



Applied Linguistics Association  
of Australia



**The Secretariat  
Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs  
(MCEECDYA)  
PO Box 202  
Carlton South  
Victoria 3053**

3 March 2010

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) and Australian Linguistic Society (ALS) are pleased to submit jointly the attached response to the Stage 2 Consultation Draft of the Indigenous Education Action Plan (IEAP) 2010–2014.

The response was prepared and reviewed by councillors and representatives from each organisation who possess extensive expertise in the field of Indigenous Education.

A letter of support for the submission from Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, President of the Australian Academy of Humanities (AAH), is appended to the document. The submission also has the full endorsement of ACTA's constituent state and territory associations for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Australia.

ACTA, ALAA and ALS would welcome the opportunity to consult further with MCEECDYA and to collaborate in the ongoing development and implementation of the IEAP and the planning and facilitation of programs and strategies which will assist educators to continue to bridge the gap for Indigenous students in Australia.

Yours Sincerely

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**(ALS)**

**Response to Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014**

*3 March 2010*

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## **INTRODUCTION: ACTA, ALAA, ALS AND OUR CONCERNS**

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) and the Australian Linguistic Society (ALS) welcome this opportunity to respond jointly to the MCEECDYA *Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014* (henceforth the Draft Plan).

**The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA)** is the national coordinating body of State and Territory professional associations for the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Our objectives are to:

- ensure access to English language instruction for speakers of other languages and dialects (Indigenous, refugee and migrant background, and international students)
- encourage implementation and delivery of quality professional programs at all levels, and
- promote study, research and development of TESOL at state, national and international levels.

Our membership comes from all educational sectors: pre-schools; schools; adult, community, TAFE and other VET settings; consultancy services in State/Territory Education Departments and the Independent and Catholic sectors; and university teacher education departments. It includes educators and researchers working in Indigenous education at all levels.

**The Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA)** is the national association for those involved in teaching, learning, research and scholarship related to language and languages in applied settings (e.g. education, the law, health, business, translating and interpreting). The Association aims to provide leadership in applied linguistics in Australia, to produce information and research about language and languages, to cooperate with groups interested in or relevant to applied linguistics, and to advocate on behalf of this professional community to government and other bodies regarding language and related issues. Our membership is comprised of teachers, teacher educators,

academics and researchers, and includes educators and researchers with long-standing experience in Indigenous education and Indigenous languages.

**The Australian Linguistic Society (ALS)** is the national organisation for linguists and linguistics in Australia. Its primary goal is to further interest in and support for linguistics research and teaching in Australia. The membership is diverse. Many members are staff or students at universities or research institutes within Australia and internationally, while others work for State/Territory Education Departments, including in implementing policy within Indigenous communities. Our membership includes researchers with extensive experience with Australian Indigenous languages and creoles, Indigenous varieties of English and Standard English.

The concerns of members of ACTA, ALAA and ALS in regard to Indigenous students are well described in the two key documents that the Draft Plan identifies as underpinning and informing its proposals (p. 4): MCEETYA (2006) *Australian Directions for Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, and Buckskin et al., (2009) *Review of Australian Directions for Indigenous Education 2005-2008*. From our perspectives, these documents:

1. offer a clear description of Indigenous learners of Standard Australian English (Standard Australian English)
2. acknowledge the importance of these learners' other languages and varieties, and therefore
3. the necessity for assessment and pedagogy that targets these learners' distinctive language learning needs.

### **1. Indigenous learners of Standard Australian English**

The MCEETYA (2006) report points out that:

Indigenous students are not homogeneous: they reflect the cultural, social and economic diversity of the communities in which they live. (p. 13)

This report also records that these students 'are widely dispersed across schools in remote, rural, regional and urban Australia' and that they 'represent a high percentage of

enrolments in remote and community-based schools, [while] the majority attend regional and urban schools where most of their peers are non-Indigenous’ (p. 13). These schools ‘are also diverse in terms of size, resources, staffing levels and the quality and retention of principals and teachers’ (p. 13).

