarrku song in North West Arnhem land our wider understanding of the construct of language was confirmed as esoteric. The author, Meiki Elizabeth Apted documented in her study that this form of language "... is used only in song and appears to be comprised entirely of non-decipherable, non-translatable, non-interpretible linguistic material ...".<sup>24</sup> Of course, the indecipherable, non-translatable aspect of this medium is such because it is a highly stratified secret and sacred communication conduit between spirit Elders and designated spirit communicators. The spirit principles and practices inherent in these language ways were once wide spread. Certainly I know from my late mother's personal testimony as a Dhungutti Elder, that our cultures along the North Coast of New South Wales had similar diverse non-speech language vocabularies as part of cultural praxis. It would not be a wild assumption to presume that we all did.

In bringing this into focus from our perspective here in NSW, these multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-stratified language forms that we once all spoke, sung, danced and imaged with fluency remain omnipresent in our spirit memories, even today, even when we have suffered language and culture loss. I note that John Hobson takes up the issue of fluency in one of his chapters in the recent volume 'Re-Awakening Languages'.<sup>25</sup> Hobson indicates that linguists and other language specialists have a penchant for the term 'oral proficiency'. In my own mind I equate fluency with the broader praxis of spiritual communication, so fluency for me extends past the parameters of proficiency in speech vernacular alone. In NSW the praxis of communication, including spirit communication, in accordance with our foundational methodologies and methods has been severely devastated through colonisation; there is no getting away from this reality.

It must be remembered when thinking about us Aboriginal peoples of NSW that we were among the very first on this continent to experience enforced suffocation of our languages and cultural praxis. This came about not simply because of land being taken out from under us, it also came about through the ravage of disease which led to knowledge holder death, and imposed assimilation. Even so, we remain highly conscious of the myriad of linguistic forms that once held currency in our cultural life-worlds. Certainly we maintain a sense of the continuing primacy of their spirit presence within our identity. Well known Gumbaynggirr identity Aiden Ridgeway said in reflecting on our languages that:

... it goes to the heart and soul of one's identity and gives connection to family, country and community. It instills a sense of enormous pride and provides the strength from which to see the world beyond the fences of your own community - then everything seems possible.<sup>26</sup>

It seems though that understanding of the importance of language as a strengthening agent of our identity is sometimes morphed into an assertion that language is the primary indicator of Indigenous identity, meaning that Indigenous identity cannot be fully legitimated without it. There is also an additional assertion within Indigenous sovereignty discourse that only first language can voice Indigenous self-determination and self-governance<sup>27</sup>. The argument here is that English is not the right language for the expression of sovereignty. Language under this argument takes on for us an inherently socio-political role. Whilst it can be argued that these assertions meaningfully recognise the power and value of our languages, on the other hand they also, unintentionally I feel, erode the identity premise of so much of us, which is embedded within cultural concepts that work beyond the confines of language, and need to because of language decimation.

In their article on the Zapara peoples of Ecuador Maximilian Viatori and Gloria Usbigua highlight this by noting that "many indigenous activists, community leaders, and educators in the Americas claim that self-determination cannot be articulated using the languages of their colonizers"<sup>28</sup>, but they also point out how problematic this assumption is for those of us who do not have full language. Does this mean that we are less recognisably Indigenous without the benefit of full 'authentic' language? Viatori and Usbigua assert that:

23 H Perkins (writer/presenter), *Art + Soul: a personal Journey into the World of Aboriginal Art*, Screen Australia, 2010.

24 ME Apted, 'Songs from the Inyjalarrku: The use of a non-translatable spirit language in a song set from North-West Arnhem land, Australia', *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, vol.30, no.1, 2010, p.94.

25 J Hobson, 'Questions of fluency in Australian languages revitalisation' in J Hobson, K Lowe, S Poetch & M Walsh (eds), *Re-Awakening Languages: Theory and Practice in the Revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous Languages*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2010, pp.267-280.

26 A Ridgeway, 'Language is power; let us have ours', Sydney Morning Herald, 26 November 2009, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/language-is-power-let-us-have-ours-20091125-jrsb.html>

27 M Viatori & G Usbigua, 'Speaking sovereignty: Indigenous languages and self-determination', *Wicazo SA Review*, vol.22, no.2, 2007, pp. 7-21.

28 *ibid.*, p. 13.

These questions raise several issues with the use of language to delineate officially recognized sovereign indigenous nations. First, this equation is founded on Western colonial misconceptions of indigenous languages as indicators of an indigenous group's "authenticity"- the stereotyping of indigenous culture as unchanging and unaltered by the pressures of modern capitalist society... Second, this discourse establishes that valid Indians are only those who speak a language that is distinct from "Western" society.<sup>29</sup>

When we look back against the idea of language as a matrix of lexicons of verbal and non-verbal spirit founded tongues we open our minds to seeing that speech language is really only one aspect of a complex structure which is definably culture. This then brings me to the matter of how we Indigenous peoples intellectualise culture. Before I yarn about this however, I'll digress for a moment to one of the best known Western understandings of what culture is. This understanding was proffered by eminent Welsh intellectual Raymond Williams. Williams noted in his volume 'Keywords' that culture is:

(i) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development...(ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general...(iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.<sup>30</sup>

In bouncing of this definition it can be seen that culture is synonymous with 'a way of life', and that 'a way of life' includes intellectual, spiritual, creative and social elements. The sweeping of intellectual and spiritual into the meaning of culture is particularly relevant for explaining our perspective on culture because it helps us to clarify culture as an embodiment of ontology "... the body of knowledge that deals with the essential characteristics of what it means to exist"<sup>31</sup>, epistemology "... the nature of knowledge and truth"<sup>32</sup> and axiology, which centres on the study of values and their relational position to ethics, aesthetics and "... their acceptance as true knowledge..."<sup>33</sup> This gives us a basis from which to understand Indigenous meanings of culture under the term 'country' as a distillation of our ways of seeing the world [our worldview], our ways of knowing the world, our ways of doing within the world, and our ways of being within the world.

Interestingly, a Canadian study conducted in 2007 looked specifically at how Indigenous teachers conceptualised culture.<sup>34</sup> The author, Timothy Begaye, reported that the teachers he interviewed tended to associate culture with the notion of being as traditional or traditionally grounded. Culture was variously highlighted as being synonymous with customs, beliefs and values. Clearly Begaye felt that these observations illustrated that we are predisposed towards connecting culture with the past. It is true that when we talk about culture that we turn back towards our foundational ways of knowing, doing and being. We do this because these foundational ways give us our means to make sense of our place within the world. It might help to think of this in terms of a psycho-spiritual compass which points the way for us to understand and explain. It gives us continuity with our spirit Elders who remain spiritually living for us.

I have mentioned spirituality quite often, but I am yet to define what I mean. For me personally spirituality is so intrinsic to my being that it is almost mundane, and I know it to be so for most other Indigenous peoples. It is not, as many would suppose, a matter of religion, because Indigenous spirituality works well beyond belief.<sup>35</sup> It is, as I've already noted, but emphasise again, the basis of country, and as such it is our ontology, our epistemology and axiology. Dr Naomi Kipuri expressed our spirituality as defining our relationships with our "... environment as custodians of the land; it helps construct social relationships, gives meaning, purpose and hope to life. It is not separated but is an integral, infused part of the whole in the indigenous worldview".<sup>36</sup> In thinking about belief, the separation is that we don't 'practice' our spirituality as religious ritual in the Western sense; we think it, speak it, sing it, dance it, and image it so that we live it.

