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Section B: Teacher Education

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Reconciliation and the Maintenance of Indigenous Language in Urban Secondary Schools

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Introduction

Indigenous students in urban secondary schools in the Northern Territory are faced with barriers to their success in learning, in the education race. Amongst these is the question of language studies. Like all students, they must study English as a separate subject, they must study all other subjects using English as the language of instruction, and they must study a second language, a language other than English (LOTE), as a component of their Junior Secondary Studies Certificate. Most schools offer Indonesian and some are able to offer a broader choice. For the Indigenous student, social justice demands an addition to this range. It is illogical and unfair that schools, in some cases with up to 30 per cent Indigenous students, do not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in their programs. It is also short-sighted of schools to ignore the opportunity to provide these students with a subject area in which their culture is dominant.

It is not necessary to debate that Indigenous languages could be included as a student's LOTE requirement — they are quite clearly languages other than English. There are, however, two

stumbling blocks. Firstly, it is a relatively recent concept that Aboriginal languages are legitimate languages for inclusion in schools programs, and secondly, there are few teachers with formal teaching credentials who are also capable of teaching and available to teach Indigenous languages. Although both these factors can be overcome, they require a massive shift in attitude to secure them. It is a shift which must take place but advocates for the inclusion of Aboriginal languages in secondary schools must ensure that the entire school community, including the Northern Territory Education Department, accepts the legitimacy of the courses developed and the choice of teachers, even if they are not formally qualified. Without such acceptance, the courses will not have equal status with other subjects and programs within schools and that status is the element which is essential to the on-flowing benefits for students.

The role of Indigenous language studies in urban secondary settings is completely different to its role in a community school. The student population is so mixed that the issue of using an Aboriginal language as the language of instruction is irrelevant. The mounting pressure from Aboriginal parents and teachers, and from non-Aboriginal teachers as well, is to provide programs where Aboriginal languages will be studied as LOTE subjects. From such programs, students will learn some aspects of the chosen language but, unless the language is also used at home, it is unlikely that fluency will be achieved. This is not the prime advantage to be gained from such courses. The 'hidden curriculum' in language maintenance

courses is much more complex and the indisputable benefits apply to all students, not just Indigenous students. Three main areas of benefit can be isolated: cultural understanding will be developed; status and self-esteem will increase for Aboriginal students; and cross-cultural respect will be enhanced.

Language and culture are inextricably mixed. We cannot study a language and its usage without developing some understanding of the culture it reflects. From studying Indigenous languages, students learn the culture through the language itself and the way it is taught. They learn how to act, how to speak and when to speak. From learning a language, students develop an understanding of the protocols and norms of the society it springs from.

For Aboriginal students, to be given the opportunity to learn their own language in a school setting, or even another Aboriginal language, sends a powerful message. Until recent times, it was not considered that their language, and thus their culture, had a place in schools. We can extrapolate on this, as no doubt generations of Aboriginal students have done. If the language and the culture of a people have no place, do the people of that language have a place? If the language and the culture are inferior to English and its culture, are the Indigenous students inferior to other students? The inclusion of Indigenous languages in schools will work to counteract these negative perceptions. Aboriginal students will realise that assimilation has given way to multiculturalism and that their culture has value and should be celebrated. This flows on to the students themselves. Through language studies, their position in the school and their status is confirmed. Students who believe they belong to a school and are respected by it are much more likely to make their school experiences successful. This will lead to better involvement in the education process and greater accessibility to the life opportunities which flow from it.

The third aspect is cross-cultural respect. Tolerance and harmony are end products of cross-cultural sharing. To see Indigenous languages and culture given respect within a school, to see Aboriginal Elders in the teaching role, to see Aboriginal students in classes where they have greater initial understandings than other students, ensures a

change in perception for all students who participate in these courses and for those who are aware of students who participate in these courses and for those who are aware of them. This effect flows on to the people around these students as well, to parents and the community at large. Through Indigenous language courses, we can build bridges of understandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, move closer to social equity and thus, enhance our chances of reconciliation.

It is important to step from these philosophical concepts to the practical, to consider how schools can implement these ideas and to judge their success. Sanderson High School has made this step. The Sanderson experience has been thoroughly documented in a yet to be published research study, *Sanderson High School Aboriginal Language Program*, by Annarella Sebbens, an Aboriginal educator who is a member of the team of educators charged with the responsibility of developing, implementing and reviewing the program. As Sebbens explains (forthcoming: 2), Sanderson High School establish its Aboriginal Language Program in 1995, Sanderson High School is a government school comprising 800 students of which 18 per cent are Aboriginal. In excess of 82 per cent of the school's Aboriginal students are involved in the program.

The original goal of the program was 'to give Aboriginal students an opportunity to complete their Languages Other Than English (LOTE) requirements for the Junior Secondary Studies Certificate' (Sebbens, forthcoming: 3) but the school was also hoping to provide impetus for Aboriginal language studies to extend to the senior school, to improve the success rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the LOTE area, to develop cultural understandings for all students and to develop 'greater empathy (for Aboriginal culture) among the non-Aboriginal student population' (Sebbens, forthcoming: 3) through their inclusion in the program.