In regard to Indigenous students’ language backgrounds – which is the entry point for our concerns – the MCEETYA (2006) report makes the following important distinctions:

Some Indigenous students start school speaking Standard Australian English, however, the majority will speak Aboriginal English (a non-standard dialect of English)<sup>1</sup>, a creole, one or more Indigenous languages or any combination of these as their first language. (p. 13)

The MCEETYA (2006) report elaborates:

In the 2001 Census, about one in eight Indigenous Australians (12 percent) reported that they spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home. The majority (about 80 percent) reported that they spoke English. However, the Census does not differentiate between standard Australian English and Aboriginal English. Kaldor and Malcolm (‘The language of school and the language of the Western Australian Aboriginal schoolchild – Implications for education’, *Aborigines of the West: Their Past and Their Present*, p. 411) suggest that ‘Aboriginal children’s speech today is probably best seen as a post-creole continuum,’ and Harkins (‘Structure and Meaning in Australian Aboriginal English’, *Asian Englishes: an international journal of the sociolinguistics of English in Asia/Pacific*, 2000, 3 (2): 60) asserts that ‘Australian Aboriginal English ... is now the primary language of internal and wider communication for the majority of Australian Aboriginal people.’ The literature also reveals that standard Australian English spoken by

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘dialect’ is often interpreted as referring to supposedly inferior or defective forms of a language. This interpretation has no scientific foundation. Linguists generally prefer the term ‘variety’ as a neutral term that denotes the systematically different forms associated with a language. (It should be noted that the term ‘language’ is also problematic if placed under scrutiny.) ‘Standard language’ refers to a variety that, for various complex reasons, has acquired prestige and is codified in grammar books and other prescriptive texts. (Note that this situation is not static. The post-War legitimisation of ‘Standard Australian English’ is one example.) This submission retains the term ‘dialect’ because it is now established in policies and programs. However, in this context, no disparaging connotations attach.

Indigenous students frequently shows evidence of conceptual features that are not shared with non-Indigenous speakers. Aboriginal English shows itself at the level of conceptualization, even when it is not so apparent at the level of linguistic form. (See, for example, the extensive body of work by Ian G. Malcolm, as well as recent work by F. Sharifian, ‘Cultural conceptualisations in English words: A study of Aboriginal children in Perth’). (p. 33)

An understanding of the diversity of Indigenous language backgrounds is crucial to any plan to improve Indigenous students’ education. In the Northern Territory, for example, several dozen different Aboriginal languages are in active use by Indigenous people, who constitute approximately 30 per cent of the Territory’s total population of 200,000 (Grimes, 2009, p. 2). The dominant or only language of the majority of Indigenous children entering NT schools is any one or more of these languages and/or Aboriginal English and/or an Aboriginal creole. Aboriginal varieties of English and Aboriginal creoles have significantly distinct and systematic differences from Standard English, both linguistically and conceptually (Sharifian, Rochecouste, & Malcolm, 2004; Butcher, 2008). The same diversity is found, to a greater or lesser degree, across Australia, most notably in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales. We note that, although the Queensland and Western Australian sections of the Draft Plan refer (minimally) to ‘students whose first language is not Standard Australian English’ (p. 27), the main body of the Draft Plan consistently fails to make even this acknowledgement.

Our members who work with Indigenous students have first-hand experience of these inter-related linguistic, cultural and conceptual issues and distinctions, and their impact on educational outcomes.

***This joint submission takes the MCEETYA 2006 description of Indigenous students’ language backgrounds to be foundational in considering their learning needs.***

## **2. The place of Indigenous languages in education**

Buckskin et al. (2009) state that:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the same right as any other people to receive instruction in their own language. (p. 54)

This right has international recognition going back to the 1950s (UNESCO, 1953) and is supported by numerous international agreements and mechanisms.<sup>2</sup>

The 2006 MCEETYA report describes previous policies and practices as ‘predicated on the supposed “inferiority” of Indigenous Australians’ and contributing to ‘a tendency for systems and schools to devalue the educational potential of Indigenous students and to overlook the cultural, linguistic and social capital they bring to the classroom’ (p. 16). In relation to ‘Engagement and Connections’, which is one of the six priority domains in the Draft Plan, the 2006 MCEETYA report states that:

[e]ngagement presupposes that teachers and students (and schools and communities) understand each other and that there is effective two-way communication. Most Indigenous students are not native speakers of standard Australian English. Their home language is usually Aboriginal English, a creole, one or more Indigenous languages or any combination of these. The home language, whether an Indigenous language or a contact language like Aboriginal English, *not only carries the culture of Indigenous students but also encapsulates their identity*. For schools to put standard Australian English in an oppositional relationship to the home language, for example, by making it the only recognised vehicle of oral communication in schools, will be to invite resistance, whether active or passive, on the part of Indigenous students. (p. 17; our emphasis)