There is often an unspoken assumption that language and culture are synonymous. Begaye, for instance, found in his study that "each teacher also noted a direct relationship between culture and language and how they are not mutually exclusive".<sup>37</sup> The problem here is as I've shown; language as a term is too readily confined to the idea of speech language. What I have tried to do with this paper is open up an understanding of Indigenous speech language as one aspect of a much wider body of language, which in turn is part of an even wider body of spirit culture. My purpose in doing so is to not only place language within its more ontological framework, which is necessary for a more meaningful discussion of the importance of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures, but also to open the doorway to understanding how culture has been able to survive within us without the 'oral proficiency' of speech language.

Culture is a far bigger entity than language because it is so deeply and profoundly the 'brain' of our cognition.

29 *ibid*, p.11

30 R Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised and expanded edn, Fontana, London, 1983, p.90.

31 B Chilisa, *op.cit.*, p.20.

32 *ibid.*, p.21.

33 *ibid.*

34 T Begaye, 'Native teacher understanding of culture as a concept for curricula inclusion', *Wicazo SA Review*, vol. 22, no.1, Spring, 2007, pp. 35-52.

35 United Nations Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, *op.cit.*, p.60.

36 *ibid.*

37 T Begaye, *op.cit.*, p.46.

So long as our cognition, our emotion and our socialisation are embedded within the spirit being of country our culture will survive and continue to breathe within us. That, however, is not enough for us, it never has been. It is a matter of survival that our forebears and ourselves have maintained a grip hold on whatever remains for us, and we engage within the spirit of this so well that it gives us strength of identity. Notwithstanding this, we are serious about language loss and culture loss, because we understand that to have our speech languages, sound languages, song languages, movement languages and image languages means to be more culturally holistic again within the richness of our foundational spirit realms and spirit communication realms.

## Our cultural and linguistic survival status

There are, without doubt, Indigenous cultures around the world who are fortunate enough to still have intact language and culture, but they are low in number and they are facing the very real threat of loss, just as we have in NSW. The international and national body of literature on Indigenous language and culture loss is extensive to say the least, but for me one of the most compelling single statements I've read in recent times came from Ryan Wilson, President of the National Indian Education Association, who simply stated that "this is a race against the clock and we're in the 59th minute of the last hour".<sup>38</sup> This statement is a strong, sobering Indigenous voiced observation which imparts the true intensity and urgency of what we face on a global scale. The reality is that:

Of the some 7,000 languages today, it is estimated that more than 4,000 are spoken by indigenous peoples. Language specialists predict that up to 90 per cent of the world's languages are likely to become extinct or threatened with extinction by the end of the century. This statistic illustrates the grave danger faced by indigenous peoples.<sup>39</sup>

When you further consider the strength behind Dr Naomi Kipuri's statement "Indigenous languages have been dying, not only as a result of unintended consequences of colonization and globalization, but also because of deliberate assimilation policies that sought to deny indigenous peoples their own identities and cultures"<sup>40</sup> then you come face to face with the catastrophic nature of what we Indigenous peoples contend with, and what we absolutely dread in terms of the loss of our languages and our cultures. In the face of such alarming data and statement it would be quite easy, especially for those with a non-Indigenous 'eye', to conclude that we are in a position wherein we must accept the inevitability of language loss and culture loss as a matter of 'progress', but we reject this wholeheartedly on moral, ethical and human rights grounds.

Before I move on to discuss the survival and revival of our languages and cultures as a matter of our basic human rights I want to bring home the message of exactly what has happened, and is happening to us. Taking our own nation as a prime example it can be seen from data collected through the 2006 census that of our 517,200 population only 52,000 of us report speaking in our own languages<sup>41</sup>; a staggering figure. Further it is categorically stated that:

Of those Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language at home, almost three-quarters (74%) live in Very Remote Australia, with 14% living in Remote Australia. Only 4% of Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language live in Major Cities. Over half (56%) of all Indigenous language speakers live in the Northern Territory where 59% of the Indigenous population speak an Australian Indigenous language.<sup>42</sup>

A similar trend can be found in Canada where it is reported that only 18% of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples confirmed that they spoke their own mother tongues, whilst an overwhelming 73% claimed English as their first language and a further 8% French.<sup>43</sup> In his annual report former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [ATSI] Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, reported that only 18 Indigenous languages in Australia are known to be spoken fully by all generations, and that only 100 languages exist in one form or another, with most being considered endangered.<sup>44</sup> If these statistics aren't bewildering enough Tom goes on to corroborate that "the loss of languages in Australia has received international attention. A significant international study on language endangerment has singled out Australia as a place where languages are disappearing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world".<sup>45</sup>

These are just general statistics, but even so they are extraordinarily illustrative of our language status. To gain a far more meaningful insight into these figures in terms of individual general speech language's it is possible to consult a number of online databases. Here in Australia the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] provides access to its extremely useful AUSTLANG: Australian Indigenous Languages Database<sup>46</sup>, which can be searched in all manner of ways. A search under New South Wales for example reveals reference to 118 Aboriginal languages, the vast majority of which fall into the various categories of high endangerment or non-use.

38 D Frosch, 'Its native tongue facing extinction, Arapaho tribe teaches the young', *New York Times*, 17th October 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/17/us/17arapaho.html?ref=indiansamerican>

39 United Nations, Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, op.cit., p.1.

40 ibid., p. 58.

41 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population Characteristics, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: 2006*, cat. no. 4713.0, 2010, [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/526FE126443EBCC6CA257718001D547F?File/47130\\_2006\\_reissue.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/526FE126443EBCC6CA257718001D547F?File/47130_2006_reissue.pdf)

42 ibid., p.36

43 E K Raining Bird, 'Health, education, language, dialect, and culture in First Nations, Inuit, and Metis communities in Canada: An overview', *Canadian Journal of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology*, vol.35, no.2, 2011, pp. 110 – 124.

44 'The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia', op.cit., p.58

45 ibid.

46 AUSTLANG, <http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/disclaimer.php>

Similarly at the international level the online version of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger<sup>47</sup> is a worthwhile resource, although the print version appears to be more detailed in nature.

That said, what is absolutely telling about these forms of resource is the specialised terminology that they use. For instance the UNESCO atlas relies upon the language gradations – vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct.<sup>48</sup> AUSTLANG on the other hand uses what it terms 'NILS endangerment grades', which determine the status of our languages as – 5. strong/safe; 4. unsafe; 3. definitely endangered; 2. severely endangered; 1. critically endangered or 0. no longer fully spoken.<sup>49</sup> Stephen Wurm, a noted linguist, explained these forms of terminologies thus:

A good yardstick for recognizing the level of endangerment of a language ... is the use of a threatened language in various generations of a speech community, especially that of children and young adults. If they begin not to learn the language anymore and 10-30 percent do not, the language is potentially endangered. If there are only a few children speakers left, and the youngest good speakers are young adults, the language is endangered. If the youngest good speakers are largely past middle age, the language is seriously endangered. If only a handful of mostly old speakers are left, the language is moribund. If no speakers seem to be left, the language is believed extinct.<sup>50</sup>

To an Indigenous eye and ear these types of phrases are terrifying, all the more so when you take into consideration that the data represented on these databases merely references that which can be considered more general speech language and dialect. It would not be a quantum leap to suggest that if speech language can be thought of in terms that include extinct, then we also need to accept that our much wider sound, movement and image spirit languages force home for us the real magnitude and intensity of what we have lost, or are in the process of losing. Since language doesn't sit outside culture but rather is a focal part of culture, especially when understood in the wider Indigenous context, it becomes clear that language loss is a reasonably strong indicator of loss of cultural praxis, though I do emphasise not necessarily an indicator of identity loss as such.