In the program, 'the students are learning the Yolngu Maths languages from two Indigenous speakers ... (and the program) employs a holistic approach incorporating many aspects of culture, including respect and protocols' (Sebbens, forthcoming: 6). The program is divided into two major categories, **Learning the Culture and the**

Words and Aboriginal People Should Teach Us (Sebbens, forthcoming: 6). In her research document, Sebbens stresses that Aboriginal people contributed to the development, implementation and delivery of the program.

Assessment of the success of this program can be made through reflection on the participants' comments about it and their reactions to it. Sebbens records that 'prior to the language program, Aboriginal students were reluctant to study languages that were offered to them' (forthcoming: 7). She notes that teachers stated that greater involvement and higher levels of successful completion of LOTE requirements resulted. Thus, the initial goal of the program was met, Sebbens also records student enjoyment and interest in 'learning from the elders about the culture, the kinship system and food gathering practices in association with learning the language' (forthcoming: 7). One Aboriginal student stated 'I've learnt to respect the elder people' whilst a non-Aboriginal student said, '[I learn] how to act around Aboriginal people and how to respect their culture' (Sebbens, forthcoming: 8). Another non-Aboriginal student said that the course was designed 'to teach people that go to Sanderson the language and the respect and who ... the Aboriginal people [are]' (Sebbens, forthcoming: 8). Sebbens also notes that the Principal in 1995, Ms S. Hooper, commented, 'Racism in this school is greatly reduced and I strongly support this program' (forthcoming: 9).

This range of commentary indicates that the goals which Sanderson High School was interested in achieving were largely met. It also appears the aspects of the 'hidden curriculum' mentioned earlier, cultural understanding increased status and self-esteem for Aboriginal students and cross-cultural respect, were either directly sought by or became by-products of this program. The Sanderson High School program provided obvious benefits for those directly involved in it and it now rests with educators to apply these benefits more broadly. It is not suggested that all schools in the Northern Territory, or Australia-wide, adopt the Sanderson model. It is, however, in the light of Sanderson High's experience, appropriate that all urban secondary schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students be compelled to address the language and cultural needs of these students. It is also appropriate that

schools with small numbers of Indigenous students consider other methods of addressing these needs.

The process of Indigenous language inclusion usually begins at one of three points, parents and students may initiate it, educators within a school setting may; or a change in this direction may be imposed from educators outside the school setting. Where no action is occurring, the Northern Territory Education Department should be directing schools to begin the process. If the parents or the educators within the school setting have already started to seek this improvement, they should be encouraged to continue. This can be done through more generous staffing, education for educators and financial support for programs.

Within the school, a series of steps needs to be taken. Initially, an assessment of the Indigenous population must be made. If the number of Indigenous students is too few, the school may need to address the issue of establishing a cluster incorporating other schools. In our hi-tech video link-up age, distance is no obstacle here. If, however, the number of students is reasonably large, as is the case with most urban schools in the Darwin area, each school should be compelled and assisted to begin work on an Indigenous language program which is tailored to the needs of its students.

The first step is to establish the attitude of the school's Aboriginal parents towards language inclusion. If the parent group does not wish the school to become involved, that wish should be respected. It should be noted here that the manner in which this opinion is sought is crucial and Aboriginal educators within schools need to be involved in this process. If the Aboriginal parents do wish the school to adopt an Indigenous language program, they must be involved from this point on and ultimate 'ownership' of the course needs to lie with them. Parents and students must be involved in decisions relating to what language or languages should be taught. If the concept that Indigenous language inclusion is beneficial to the entire school community, and indeed the Australian community, they will work cooperatively to see that other school-based needs are met. It follows that once schools are committed to making learning programs work, they will lobby those concerned educational bodies outside the school to ensure that accreditation is gained.

The acceptance of the need for Indigenous language programs outside the school system is equally complex. It is necessary that acceptance is actively sought and extensively gained. Unless there is wider acceptance, government funding will be limited and also, the gains made towards social equity for students will be wasted when they leave school. Educators can assist here by advertising their successes. If the general public can see the end-product, that Aboriginal students (and therefore Aboriginal people) can be re-enfranchised through a wider acknowledgement of their languages and cultures, and if people can be convinced that society benefits in the end, they will be more likely to support such acknowledgement.

Finally, it is evident that schools cannot and should not carry the full responsibility for establishing cross-cultural respect in Australia. Every person who understands the issues involved in cultural acceptance needs to contribute in every way they

can. People need to challenge attitudes in themselves and in venues where they can be effective. This means that everyone (educators, parents, health workers, writers, media moguls, politicians, film-makers, etc.) has a role to play in the re-establishment of the dignity of Aboriginal people and thus, in the healing process which Australian society needs to embrace. The increasing understanding of the need to include Indigenous language maintenance in this process demands that ignoring this need, as urban secondary schools have done for so long, is no longer an acceptable option.

References

Sebbens, Annarella (1998) *Sanderson High School Aboriginal Language*. (forthcoming). This reference is in draft form only at this stage. The author of this paper has gained access to Sebbens' material through her role as proof reader of Sebbens' manuscript. *Used with permission.*