In addition to issues of basic rights and student engagement, purely pragmatic considerations support the use, maintenance and strengthening of children’s mother tongues in their education. Decades of practical experience and an overwhelming body of research show that second/additional language learning is most effective if based on a firm foundation in the learner’s mother tongue (see Grimes, 2009, for a comprehensive bibliography, including 257 publications since 2000; also August & Shanahan, 2008;

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<sup>2</sup> These include the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (Article 4); the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Article 14); and the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (Articles 5 and 6).

Collier, 1992; Cummins, 1978, 1980; Datta, 2007; McKay, 1997; McKay, Davies, Devlin, Clayton, Oliver, & Zammit, 1997).

It should be noted that ACTA is the peak body representing *English* language educators in Australia. Our members are committed to the proposition that learners' first/other languages must be central to thinking, policies and action in English language and literacy education, and Australian education in general.

***This submission cannot emphasise too strongly the necessity of giving Indigenous languages a valued place in policy making and curriculum for Indigenous students.***

### **3. Distinctive and differentiated language learning pathways and needs**

The issues just identified mean that Indigenous learners of Standard Australian English come to formal education in general, and English in particular, *from distinctive and differentiated linguistic and cultural starting points*. Their starting points for learning are linguistically and culturally embodied skills and understandings of the world, as is true for all human beings.

#### **3.1 Pedagogy**

Effective pedagogies are based on at least four crucial ingredients:

- (i) understanding what learners *already know and can build from* (i.e. learners' starting points), which help determine
- (ii) specifications of what learners don't know and *need to learn* (i.e. desired educational outcomes)
- (iii) an understanding of *the processes* by which learners move from (i) to (ii) and of *recognisable milestones* along the way (i.e. an understanding of learning pathways)
- (iv) strategies that are informed by this understanding (i.e. teaching plans and methods) and that assist learners *to move between* what they already know and what they need to know.

These ingredients define what is meant by ‘scaffolded’ teaching (cf. Draft Plan, p. 14). They apply to all learning areas – as much to learning mathematics or history as they do to learning English as a second/additional language/dialect.

Buckskin et al. (2009) state 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*. (p. 25; our emphasis).

Specialist pedagogies in teaching English as a second/additional language or dialect are based on the four ingredients just listed.<sup>3</sup> The MCEETYA (2006) report identifies a lack of this specialist instruction at the centre of the educational gap for Indigenous students:

Disproportionate numbers of Indigenous students do not meet national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5 and 7 – results are generally about 20 percent below the national average. Of grave concern is the fact that the proportion of Indigenous students who meet these benchmarks drops significantly from Year 3 to Year 7. Research attributes this drop to the difference between the acquisition of basic interpersonal communication skills in a new language (which takes about two years) and academic language proficiency (which takes around seven years). From preschool to Year 3, most learning is based on acquiring interpersonal communication skills. At Year 4, the focus changes to the acquisition of academic language proficiency. *Without second language or dialect instruction at this point, 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. (p. 13; our emphasis)

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<sup>3</sup> Different jurisdictions in Australia (and elsewhere) use different terminology to denote pedagogy that is directed to learning standard varieties of English by non-native speakers. Accepted terms are teaching *English as a second language or dialect* (ESL/D) and *English as an additional language or dialect* (EAL/D). The latter has gained favour among many (but not all) educators since it captures the situation of English language learners who already speak more than one language/dialect other than a standard variety of English.

Although the guidelines for submissions on the Draft Plan preclude comment on Chapter 3 ('Jurisdictional Priorities'), we note that Queensland and Western Australia have acknowledged the need to 'provide targeted support to students whose first language is not Standard Australian English' (pp. 23, 27), while the Northern Territory will provide 'school-based and regionalised support for teachers and school leaders in literacy, numeracy and English as a Second Language including though coaching and mentoring' (p. 33). We strongly endorse these elements of the state and territory policy platforms, noting also that they refer to speakers of Aboriginal English and creoles as well as traditional Indigenous languages. We also note that similar commitments are conspicuously absent from the remainder of the Draft Plan.