On page 8 I noted that the use of words keeps us in spiritual harmony with country. I was deliberate in making this statement because no matter how devastated our languages and cultures may be, we still see our identity as unique and culturally separate. In again reflecting on the wisdom of my late mother, Mum told me that even if you only have one word left you hold onto that word because that word brings you home spiritually to the essence of your country, and as such who you are. So, there is no getting around the fact that we understand language as cultural praxis, we see fluency as full spiritual immersion, and see language as tangibly related to identity and a rightful avenue for cultural, social and political representation. That we have suffered loss does not disqualify us from our being as Indigenous, but having language restored, to whatever extent possible, means profound spiritual re-energising of our psycho-spiritual self and our cultural praxis.

## The imperative to protect Indigenous languages and cultures

The literature on Indigenous languages and cultures, but most notably on languages almost universally carries within it one leading message – that there is an imperative to protect Indigenous languages and cultures from further disintegration. My interpretation of this imperative is that it can be broken down into three distinct categories:

- i. a human rights imperative,
- ii. a reconciliation imperative,
- iii. a scientific imperative.

These imperatives are applicable globally, nationally and without doubt here in New South Wales. Further, these imperatives serve as tangible justifications for government in identifying fundamental social, cultural and political responsibilities towards Indigenous peoples. The need to show evidence of socio-economic advancement of Indigenous participation within mainstream society should not overshadow or otherwise usurp the moral and ethical premise of these imperatives.

In 2007 the United Nations formally ratified its 'Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'.<sup>51</sup> Of the 46 articles listed in the declaration the following articles in particular create, in my view, an imperative for governments with respect to the continuance of our Indigenous languages and cultures:

### Article 8.1

Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

### Article 13.1

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories,

47 UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

48 UNESCO, *ibid.*

49 AUSTLANG, *op.cit.*

50 S Wurm, 'Australia and the Pacific', in C Moseley (ed) *Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages*, Routledge, London, 2007, p.439.

51 United Nations, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/en/drip.html>

languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons

### Article 14.3

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

### Article 15.1

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information<sup>52</sup>

It is indeed interesting that Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America all voted against the adoption of this declaration in 2007. What is perhaps even more interesting is the subsequent turn around in the sentiment of this opposition. Australia indicated formal endorsement of the declaration on the 3rd of April, 2009, New Zealand on the 19th of April, 2010, Canada the 12th of November, 2010 and finally the United States on the 16th of December, 2010.<sup>53</sup> Even so, each country has stopped short of writing the declaration into law. From our Indigenous perspective this can be read as fear based because of the potentiality for reparation over past injustices, including enforced child removal – a practice common in all four countries. The formal endorsement of this document, however, can be read as moral and ethical acceptance that we should not be required to relinquish our languages and cultures in-order to participate in the dominant culture.

The human rights imperative created through the United Nations declaration annexes well with the discourse of reconciliation. Here in Australia reconciliation is founded on principles related to righting the historical wrongs of the past through acknowledgement of the reality of the events of history, which includes public acceptance that policies aimed at language and cultural destruction did exist and were implemented, and of course goals for achieving Indigenous social and economic parity.<sup>54</sup> In terms of being an imperative for protecting Indigenous languages and cultures Indigenous spokesperson Noel Pearson said it best when he expressed the view that:

We will have true reconciliation when millions of Australians speak our Australian languages from coast to coast. It is then that we will have the keys to our landscape, our history, our art, our stories. The Australian languages, and the literatures and cultures that live or have lived through them, are the most important things we have in Australia. Their revival, growth and use in all social, political, educational, commercial and cultural domains are the most important matter for Australia's future.<sup>55</sup>

The meaning in Noel's words is unmistakable. In the broader frame of this newspaper piece he is clearly saying that as much as English may be the dominant discourse in this country, and may well be the dominant discourse behind Westcentric globalisation, there nonetheless is a moral and ethical imperative to recognise and reconcile with the historical reality of this country as one that belonged to and remains quintessentially Indigenous in foundation. Noel does not step away from the realisation that all Indigenous peoples inevitably require the skill to communicate effectively in English, but he also points to the fact that it is perfectly possible to be functional both in Indigenous languages and cultures and also English. His opinion brings into sharp focus, and I feel questions, the either or notion that implies that Indigenous peoples have to have one or the other, not both.

If the moral and ethical imperatives set through the ideals of reconciliation and the fundamentals of Indigenous human rights are unpalatable then perhaps the imperative founded on the interests of Western science will persuade. The imperative to ensure the survival and revival of Indigenous culture can be argued along Western oriented 'scientific' lines, and it is these arguments that sound far more convincing to a West centric ear. Joji Carino pointed out that the continuance of our languages is "...vital to the conservation of biodiversity"<sup>56</sup> a perspective echoed by Tom Calma who likewise noted "Indigenous cultural knowledge is increasingly playing a role in preserving the biodiversity of Australia's fragile eco-system".<sup>57</sup> Calma cited Indigenous knowledge of fire abatement, climate patterns and animal species as significant to the development of a global knowledge bank that is needed in order to answer the potential disaster of global warming.<sup>58</sup>

It is very telling that "many traditional practitioners are experts at reading indicator species that provide very early warning signals of impending environmental or food catastrophes and changes such as global warming"<sup>59</sup>. It is also telling that "traditional languages have vast vocabularies for naming species and describing their ecology which are little known to Western science".<sup>60</sup> If these vital knowledges are further eroded through the demise of knowledge Elders, without that knowledge being handed on to the next generation, then the survival of the world itself could

52 *ibid.*

53 United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, News, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/news.html>

54 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Walking together: The First Steps: Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to Federal Parliament 1991-94*, Commonwealth of Australia, AGPS, Canberra, ACT, 1994.

55 N Pearson, 'Speaking one's mother tongue is vital', *The Australian*, 21 May 2011, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/speaking-ones-mother-tongue-is-vital/story-e6frgd0x-1226059932608>

56 United Nations Dept of Economic & Social Affairs, *op.cit.*, p.43.

57 'The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia', *op.cit.*, p.62.

58 *ibid.*, pp.62-63.

59 United Nations Dept of Economic and Social Affairs, *op.cit.*, p.43

60 'The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia', *loc.cit.*

be said to be under threat. Carino argues that “the future of indigenous peoples is closely linked with solutions to the crises in biodiversity and climate change, which must incorporate respect, protection and promotion of indigenous peoples’ rights as an essential component of a global strategy”.<sup>61</sup>

## Revitalisation and Reclamation

In the spirit of Ryan Wilson’s<sup>62</sup> analogy with the ticking of a clock many nations across the globe, certainly in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and in the United States have reacted to the burden of obligation to respond proactively to stemming the tide of perishing Indigenous languages and cultures. In one sense, our language loss and cultural loss has become a ‘cottage’ industry for enthusiastic anthropologists, linguists, sociologists and the like. Our loss does continue to create us as ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ of Western academia. It is a vexed situation for us. On the one hand we recognise our need for ‘expert’ help; on the other hand we recognise our lack of status as our own ‘experts’. We seem too readily to slip to the margins. Certainly the vast majority of literature that I have thus far engaged with is non-Indigenous in orientation, and more oriented toward Western scientific ways of understanding rather than Indigenous ways of understanding.

