



WATESOL

Westralian Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

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The Secretariat
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WATESOL Response to Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014

WATESOL is the professional association for all English as a Second Language teachers in Western Australia. It covers all sectors of English language teaching: ELICOS; Adult migrant colleges; Catholic Education; Independent schools; Department of Education WA (ESL/D and Aboriginal); All levels of instruction: primary, secondary and tertiary levels within these.

Our aims are to:

- ensure equal access to appropriate English language instruction for speakers of other languages and dialects (Indigenous, refugee and migrant background, and international students);
- further the development of quality professional learning programs at all levels; and
- provide advocacy on matters impacting on the teaching and learning of English as an additional language or dialect.

We greatly welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on this important document. In this regard, we fully endorse the joint submission made by ACTA, ALS and ALAA, which reflects robust research and best practice in Indigenous education. We also submit our own feedback based on the question format provided on the MCEECDYA website.

As peak body for ESL/D in Western Australia, we would be happy to continue contact to elaborate and discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely

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Signed on behalf of Belinda Stewart, WATESOL President
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Introduction

Our concerns in regard to Indigenous students are captured by the two documents that the Indigenous Education Action Draft Plan (henceforth referred to as the Draft Plan) identifies as underpinning and informing its proposals (p. 4): the *Australian Directions for Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (MCEETYA, 2006) (henceforth referred to as Australian Directions) and the *Review of Australian Directions for Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (Buckskin et al., 2009) (henceforth referred to as the Review). These documents duly:

- 1) consider that the “majority [of Indigenous students] will speak Aboriginal English (a non-standard dialect of English), a creole, one or more Indigenous languages or any combination of these as their first language” (MCEETYA, 2006; 13);
- 2) acknowledge the need for pedagogy and assessment appropriate for students with these distinctive language learning needs: “Without second language or dialect instruction...students fall behind at increasing rates. Lack of academic achievement and loss of confidence in these early years mean that most Indigenous students never catch up” (MCEETYA, 2006; 13); and
- 3) recognise the specific non-dominant education rights involved: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the same right as any other people to receive instruction in their own language” (Buckskin et al. 2009; 54).

WATESOL considers the three language principles highlighted above to be essential elements that must be included and foregrounded in the Draft Plan.

1. *What was your first impression of the Plan IEAP when you read it?*

These three fundamental points mentioned above need to be made explicit in the Draft Plan and guide its development.

The Australian Directions report emphasised and embedded the fundamental importance of students’ language backgrounds and the need to reconceptualise¹ the approach to Indigenous education to equitably accommodate for these backgrounds. These considerations and an understanding of its impact on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy on improving outcomes for Indigenous students are consistent with the Review and several other MCEETYA reports and numerous national and international reports (AHRC, 2009). In the Draft Plan itself, certain jurisdictions mention their own strategies for “students whose first language is not Standard Australian English” (p. 23, 27, 32); yet consideration of this basic fact is markedly absent from the Plan. Therefore, in this major aspect, the Plan is regressive.

Equally it is surprising that there is no mention of the language resources Indigenous students bring to the classroom. With reference made to assessment measures that do not appropriately take account for the language backgrounds of Indigenous students² there is a risk of perpetuating a deficit perception of students by positioning them by what they lack (p.13).

As implied in Australian Directions and the Review, the challenge for Indigenous education – and therefore the Plan - is to harness these language resources to then develop

¹ Hence the section title – *Why a new approach is needed*. Factors other than language were also considered such as the problems with teachers holding deficit views of students (MCEETYA, 2006;16).

² Such as the Australian Early Development Index (see Al Yamen, nd) and high stakes assessment like NAPLaN (Solano-Flores, 2008; Solórzano, R.W., 2008).

Standard Australian English (SAE) language proficiency (and as a result, SAE literacy and numeracy skills) in an additive manner. This notion has recently been reinforced in the Social Justice report 2009 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009) - the annual report on the human rights of Indigenous peoples in Australia.

2. *What questions, issues or concerns did the Plan IEAP raise for you?*

- The Review states that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home languages are almost always different from the languages required by mainstream. That difference must be both respected and provided for from the early years and on, in a connected and continuing way – for many, by treating English as a second language” (Buckskin, 2009; 24). Why have these essential factors (respect of and provision for different cultures) not been acknowledged?
- Where is the positive reinforcement of culture and identity that was prevalent in Australian Directions and the Review in the Draft Plan?
- Cultural (and therefore linguistic) considerations are not as integrated or as explicit as in the Australian Directions report. What made the Australian Direction report so unique was its inclusivity and sensitivity towards the important but often overlooked nuances Indigenous education, specifically the 3 points mentioned in the introduction.
- Outcomes, targets and performance indicators seem narrow in scope and there seems to be little reference to the longer term, broader social and cultural ambitions of Indigenous education.
- While the format is clear and simple to understand, there is a risk that key concepts will be poorly and tokenistically understood (such as ‘cultural inclusivity’) or overlooked (such as the additional language/dialect learning needs of students). The Plan could remedy this by expanding and embedding these concepts throughout the document to ensure a more culturally robust and appropriate approach.
- The suggestion to take Indigenous languages out of the school is of great concern. Indigenous education simply cannot be conceptualised without focussed consideration for Aboriginal languages, as exemplified in previous MCEETYA documents and the Australian Labour Party 2007 Platform and Constitution.
- Poor consideration of Aboriginal languages can needlessly and considerably impair the cognitive and social development of those students who do not speak SAE as a first language and therefore hinder their progress in SAE literacy and numeracy (Bialystok 1997; Bialystok 1999). Students need appropriate bilingual and English as a second language/dialect pedagogy to participate in schooling, depending on their language backgrounds.
- Why should children have access to bilingual Asian language programs³, but Indigenous children be denied access in schools to development and enrichment of their first languages in similar programs?