In regard to specific (as distinct from specialist) 'interventions', the MCEETYA (2006) report describes some 'Indigenous specific intervention programs that supplement mainstream effort' as 'highly successful' but also states that 'only a small proportion of the total population of Indigenous students is able to access them' (p. 16). Further:

Although invaluable, these programs have had unintended consequences. Indigenous education has come to be seen as peripheral rather than integral to core business. In addition, the funding of Indigenous education through special programs has led to dependence on short-term solutions. In other words, Indigenous education has been 'bolted on' rather than 'built in' to mainstream effort, becoming the province of specialists and committed individuals instead of systems as a whole. (p. 16)

We agree that 'bolted on' programs, as described in the MCEETYA (2006) report, can have and often have had the consequences described. We also agree with the report's recommendation that 'the lessons learnt from strategic intervention programs are "built in" to core business to become everyone's business: departmental staff, principals, teachers, school staff, Indigenous students, parents/caregivers, families and communities.' (p. 16)

However, a built-in approach – also described as a whole-of-school, mainstreaming and inclusive approach – can have the equally unintended consequence of becoming a 'one

size fits all' approach, as has happened in Australia and elsewhere (see McCarty, 2008, for a description of this approach in the USA). To change the metaphor, withdrawing support from successful and invaluable programs – that is, from evidence-based successes – is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. If the aspiration of 'learning lessons from strategic intervention programs' (p. 16) is to be more than a rhetorical nod in the final Plan, these lessons should be probed and built upon.

The required 'paradigm shift in how education systems and schools respond to the learning needs of Indigenous students' (p. 16) is that schools view diversity in their populations *and* programs as integral to educational provision for all. In other words, *difference* should not be equated with *deficit* in either individuals or programs. From this standpoint, differentiated, targeted programs can respond to students' diverse starting points and accord respect to *all* learning pathways. If the Plan is committed to evidence-based strategies, much can be learned from schools that have made responding appropriately to diversity their core business<sup>4</sup> (cf. MCEETYA, 2006, p. 16). The differentiated programs in these schools are:

- not seen as short-term
- do not devalue students' educational potential or assume that disparity in educational outcomes is normal
- do not assume that 'students are to blame for their poor educational outcomes' (p.16)
- are open-ended and supportive in the pathways they provide.

The distinction between 'special programs for some students' and 'engaging all students in learning' (p. 16) is a false dichotomy based on selectively deployed and unsubstantiated evidence.

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples of schools and programs that accept and value diversity (in these cases, in regard to refugee and migrant background students) are Holyroyd High School in Sydney (Hoddinott, 2006), Debney Park and Chandler Secondary Colleges in Melbourne, and Milpera State High School in Brisbane.

Our associations are committed to the position that distinctive, differentiated and expert second language pedagogies are required to meet the needs of those Indigenous students who are learners of Standard Australian English.

### **3.2 Assessment**

The fact that the very many Indigenous students who are learning Standard Australian English have different starting points and follow distinctive language learning and other educational pathways also makes uniform specifications of milestones and standards of achievement problematic. Assessments of literacy and numeracy that are derived from age-based norms for speakers of Standard Australian English as a mother tongue will yield distorted and largely worthless data – whether diagnostic or formative – about beginners in English and those in the process of learning it, including speakers of Aboriginal English and creoles, for the following reasons.

First, these assessments are liable to make false assumptions about learning contexts (Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2009) and about age-appropriate knowledge of Standard Australian English. Second, because assessment tasks are written (from a particular cultural viewpoint) in a language that learners do not understand or understand only partially, and they require learners to respond in that language, they do not permit learners to demonstrate what they *do* know and *can* do. Third, such aged-based assessments of literacy and numeracy fail to provide data that relates to these learners' *actual* learning milestones or progress, for example, in mastering the complexities of Standard Australian English question forms (see Lightbown & Spada, 1999 for an overview of research into second language learning pathways). Fourth, because they do not take account of learners' mother tongues, the data they provide is open to misinterpretation – for example, a failure to recognise phonemic differences in Standard Australian English has been taken, quite incorrectly, to indicate that learners have a speech or hearing disability.