That duly noted, the literature overwhelmingly discusses language loss under two overarching banners – revitalisation and reclamation. It must be noted here though that culture loss, in its far wider dimension, does not appear to attract anywhere near the amount of fascination that speech language does. My impression, in wading through the mountainous volumes of material that can be read in this area, is that there appears to be a quiet assumption that to save a speech language is to save a culture, but as I’ve already demonstrated there are two factors that complicate this assumption. Firstly, the saving of culture is broader than saving speech language because there are all the other language forms involved as well that bring into focus the enormous body of our spirit based cultural praxis, and secondly our cultural identity has frankly outlasted language in many instances, and on that basis alone culture cannot possibly be seen as ‘dead’ because it lives within our psyche.

Actually reference to ‘dead’ is interesting because it denotes actual terminology used within the field of sociolinguistics. It challengingly means “the process by which a language ceases to be spoken because its former speakers gradually shift to another distinct language, leaving no speakers of the original language”.<sup>63</sup> This is a particularly relevant term for us Indigenous peoples because so much of our language loss, in its holistic sense, can be attributed to our enforced, and I stress enforced, shift to English. Other equally emotive terms include ‘language murder’ and ‘language suicide’.<sup>64</sup> The Western academic fields of sociolinguistics, the sociology of language, the psychology of language and even psycholinguistics present provocative theories that we in Indigenous academia will need to critically ponder if we are going to move forward into new culturally deeper conversations about our language and cultural revival praxis.

It is my intention to offer my own contribution to this conversation in my final report for this study by looking more closely at what each of these fields’ offers in terms of understanding human linguistic utility and its relatedness to individual cognition and social function. Certainly my impression thus far is that the myriad of theories on language and human society are such that Indigenous language and culture revitalisation and reclamation are inevitably embedded within a far wider polemical body of socio-cultural politics. These issues will be mentioned, rather than extensively covered, in this introductory impression paper. For now, with this paper it is more important to stay with a more general discussion of the concepts of revitalisation and reclamation because these two avenues of language industry feature prominently in mainstream educational action and also community based action.

Of all the definitions and interpretations I have read on these two broad terms the straightforwardness of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] was refreshing. They simply stated that:

Language revitalisation means that the language is still known and used by the community, but only by a few people, usually the oldest members of the community. Languages of this status can be learned in part by listening to old people, and recording their speech.

Language reclamation usually means that relearning the language has to rely primarily on old records such as tapes and historical documents. People in the community may remember and use a few words, but to learn the language beyond this level will require more than referring to Elders’ knowledge. Elders are still vital to this process due to their authority and their cultural knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

The VCAA break this down further on their language revival tab on their website<sup>66</sup> by noting that ‘language revival’ involves ‘language revitalisation’, ‘language renewal’, which applies “when there is still some language in the community, but it is not used for everyday purposes”<sup>67</sup> and ‘language reclamation’.

Whether an Indigenous language initiative is purposed towards revitalisation, or renewal for that matter, or indeed

61 United Nations Dept of Economic and Social Affairs, op.cit.

62 D Frosch, op.cit.

63 J Swann, A Deumert, T Lillis & R Mesthrie, *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, USA, 2004, p.168.

64 P Matthews, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, 2nd edn, Oxford University, Oxford, p.217.

65 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], *Aboriginal Languages, Culture and Reclamation in Victorian schools: Standards P-10 and protocols*, VCAA, East Melbourne, Vic, 2009, p.9 [http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/vels\\_standards/vels\\_aboriginal\\_languages.pdf](http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/downloads/vels_standards/vels_aboriginal_languages.pdf)

66 VCAA, [http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/alcv/language\\_reconstruction.htm](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/alcv/language_reconstruction.htm)

67 ibid.

reclamation there is a basic socio-political setting, especially in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, that situates the reality of these initiatives. Ethnographer Teresa L McCarty discusses this in reference to Indigenous America explaining that:

Indigenous language revitalisation confronts not only a colonial legacy of linguistic, genocide, and cultural displacement, but mounting pressures for standardisation. Those pressures are manifest in externally imposed 'accountability' regimes- high-stakes testing, reductionist reading programmes, and English-only policies...<sup>68</sup>

McCarty moves on to assert that "in the context of these demographic transformations and the larger forces of globalisation, we are witnessing increasing intolerance for linguistic and cultural diversity".<sup>69</sup>

With the ubiquitousness of globalisation all about us we Indigenous peoples cannot draw any easy conclusion that language revitalisation and reclamation is wanted within the wider framework of society. In investigating Australia's position at the Federal level I found that Tom Calma drew attention in his annual social justice report to a 'national approach'.<sup>70</sup> This national approach as determined through the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts articulates 5 key objectives in terms of our languages. These, as shown on the dept's website, are:

1. National Attention: To bring national attention to Indigenous languages – the oldest surviving languages in the world; and the pressures they face.
2. Critically Endangered Languages: Reinforce use of critically endangered Indigenous languages that are being only partly spoken to help prevent decline in use and to maintain or extend their common, everyday use as much as possible.
3. Working with Languages to Close the Gap: In areas where Indigenous languages are being spoken fully and passed on, making sure that government recognises and works with these languages in its agenda to Close the Gap.
4. Strengthening Pride in Identity and Culture: To restore the use of rarely spoken or unspoken Indigenous languages to the extent that the current language environment allows.
5. Supporting Indigenous Language Programs in Schools: To support and maintain the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools.<sup>71</sup>

If you juxtapose the outlook of these 5 key objectives against the imperatives I discussed earlier on in this paper it can be seen that in theory at least Indigenous language revitalisation and reclamation is well and truly part of Australia's national agenda. It is worth noting, however, that Tom Calma reflected in 2009 that there is significant disparity between the Federal Government's 'national approach' and state by state policy on Indigenous languages in that "some state and territory governments have policies which ignore Indigenous languages or limit Indigenous language teaching in the interests of promoting English literacy".<sup>72</sup> Given this, it is impressive that here in NSW our Indigenous language policy has stood since 2004, and very noticeably creates a mandate for government to support Indigenous community self-determination in context to language revitalisation and reclamation.<sup>73</sup>

Whatever the situation is at either the Federal or State level, and it does appear that change is on the horizon at the Federal level with formal discussion of a national Indigenous language policy underway,<sup>74</sup> the fact remains that there is usually a wide chasm between the promise of theory and the reality of practice. On this basis we need to ask - what does language revitalisation and reclamation involve? and conversely - what does it not involve? From what I have discerned thus far ideally it involves the establishment of meaningful partnerships between Indigenous communities and 'expert' personnel working together as research teams, education teams and media/resource production teams. What it does not seem to involve, and I know through my own cultural knowledge cannot really involve, is the deeper spiritual business of reclamation that only we can define, determine and undertake ourselves as Indigenous cultural and academic work.

