

A close-up, profile view of a young Indigenous boy with dark hair and eyes, looking towards the right. He is wearing a blue zip-up jacket. The lighting is warm and soft, highlighting his features.

A way forward for
**Indigenous
languages**

Should Aboriginal students be taught in their own languages?
Nola Purdie considers strategies for strengthening the quality of
Indigenous languages programs in schools.



More than a year on from the Australian Government's apology to the Stolen Generations, literacy and numeracy results for Indigenous students remain consistently below the national average.

As the government noted in its *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage* report of February 2009, 'the gulf that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in these critical areas remains significant.'

For many students who speak an Indigenous language, the language used in school plays a role in their educational outcomes. Addressing the state of Indigenous languages in schools may go some way towards addressing the gap in educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The Australian Government has shown strong support for Indigenous language education. The government's recent statement of support for the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* reaffirms the right of Indigenous peoples to have access to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Individual states and territories continue to debate over the implementation of bilingual education, however, with the recent furore over enforced English-language teaching in Northern Territory schools one timely example.

An ACER report, *Indigenous Language Programs in Australian Schools — A Way Forward*, aims to provide a snapshot of the current national situation in Indigenous languages education in Australian schools as a basis from which national projects can work to strengthen the quality of Indigenous languages programs in schools.



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In our report, we make a range of recommendations, including that federal, state and territory education departments support the maintenance, revitalisation, and rebuilding of Australian Indigenous languages by

creating opportunities for students to learn an Indigenous language as part of the Australian Government's School Languages Program.

We urge that students who have an Indigenous language as their first language be supported to learn that language either as part of the school's language program or as part of a bilingual education program.

Indigenous languages in schools

Before European settlement, as many as 250 distinct languages flourished across Australia. Today, less than 20 are considered to be strong. Several of these languages, however, are in danger of also being lost because they are spoken only by small groups of people, most of whom were more than 40 years of age.

Currently, many Indigenous communities are working hard to maintain or revive their languages. Within schools, also, there is increasing activity related to the teaching of Indigenous languages. These efforts urgently require support to ensure the survival of those languages still considered strong, and to revive those languages in danger of being lost with the passing of older generations.

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

Our report reveals that more than 16 000 Indigenous students and 13 000 non-Indigenous students located in 260 Australian schools are involved in an Indigenous language program.

Most of these students are located in government schools in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, New South Wales and South Australia.

More than 80 different Indigenous languages are taught in schools, but most of these languages are not spoken by students at home.

Only 28 per cent of the programs are first-language maintenance programs,

and include bilingual programs undertaken by students in the early years of schooling and throughout their schooling.

About 12 per cent of programs are second-language learning programs, whereby a language is taught to learners in the languages area of the school curriculum. In this type of program, students have little or no assumed knowledge of the target language.

The remaining 60 per cent of programs are language revival programs or language awareness programs.

Bilingual education

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, or two-way learning, programs.

Bilingual programs attract both proponents and detractors. Bilingual programs are often promoted as a route to the mastery of English as a second language. Children are taught literacy and numeracy skills and concepts first in their mother tongue (first language) so that they are able to use and understand them without conceptual interference from another language. The concepts learned in the mother tongue are later applied to the second language.

As we explore in our report, a growing body of research evidence shows that well-designed bilingual programs are academically effective and do not hold back students' acquisition of English. Research suggests that if literacy is established in a child's first language, it is easier to switch to another language. Research also suggests that childhood bilingualism enhances cognitive ability by promoting classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills, and creativity gains.

In addition to the academic and cognitive benefits associated with

bilingualism, there appears to be a consensus among those actively working in the area that bilingual education can assist in providing a sense of identity to speakers of Indigenous languages and their descendants. It is regularly asserted that the alienation felt by many Indigenous people can be ameliorated by connection to their heritage via language programs of various kinds. Positive effects such as increased motivation and self-esteem, and participation in school have also been reported.

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

Effective language programs

The development of successful programs in schools begins with careful negotiation with Indigenous people. It is essential to recognise protocols related to language ownership, maintenance, and revival. The recruiting and training of Indigenous teachers and the provision of ongoing support to them, the development of appropriate curriculum materials, the use of new technologies, and the funding and resourcing of school programs are all matters to be tackled with energy and sensitivity.

The *Indigenous Language Programs in Australian Schools* report suggests strategies for the strengthening of language projects, expressed

through a set of key principles, recommendations and case studies.

Large-scale projects such as the Digital Education Revolution, the National Curriculum and the School Languages Program could provide funding and opportunities to support school Indigenous languages programs.

Languages programs are not sustainable unless they are developed in partnership between the school and the owners of the language being taught. The most successful school language programs will flow from a collaborative approach involving Indigenous communities, Indigenous Language Centres, linguists, schools and teachers.

Our report emphasises that learning an Indigenous language and becoming proficient in the English language are complementary rather than mutually exclusive activities.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first people of this country and their languages are unique to it. The capacity to learn these languages and support their reclamation and long term maintenance as strong and viable languages is of great significance to all Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

Indigenous Language Programs in Australian Schools — A Way Forward was prepared by ACER researchers including myself, Tracey Frigo, and Clare Ozolins, as well as Geoff Noblett, Nick Thieberger and Janet Sharp. The report was funded by the Australian Government's School Languages Program.

The full report is available online from the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website at <www.deewr.gov.au/languageseducation> ■