Some of our members report that when young Indigenous children (particularly in remote areas) are assessed in English in the classroom by English-speaking teachers, they tend to withdraw or be silent. If the same children are taken outside to more familiar settings and

are assessed by people whom they trust, in language with which they are familiar, they demonstrate full competence in the skills and knowledge being assessed.

There is a role for assessments in English which measure learners' knowledge of English and skills in that language, as distinct from their general language proficiency or proficiency in languages/varieties other than Standard English. However, assessments in English should not assume sole responsibility for measuring everything a learner knows and can do.

Aside from being misleading, in painting a negative picture of learners, assessments that fail to take account of these matters impact negatively on learners' sense of worth and ongoing engagement with formal education.

Accurate and informative documentation of Indigenous students' starting points and progress towards appropriate uses of Standard Australian English requires mapping against the benchmarks and milestones of actual, documented learner pathways. Such documentation exists in some Australian assessment tools (Australian Education Council, 1994; Department of Education and Training, 2009; Education Queensland, 1999, 2002; McKay, 2007; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004a, 2004b), although further research and development is needed.

***We are committed to the position that initial and ongoing assessments of Indigenous learners of Standard Australian English require assessment tools that can map these learners' actual pathways towards agreed English language and other educational outcomes.***

## **RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS IN THE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

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

The Draft Plan is clearly presented, both in the substance of its proposals and stylistically.

Its focus is on outcomes and performance indicators.

These are valuable in:

- setting targets to which government might be held accountable
- articulating valuable aspirations that would be hard to dispute.

We endorse all of the Outcomes stated for each priority domain and, with minor reservations, most of the Targets and Performance Indicators.

However, the Outcomes and Target statements are problematic in so far as they:

- skim over *what is needed* to achieve these Outcomes and Targets – this is where the substantive debates lie
- can be – and are – assumed to *specify pathways* towards these Outcomes and Targets; for example, the planned national collaborative, systemic and school level actions are confined to description of literacy programs and pay no attention to the (Standard) English **language** learning on which English literacy rests (for example, the need for speakers of Indigenous languages and creoles to build a foundation in understanding and speaking English, and to acquire a new phonemic, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic system for meaning-making; the quite different needs for speakers of Aboriginal varieties of English to discern and discriminate between these varieties and Standard English and the contexts for their effective use)
- can – and, in practice, do – *exclude important considerations* about how Outcomes and Targets might be reached, most notably the long-standing and comprehensive evidence (see **The place of Indigenous languages in education** above) that:
  - supporting mother tongue development is the best foundation for learning other languages and varieties, in this case, Standard Australian English

- oracy in Standard English is, with rare exceptions, the best foundation for learning literacy in English<sup>5</sup>
- can be – and, in practice, are – used beyond the Draft Plan to conflate questioning of favoured/implicit pathways to given targets with opposition to the targets themselves, for example,
  - when those who criticise a mandated approach to learning English phonics are positioned as opposing or hindering Indigenous learners’ gaining literacy in English, *or*
  - when those who advocate bilingual approaches to developing literacy are positioned as wishing to hold Indigenous student ‘back’ from gaining literacy in English.

See answers to questions below for an exemplification of these points.

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

### 2.1 Concerns

We have the following major concerns about the Draft Plan.

(i) The Draft Plan confuses (Standard) *English* with *literacy* and with *language* in general. Specifically, it:

- confuses **learning (Standard) English** with **learning literacy** – the Draft Plan makes frequent reference to literacy learning but never (except in some parts of Chapter 3) to learning English; it completely disregards the learning pathways and associated learning tasks for Indigenous learners of English as an additional language/dialect, and so provides no basis for system or school action in providing appropriate ESL programs

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<sup>5</sup> Exceptions to the principle that oracy in a language is the best foundation for literacy in that language are found with highly educated learners (usually adults) learning foreign languages or ancient languages such as Latin.

- **equates *English with language*** – references to ‘language’ frequently actually mean ‘English’ and hence **ignore the other languages** spoken by the majority of Indigenous Australians or treats them as marginal (e.g. p. 7: do the ‘language’ data derived from the Australian Early Development Index provide information about children’s proficiency in Standard English only or does it also provide data on proficiency in Aboriginal English, creoles and/or Indigenous languages?)
- ignores the fact that Standard Australian English is **a particular English dialect/variety** which is dominant in the public domain in this country and which is not equally accessible to all – failure to make this explicit is to fail to articulate the rationale for the privileged position of English in education, to imply the innate superiority of English and conversely imply the innate inferiority of other languages or varieties of English and their speakers, and to provide no basis for meeting the distinctive learning needs of Aboriginal English speakers
- provides no place for **utilising learners’ languages as stepping stones** to either English or literacy, much less for **developing Aboriginal languages** in their own right.