Ultimately, the key motivational goal behind Indigenous language revitalisation and reclamation is general speech fluency or oral proficiency. The degree to which this can be achieved is directly proportionate to the starting position of revitalisation. Reclamation, as a historically founded research based endeavour is unfortunately unlikely to bring about the type of everyday conversational oral proficiency that we usually cite as a key marker of communicative adeptness, because it fundamentally starts from the position of having no existing fully proficient speakers. As a community Indigenous person, who has over the years seen firsthand language revitalisation and reclamation effort, I read sentiment in existing non-Indigenous literature, and Indigenous demand, which appears hopeful, yet 'romantic' because the aspiration to give us back our mother tongue's has to be rationalised against what is feasible, attainable and bluntly viable.

68 TL McCarty, 'Revitalising Indigenous languages in homogenising times', *Comparative Education Review*, vol.39, no.3, 2003, p.159.

69 *ibid.*

70 Human Rights Commission, *op.cit.*

71 Australia. Dept of the Prime Minister & Cabinet, Office for the Arts, *Indigenous Languages - A National Approach*, <http://www.arts.gov.au/topics/indigenous-arts/indigenous-languages-national-approach>

72 'the perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia', *op.cit.*, p.59

73 NSW Dept of Aboriginal Affairs, *op.cit.*, pp.4-5.

74 Australia, Dept of the Prime Minister & Cabinet, Office for the Arts, *National Cultural Policy: Discussion Paper*, The Dept, Canberra, ACT, 2011, <http://culture.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/discussion-paper/national-cultural-policy-discussion-paper.pdf>



On page 14 of this impression paper I wrote categorically that cultural identity is not enough, that we want to achieve spiritual re-immersion through the reinvigoration of our variant modes of language. That, at the surface level, could definitely be read as part of romanticised Indigenous demand, because where our cultures have been severely cauterized from foundational ways of doing and being reinvigoration of cultural praxis will inevitably face constraints. The reality is that for many of us there are going to be actual limits to how far we can go in the recovery process, but we have found that the romance of demand is necessary to the political process of voicing to be heard, and probably as well psychologically comforting in terms of spiritual healing. It is not in the least romantic however, where our peoples have existing language and cultural praxis. For them the demand is real, rightful and urgent.

Like any other Aboriginal person whose cultures have been interrupted by the forces of colonisation and assimilation I am situated in a duality that finds me fighting vigorously for our cultural sovereignty whilst psychologically adjusting to the irreversible situation of our minority reality in a dominant culturally oppositional society. Indigenous language and cultural revitalisation and reclamation has a leading place in this fight for cultural sovereignty, but I find myself having to be pragmatic about the distance between what we should have and what we perhaps will have. So, I was struck by the reality of the words of linguist Dr Michael Walsh who noted that:

As consultations with Aboriginal people progressed a common reaction was: 'we want our languages back!' However Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 63) have warned that 'While it is generally politically and emotionally correct to proclaim resoundingly, "Yes!" [to the question of preserving one's language and culture] the underlying and lingering fears, anxieties, and insecurities over traditional language and culture suggest that the answer may really be, "No." Many of the issues they raise for southeast Alaska have counterparts in Indigenous NSW: official discouragement of the use of ancestral languages; intergenerational dislocation; shame, anxiety and embarrassment over the use of ancestral languages. Simply stating that 'we want our languages back!' will not be enough to achieve this aim.<sup>75</sup>

There are hard cold realities with language revitalisation and reclamation, the most difficult of which is Indigenous dispute. Dispute scopes a number of highly complex matters that only we ourselves can deal with including issues pertaining to:

- teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures off-country
- who represents an Indigenous knowledge holder
- who represents a valid language and culture informant
- what can and cannot be made public, and apropos of this what is part of our stratified private knowledge structures
- what extent language teaching and learning can be undertaken outside of the pedagogy of country
- who develops and owns manufactured resources
- correct pronunciation of words reclaimed from Western historical records

I am sure the list could go on and on. What this list illustrates is that there is a long pathway to be travelled in language revitalisation and reclamation, and it is further swathed in other issues to do with cultural shame and the like; issues that I will address at length in my final report.

Before I move on to take a closer look at the literature in context to education I want to acknowledge the many successes that have taken place in Indigenous language revitalisation across the nation and indeed in Aboriginal language revitalisation in NSW. The proof of this within the literature can be found very easily simply by browsing the ever increasing range of adult and junior language dictionaries that have been published over the past decade or so. I will be covering these forms of publication in detail in my final report. Here I cite as a fine example of this type of work, because of its relation to my own Dhungutti being, the dictionary produced in 2007 through the Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Languages Culture Cooperative and the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Cooperative<sup>76</sup> which stands out as an exemplar of how far we can go with determination. Even so as Dr Walsh has pointed out "after all the accounts of success and failure and what might work, it is difficult to predict which Indigenous languages will survive. Nor is it easy to predict how much of these languages will survive – and for what purposes".<sup>77</sup>

## Language, culture and education

What I have written thus far imparts to you what I feel is an indispensable review of the realities of the cultural context, circumstance and location of Indigenous languages and cultures within society, and within the enterprise of revitalisation and reclamation. In much of the literature behind both these matters education comes

75 M Walsh, 'Raising babel: Language revitalisation in New South Wales, Australia' 2006, p.114, [http://azoulay.arts.usyd.edu.au/mpsong/MichaelWalsh\\_files/WalshRaisingBabel.pdf](http://azoulay.arts.usyd.edu.au/mpsong/MichaelWalsh_files/WalshRaisingBabel.pdf)

76 *A Lissarrague, Dhanggati Grammar and Dictionary with Dhanggati Stories*, Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Languages Culture Cooperative, Nambucca Heads, 2007.

77 M Walsh, 'Will Indigenous languages survive', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol.34, 2005, p.308.

to the fore as the most recognisable avenue for facilitating the reversal of the damage wrought by past histories and for rekindling active interrelationship between ourselves and our cultural praxis commensurate with our knowledge ways. Education stands out in this regard as the way forward. There is continual strong commentary within national and international literature that flags education systems as the most viable avenue for us to nurture the cultural education of our upcoming generations, and thereby secure our cultural continuance.

In terms of this study I am interested in looking at two key concerns related to the premise that education is our greatest hope. These concerns centre on understanding:

- what linkages exist between the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures and the advancement of Indigenous student scholastic performance and success,
- what represents best practice for the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages and cultures, especially in terms of the NSW context.

It can be seen from the body of evidence I have presented thus far that the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures within educational frameworks has to be considered on the basis of definitive conditions. These conditions align with levels of language proficiency, and I would argue cultural fluency, although as I have previously noted there is an over emphasis within the literature on language as the bastion of culture. These levels of proficiency are not applicable to the individual; they are relative to the cultural fluencies of our broader cultural communities.

The one size fits all approach has been criticised, and rightfully so. If we take Australia as our example it is patently obvious that there are multiple Indigenous cultural nationhood's within our country that speak mother tongues as first languages. Obviously thinking in terms of educational programming, and specifically curricula and pedagogy, this more fluent condition calls for education models that are in tune with this and as such work towards language and cultural continuation. In the literature two models stand out under this context – immersion programmes and bilingual programmes. Both types of programmes are purposed toward keeping language proficiency, and I would hope cultural fluency, alive and thriving. Both, however, also present as socially and politically difficult for non-Indigenous dominant cultures because of the ongoing struggle between our right to be culturally sovereign and dominant society ideology, which seeks our social absorption as a priority.