3. *Are there important issues that you feel have not been addressed in the Plan IEAP?*

Yes. As well as answering the questions highlighted above, there are other inter-related areas that need to be addressed. These include:

- **Rights:** One key conclusion of the Review in developing a positive direction for Indigenous education was that “the broader socio-cultural conditions of Indigenous peoples” (Buckskin, 2009 et al. 2009; 67) could not be separated from education; this

³ www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/aboutus/ministerial/yr2009/nov/mr041109_bilingual.pdf (Accessed 28th February 2010)

needs be reflected in the Plan. The most recent Social Justice Report (AHRC, 2009) reinforces the broader ramifications by making a further comprehensive case for the consideration of the language realities of Indigenous education.

- Equity: The Draft Plan - as a guiding, medium term document designed to achieve a world-standard education (MCCETYA, 2008) – has still to meet its responsibility achieve the equity goal set out in the Melbourne Declaration. Considering the already stated evidence pointing to the necessity of second language/dialect pedagogies for Indigenous students, it is unclear how the Draft Plan will achieve these goals. The Draft Plan - unlike Australian Directions document and as mentioned above - does not define the needs of students, and instead incorrectly implies that:
 - 1) students are a homogenous group with equal linguistic needs and backgrounds;
 - 2) students are fully proficient in SAE;
 - 3) students who are learners of SAE do not need to be considered
 - 4) students' linguistic background does not impact on their SAE literacy and numeracy development.

The language learning needs of students have become invisible. Therefore, the Plan needs to define its students to understand their needs in the first instance (see MCEETYA 2006 for an ample definition).

- Importance of home language in second language (SAE) development: We applaud the Draft Plan's recognition the importance of SAE literacy and numeracy development, however it is clear that pre-existing language skills and the current SAE learning needs are at least equally important to ensure strong holistic development. On summarising the findings of two meta-analyses of research on learning English, Goldenburg (2008) emphatically reinforces this and notes that "students should be helped to transfer what they know in their first language to learning tasks presented in English; teachers should not assume that transfer is automatic" (p.42).
- Two-way working: the Draft Plan needs to address how these outcomes are to be achieved within a frame of cultural inclusivity, Indigenous agency and two-way working. Two-way is essential in transferring knowledge from one language to another highlighted above.
- Evidence-based - Effective pedagogy and linguistic research: We believe that the Plan does not consider valuable research (national and international) on the role of language in academic, social, linguistic, cognitive and cultural development and social cohesion. This role was partially addressed in Australian Directions, and the Review greatly reinforced the need for culturally responsive pedagogy: these points need to be salient in the Draft Plan.

4. *What do you like about the Plan IEAP?*

The Plan gives some good, precise and practical actions. There is a range of positive initiatives, particularly in the areas of community involvement, educator training and higher education. WATESOL welcomes these initiatives in these areas, but further elaboration is needed to ensure clarity. Specifically,

- cultural inclusivity is included, but needs to be present throughout the document. Also, it is near impossible to be culturally inclusive if students and the language (both home and SAE) learning needs are not considered.
- The development of Aboriginal principals, teachers and Aboriginal education workers is to be especially lauded. This potential could be developed further through two-way methodologies in classroom and school planning to enable the reconstruction of cultural and social relations of power and knowledge in schools (Buckskin et al. 2009; 67).

5. *Have you any further advice that you feel might strengthen the Plan?*

- Consideration of students' language background in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy needs to be foregrounded. The Draft Plan should make links to the National Curriculum to ensure that the principle of cultural inclusivity is strongly embedded therein and that the language learning needs of Indigenous students are catered for following empirical linguistic research.
- Distinctive language learning pathways and needs (such as multiple entry points) need to be factored in as fundamental considerations (see the WA EAL/D course of study (Curriculum Council, 2007) for a suitable and successful model).
- More explicit elaboration is needed regarding the central place of Aboriginal languages in education. The Draft Plan should make use of pre-existing documents such as the recommendations from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' Indigenous Language Programmes in Australian Schools Report and the National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2005.
- Indigenous students need to be positively valued. They come to the classroom with a range of language skills that need to be reflected in the school and therefore recognised in the Draft Plan.
- While cultural inclusivity has been mentioned in the Draft Plan, and this is to be lauded, it is essential that mechanisms for two-way collaboration are built-in to implementation at every level, as has been done in the writing of the Draft Plan.
- Outcomes, targets and performance indicators can be used to ensure the integrity of cultural inclusivity, appropriate delivery of ESL/D pedagogy, number of ESL/D or bilingual programs, development of a National Curriculum that meets the language learning needs of Indigenous students, the number of Aboriginal educators trained, the number of educators with Aboriginal languages skills, the number of Aboriginal language courses available at universities, VET pathways for bilingual students and number of schools that use two-way processes.
- While use of phonics has its place, it should not be used in the place of but rather as part of a balanced literacy program delivered using ESL/D practices as appropriate.

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