In the case of cultural immersion ethnographer Teresa L McCarty confirms that “language immersion, which provides all or most of children’s instruction in the target or heritage language, is increasingly the pedagogy of choice among Indigenous communities seeking to produce a new generation of fluent Native language speakers”.<sup>78</sup> The key principal behind immersion programming is to centre the learner wholly within their own cultural context, so that all of their learning takes place through the use of their own language, and to varying degrees cultural praxis, which essentially means that mother tongue shapes their everyday learning world. Immersion differs from the concept of bilingual education because learners do not shift, within the learning day or week, from one cultural domain to another; they stay centred within their own domain. Interestingly language immersion is an accepted educational approach for non-Indigenous communities as well.

McCarty's article stands as very informative and highly relevant both in terms of immersion education and bilingual education. McCarty for instance cites a longitudinal study undertaken in Canada between 1982 – 1996, which looked at “... 700,000 students representing 15 languages in five participating school systems...”.<sup>79</sup> The authors of this study, Thomas and Collier reported that “the most powerful predictor of academic success”<sup>80</sup>, was immersion in educational programming “... for at least four to seven years in the native/heritage language”.<sup>81</sup> McCarty similarly cites another study centred on Spanish speaking children who performed significantly better in English and Maths when the children concerned were exposed to “... their native language for five years before being transitioned to all-English classes...”.<sup>82</sup>

For me these studies alone are very telling, and create a sound case for immersion to be considered in Australia as a best practice model for those of us who are linguistically proficient. In their leading study ‘Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian Schools’<sup>83</sup> Nola Purdie, Tracey Frigo, Clare Ozolins, Geoff Noblett, Nick Thieberger and Janet Sharp demonstrate the diversity that is possible in immersion programming, drawing attention to examples such as Maori early childhood immersion programmes, which focus on children up to the age of 6, immersion trips or excursions that take learners onto country for short stays and immersion camps which provide longer stretches of intensive learning session. The combinations and approaches are many, and will be looked at more thoroughly in my final report. It has to be said though that immersion programming can only succeed when teachers are accomplished language and culture practitioners.

Bilingual education, as an alternative to total immersion, is interesting too. As I noted bilingual education is somewhat different to immersion programming because learning time is divided between different cultural domains.

78 TL McCarty, op.cit., pp.148 – 149.

79 TL McCarty, ibid., p.149.

80 Thomas & Collier as cited in TL McCarty, ibid.

81 ibid.

82 ibid.

83 N Purdie, T Frigo, C Ozolins, G Noblett, N Thieberger & J Sharp, Indigenous Languages Programmes in Australian schools: a Way Forward, Dept of Education, Employment and Work Place Relations, Canberra, ACT, 2008.

The way that this division takes place theoretically can be varied, though bilingual education is often extrapolated to the concept of two-way or both-way education, which advocates equal division of learning time between mother tongues and cultures, and dominant society language and culture. Bilingual education is particularly relevant to the Australian context, again where language and culture is fluent or potentially fluent. This form of language programming has actually been part of Australia's educational landscape since the 1970's, particularly in 'remote' communities living on country.<sup>84</sup>

Purdie et al point out that "in Australia, there is a strong movement among many linguists, educators and Indigenous people to preserve Indigenous languages through actively promoting them in educational settings, including through bilingual programmes"<sup>85</sup>. They also provide a comprehensive study of the issues that surround bilingual education in an Indigenous context including teacher knowledge and skill, the politics of power in education, criticism that learning in mother tongue detracts from achieving proficiency in mainstream educational attainment levels and so on. As with immersion, I'll be addressing some of these issues in greater depth in my final report. What is important here is that Purdie et al suggest that "a growing body of research evidence shows that well-designed bilingual programmes are academically effective and do not hold back students' acquisition of English".<sup>86</sup>

Regardless of this growing body of evidence, bilingual education in Australia remains controversial, and a hotly debated arena of contestation between those of us who advance the need to sustain first languages and cultural praxis and those who demand that Westcentric learning competencies be met over and above this. In fact bilingual education is currently the focus of a national inquiry being conducted under the auspice of the House of Representative's Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, who under the chair of the Honourable Mr Shayne Neumann will look into the relationship between Indigenous language learning, Indigenous learning competencies, especially English proficiency, and the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage.<sup>87</sup> The parallel between this study and my own is undoubtedly very recognisable.

In working through literature pertinent to Indigenous language teaching and Indigenous culture teaching I am always drawn to those unique papers that are penned by our own peoples. One such paper was produced last year by Yalmay Yunupingu, a bilingual teacher with some 32 years community teaching experience. This experience speaks more loudly in my mind than any academic study. In her article Yalmay Yunupingu describes the day to day routine of her teaching practice, and how Yolngu matha is embedded within this.<sup>88</sup> In discussing the teaching of maths for example Yalmay Yunupingu says that "our language is a good language to use with the children because they think in Yol u matha and they respond to us very quickly because they can understand what I'm saying".<sup>89</sup> What she also says is that "we have now been told we are not to use our students' first language, only English".<sup>90</sup>

To say that I am appalled by this probably doesn't do justice to the intensity of my cultural mind as an Indigenous academic and educator. Not only does the demand to teach in English work directly against the rhetoric of the 'national approach' espoused by the Federal Dept of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts, it strikes at the very heart of all that we Indigenous peoples claim in the name of reconciliation, and what the international and national literature clearly asserts regarding the dreadful risks of Indigenous language and culture loss. To me this one article brings all the academic postulation about Indigenous language and culture teaching and learning into stark perspective. Yalmay Yunupingu says:

Our Vision Statement for Yambirra Schools has a clear bothways approach, where two languages, Yol u matha and English, and two cultural views are in a careful balance. If either one overpowers the other, the educational system will fail, and cause our children to grow up unbalanced and unable to function well in the world ...The decision to make English the only important language in our schools will only make the situation for our young people worse as they struggle to be proud Yol u in a world that is making them feel that their culture is bad, unimportant and irrelevant in the contemporary world.<sup>91</sup>

The intensity of Yalmay Yunupingu's assertion about our pride and our identity sits in complete accord with international statements such as "unless language and culture, as it is understood by society on all sides of the debate on loss, is practiced, sustained, and embedded in daily practice, it cannot be maintained"<sup>92</sup> and "Native language immersion schools have become a key part of the post-colonial healing process ...".<sup>93</sup> This second quote comes from Professor Jon Reyhner from the North Arizona University in the United States. It is remarkable how often Professor Reyhner is quoted within the literature on Indigenous language education. He sees the political site that our education sits within, and the impact of past dominant society assimilation practices. He is unambiguous about our fundamental human right to be re-immersed within our own languages and cultures as a matter of advancing our psycho-cultural healing and continued wellbeing.

84 ibid.

85 ibid., p.12.

86 ibid., p.19.

87 Australian Council of State School Organisations, 'Bilingual Indigenous education', *Language Education in Australia*, vol.5, no.4, 28 July 2011, <http://www.languageeducation.com/news/110728.pdf>

88 Y Yunupingu, 'Bilingual works', *Australian Educator*, no.66, Winter 2010, pp. 24 - 25.

89 ibid., p.24.

90 ibid.

91 ibid., p.25.

92 T Begaye, op.cit., p.41.

93 J Reyhner, 'Indigenous Language Immersion Schools for Strong Indigenous Identities' 2011, p.3, <http://www2.nau.edu/jar/Heritage.pdf>

Regardless of the current state of socio-political tension in education between our Indigenous perspectives and dominant society perspectives many of us still to look to mainstream education providers for help in arresting further decay of what we have left. The vast majority of us will continue to espouse the merits of immersion or bilingual education as best practice whether or not English proficiency measures and the like are met. Our first concern is after all our own cultural fluency and by association our own cultural survival. These models without doubt stand out for us because they envelope the learner within the being of country. Sadly though, these best practice models are to a great extent of limited immediate value to us here in NSW because the impact of colonisation has been so far reaching and so devastating that proficient speech language speakers are few and far between, often elderly and literally cannot accommodate cultural teaching demands. This, however, doesn't prevent immersion or bilingualism from standing as an ultimate goal.

So the question becomes – what represents a best practice model for us here in NSW where language revitalisation programmes are based on significantly smaller numbers of language practitioners or informants, or indeed language reclamation where there is a very heavy reliance on the work of external linguists and historians. To locate an answer the best place to start is to review what has been happening to date within our schools and communities. In that regard I find it very gratifying to report that the teaching of Aboriginal languages is certainly not new to schools in NSW. In a very handy table published in Purdie et al. it can be seen that Aboriginal language teaching dates back to the 1970's at Woodenbong where Bundjalung- Githabal was taught. There are also records of language learning being instituted in the 1980's at Bowraville (Gumbaynggir), Red Hill Environment Education Centre (Wiradjuri) and Toomelah (Gamilaraay).<sup>94</sup>

Further examination of the Aboriginal languages table supplied in Purdie et al., which dates back to 2006, interestingly shows some 70 individual schools involved in Aboriginal language teaching.<sup>95</sup> What is also interesting is that of these 70, 29 appear to have taken up this teaching before the 2005 implementation of the June 2003 Board of Studies NSW [BOS] Aboriginal Languages K-10 syllabus,<sup>96</sup> though 6 of these schools are Catholic/Independent and not subject to this document. Only 9 schools show a post syllabus implementation date, though the reliability of this is questionable because no implementation date was supplied for 32 schools. In the rating system used to determine the programme type every school was identified as involved in reclamation, with the exception of 2 who were noted as planning. What was further noticeable was the concentration on only 14 Aboriginal languages.

The data on teaching Aboriginal languages in NSW schools is somewhat confusing. The NSW Board of Studies [BOS] reported in 2006 that they had record of 46 of their schools teaching Aboriginal languages.<sup>97</sup> This suggests to me that the figure of 70 found in Purdie et al is either inaccurate or indicates a number of schools dropping their language programmes. Whatever the case may be the 2006 BOS report is illuminating because it indicates that "school activity varied from one half hour per fortnight to four periods per week in schools running the 100-hour mandatory language study programs. There were four schools running the 100-hour program. However, the great majority of schools held classes once a week".<sup>98</sup> The ideals behind language revitalisation, reclamation or renewal for that matter are woefully under-supported with this type of time limitation.

There can be no expectation that Indigenous languages will be spoken at a higher conversational level when exposure to language teaching does not come anywhere close to being conducted in regular reasonably lengthy daily sessions. Furthermore, there are a number of other significant matters annexed to the practicalities of Aboriginal language teaching in schools that further complicate matters, for example home language, and the language of community. Added into all of this is the point I keep coming back to about cultural praxis and language being merely one component of a far bigger entity. One only has to consider the fact that in Aboriginal language revitalisation and reclamation many language lexicons, or potential lexicons, are going to contain significant amounts of cultural ecological terminology, such as names for animal and plant species, which without the pedagogy of teaching on country may not find daily use contexts, certainly this is less likely in a standard Western classroom scenario.

There are always going to be problems in implementing and conducting these sorts of programmes, including matters to do with securing consistent ongoing community support, teacher knowledge and skill, access to suitable resources, Aboriginal student reluctance to be involved in these programmes because of cultural shame, Aboriginal community dispute regarding the veracity of the content of language lexicons being taught and conflict over cultural boundaries and so on. These are all issues that deserve considered attention, and issues that I am prepared to address in my final report. At the end of the day it has to be said that despite whatever problems arise and despite whatever limitations there are in Aboriginal language lexicons any teaching of Aboriginal language, no matter how small, is a positive for us, not a negative, and works in favour of the demands enshrined in Indigenous human rights.

So, I come back to the question of what represents best practice for NSW. That is not a question I am really prepared to answer mid-study because so much more needs to be looked at, analysed and thought about before drawing concrete conclusions. At this juncture it is my view that there is evidence to suggest that NSW needs to be looking at

94 N Purdie et al., op.cit., pp.60-63.

95 ibid.

96 Board of Studies NSW [BOS], *Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus*, BOS, Sydney, NSW, 2003, & Board of Studies NSW [BOS], *Aboriginal Languages: a Guide to the New K-10 syllabus*, BOS, Sydney, NSW, 2005?

97 M Rhydwen, J Munro, E Parolin & S Poetsch, *Report of School Based Aboriginal Language Program Activity in NSW During 2006*, NSW Board of Studies, February 2007, [http://ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/files/Report\\_Aboriginal\\_Program.pdf](http://ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/files/Report_Aboriginal_Program.pdf)

98 ibid., p.3.

creating education programmes that move closer to bilingual and immersion principles and pedagogies. In thinking about the Canadian and US context Haley De Korne, in her analysis of Indigenous language education policy, revealed a compelling case for this because as she noted “for Indigenous language communities facing immediate endangerment of their language, the importance of language proficiency is much greater”<sup>99</sup> and “past research and practice indicate that immersion methods are the most effective pedagogical approach to achieving high proficiency in a limited timeframe”.<sup>100</sup>

It does seem to me at this stage that a best practice model would involve establishing a more systematic, perhaps state wide, approach to language revitalisation and reclamation, so that there is greater cultural scope in teaching, where that is possible, bearing in mind that in certain areas it may not be possible or diplomatically difficult. I do know that the State Library of NSW has recently received sponsorship for an Aboriginal language reclamation project that will see ‘rediscovered’ words returned to community.<sup>101</sup> This project presents as an ideal moment in time for more meaningful partnerships to be forged between government agencies so that revitalisation and reclamation become more developed and tangible. Whatever occurs it is vital that we the principal stakeholders – the Aboriginal peoples of NSW – take the lead because this is first and foremost our own cultural business, and about our cultural vitality.

The other view I have formed thus far is that the separation of Indigenous language teaching from Aboriginal studies teaching may have to be revisited ultimately because language teaching and broader cultural teaching need to go hand in hand. I also tend to think that the thorny matter of Aboriginal children being taught their languages, cultures and histories in their own learning context should be re-examined. As an advocate of Indigenous independent education I have come up against the common criticism that such measures amount to separatism or apartheid, but we cannot allow these forms of emotive observation to thwart genuine consideration of this as a workable possibility, and a strategy for providing more meaningful culturally relevant learning frameworks for our upcoming generations. The other matter that has struck me is the obvious need for more direct cultural linkages between home, community and school, and between early childhood and pre-school, primary school and high school programming.

As for the matter of whether or not Indigenous language and culture learning facilitates better scholastic performance in Indigenous students, including attendance, there is a paucity of literature to be found that moves beyond anecdotal claim. Quantitative data is not plentiful, pointing to a need for longitudinal studies to be carried out. If Aboriginal languages have been taught in NSW since the 1970’s it would be interesting to look into whether or not students who have been in these programmes felt that their attitudes towards schooling were positively influenced or whether or not they moved forward scholastically through being in these programmes. There is one study in this area in NSW, but it was small and inconclusive in proving a causal link between language and culture teaching and improved Indigenous scholastic performance.<sup>102</sup> Meaningfully however, they did note the dearth in research and called for further study in this area.<sup>103</sup>

A final word on education relates to an issue that arises time and again both in community dialogue and within the literature. In his research study with Indigenous teachers, which was mentioned earlier on, Begaye pointed out that “teachers clearly noted that religious aspects, ceremonies and sacred things do not belong in schools...”<sup>104</sup> Begaye also pointed out that the teachers did not make it clear “... where they drew the lines between what should be taught in the classroom and what should be left to certain members of the community”.<sup>105</sup> I have to say that this opens up a whole other series of questions regarding the teaching of both Indigenous languages and cultures within mainstream education, particularly if you accept that Indigenous languages have both general and sacred aspects, and that culture more broadly is stratified into general, gender specific and sacred spheres of knowledge. There is no easy answer to this, but I will at least be looking at this in my final report.

## Language, culture and health and wellbeing

The other key matter my study is aimed at uncovering is whether or not the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures has a positive impact on Indigenous individual and community health and wellbeing. The short answer to this, based on my own experience as an Indigenous community person is a loud and clear yes. To find evidence of this we need look no further than the astoundingly long and remarkably documented history of Indigenous cultural demands, that have consistently sort, in this country, and in countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the United States, the right to continue cultural praxis and the right to speak in mother tongue. The sheer persistence of us on these matters, over many generations, even in the face of catastrophic loss is testimony enough to prove the direct correlation between Indigenous language and culture praxis and Indigenous health and wellbeing.

99 H De Korne, ‘Indigenous language education policy: supporting community-controlled immersion in Canada and the US’, *Language Policy*, vol.9, 2010, p.120.

100 *ibid.*

101 State Library NSW, ‘NSW State Library launches landmark project to rescue Indigenous languages’, media release, 12 August 2011, [http://blog.sl.nsw.gov.au/media/enclosures/Indigenous%20language%20lists\\_MR\\_120811.pdf](http://blog.sl.nsw.gov.au/media/enclosures/Indigenous%20language%20lists_MR_120811.pdf)

102 P Chandler, C Haid, C Jones, K Lowe & J Munro, *Aboriginal Languages Research: Impact of Learning an Aboriginal Language on Primary School Students’ Literacy in English*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, NSW, 2008, <http://ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/files/impact-learning-aboriginal-language-2008.pdf>

103 *ibid.*

104 T Begaye, *op.cit.*, p.50.

105 *ibid.*

Even so, in examining the literature afresh I came across an article which I can only say both disturbed me, and set the yes case in concrete for me. In a Canadian [British Columbia] study conducted by Darcy Hallet, Michael J. Chandler and Christopher E. Lalonde the matter of Indigenous youth suicide was examined<sup>106</sup>. In this study these authors found a direct link between the speaking of mother tongue and a reduction in Indigenous youth suicide rates. In their concluding discussion they stated:

the data reported above indicate that, at least in the case of BC, those bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six times greater.<sup>107</sup>

They then closed with the comment that "... these results demonstrate that indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong predictor of health and wellbeing in Canada's Aboriginal communities".<sup>108</sup>

Corroboration of Hallet, Chandler & Lalonde's conclusion can be found in the work of Dr A.M. Dockery. Without going into a detailed discussion of this study at this point I can say that the study itself was interesting in substantiating that the strength and health of cultural identity can be directly related to degrees of cultural investment. The concluding sentence "Indigenous people with stronger cultural identification, who speak Indigenous languages and who partake in traditional economic activities are happy more often than others"<sup>109</sup> speaks volumes. Dockery did identify that "... many Australians still see assimilation as the only solution to Indigenous disadvantage and traditional Indigenous culture as a barrier to progress"<sup>110</sup> but that did not prevent the recommendation that "the objective of policy should be to maximise wellbeing".<sup>111</sup>

Dockery did also touch on the other side of the coin, which is where learning of Indigenous cultural knowledge can cause stress and unhappiness. Further reading, however, has shown me that this is very specific to particular situations and not necessarily a generality. In a study on Indigenous psychological perception of community Brian Bishop, Simon Colquhoun and Gemma Johnson discuss the pressure that many Indigenous youth face in high cultural fluency situations because of the burden placed on them to learn highly complex, and oftentimes high degree private, knowledges at an accelerated rate because of the tremendous fear in communities over premature death of senior knowledge holders.<sup>112</sup> This burden, and the psychological ill-effect would be significantly addressed with positive changes to health standards.

As I said at the beginning of this paper, this document can be read as an impression only. It contains selected references from a far wider body of material collected and flagged as relevant to the full scope of this study, and the myriad of highly pertinent issues that have come to my attention through reading. Too often studies of this nature tend to push literature together without really providing the reader with a more complete picture of the dynamics that surround the issue/s at hand. I could, of course, stand accused of being overly longwinded in my approach, but in writing my first priority has been, and always will be, to serve the cultural interests of my own people. We cannot conduct our cultural business or stimulate our cultural dialogue based on compressed Westcentric style reporting, we want to 'hear' the whole story; we want to 'hear' the yarn that underpins all that we have to think about.

What we do need to think about in relation to what is emerging out of this paper is that there may well be bucket loads of literature on us and about us, but only a scant proportion of it can be attributed to our own Indigenous authorship. The cultural and linguistic problems and issues that we face have been studied from just about every conceivable angle, yet one thing keeps coming up for me, the avoidance of our spiritualism as legitimate systems of knowledge. Our Indigenous authors have no problem in asserting our spiritual epistemology, but the voice of our Indigenous authors is frankly not as loud in conventional academic circles as the Western interpretive voice. I foresee legitimate research opportunities for us to examine how our cultural praxis and our speaking of the languages given to us by our Spirit Elders helps us to function educationally, and I see legitimate research opportunities for us to explore from our Indigenous standpoint historical text about us. We are at a cross roads in academia where we need to stop being someone else's 'subject', we need to be our own knowledge producers and charters of our own cultural destinies.

106 D Hallet, MJ Chandler & CE Lalonde, 'Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide', *Cognitive Development*, vol.22, 2007, pp.392-399.

107 *ibid.*, p.398.

108 *ibid.*

109 AM Dockery, *Traditional Culture and the Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians: An Analysis of the 2008 NATSIS*, CLMR discussion paper series 2011/01, Centre for Labour Market Research, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, Perth, WA, 2011, p.18.

110 *ibid.*, p.19.

111 *ibid.*

112 B Bishop, S Colquhoun & G Johnson, 'Psychological sense of community: An Australian Aboriginal experience', *Journal of Community Psychology*, vol.34, no.1, 2006, pp.1 - 7.



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