(ii) The Draft Plan perpetuates a deficit view of Indigenous students by:

- describing disadvantage with **no reference to the contexts that create disadvantages** for these students, thereby perpetuating a view of them as inherently lacking skills and knowledge (e.g. see p. 7 and the depiction of Indigenous children starting school; or p. 17 and the description of Indigenous students failing to complete school)
- relying on research findings that **fail to take account of the linguistic and cognitive resources that Indigenous students actually do bring to school** (e.g. pp. 7, 13).
- provides no ground for **questioning the appropriateness of specific assessment tools** (e.g. the Australian Early Development Index and NAPLaN) with this learner group or **for proposing improvements** in these tools.

(iii) Although the 2006 MCEETYA report clearly describes the foundational relationship of language to culture and identity ('The home language, whether an Indigenous language or a contact language like Aboriginal English, *not only carries the culture of Indigenous students but also encapsulates their identity*', cited above), ***the Draft Plan almost entirely excludes mention of language issues*** in regard to all six priority domains, and never invites their systematic consideration (see (iii) below).

(iv) ***The Draft Plan's implied understanding of society, culture and identity is tokenistic, impoverished and static*** – in its disconnection of Indigenous languages and language use from its attention to culture, its conception of 'cultural competence' and its depiction of education, literacy, employment and the full life.

For example, the Draft Plan fails to accord any place for the orally-based practices and understandings that characterise many Indigenous communities, and how these practices might support further learning. To illustrate, in a recent article Kral (2009) writes:

In the Australian Western Desert, verbal arts are central to social interaction. ... Recent research has shown that young adults in remote desert communities are adapting oral narrative skills and exploring an expanding repertoire of multimodal practices (Kral, 2007). Young people, familiar with the oral, visual and gestural features of sand storying telling, readily embrace multimodal literacies by adapting the narrative schemata of sand stories to new multimedia forms. In other locations, traditional oral narrative schemas, verbal arts and speech styles have seeped into new song writing and recording practices. ... new forms of textual communication and linguistic creativity are emerging where even those with few alphabetic literacy are using digital technologies to create song recordings, films and slide shows (pp. 43, 44).

In citing this passage, we should not be interpreted as dismissing or downgrading the importance of Indigenous students gaining conventional literacy skills in Standard English (see our response to Question 1 above). Rather, our point is that the Draft Plan implies that Indigenous literacy practices are non-existent or detrimental and should be

replaced. Nowhere in the document is there any indication that these practices might be encouraged in their own right and as routes into other skills and opportunities.

In contrast to the static and dated notion of cultural competence, we propose that the final Plan should embody the assumptions underpinning **‘inter-cultural’ or ‘two way’ approaches to language, culture and social interaction**. These approaches view cross-linguistic and cross-cultural interactions as dynamic processes that bring the different languages and cultural assumptions into a ‘third’, interactive and negotiated space. In this space, each party learns about the other, and works to understand and accommodate the other to reach new understandings and agreements (Reynolds, 2005). From this perspective, teachers do not simply induct their students into fixed cultural and social norms but rather are mediators of and between cultures.

In the classroom, the principles underpinning inter-cultural approaches can be summarised as:

**(1) Active construction**

- Learning involves the purposeful and active construction of knowledge within a socio-cultural context of use.
- Learners explore language and culture through active engagement.
- Learners develop a personal, inter-cultural space with multiple dimensions.

**(2) Making connections**

- Learning is based upon previous knowledge and requires challenges to preconceptions that learners bring to the classroom.
- These challenges lead to new insights through which learners make connections to reorganise and extend their existing frameworks of knowledge and belief.

**(3) Social interaction**

- Communicating about linguistic and cultural differences and similarities.
- Communicating across linguistic and cultural boundaries.
- Recognising these boundaries and exploring why they are constructed.
- Engaging with unfamiliar conceptual systems through language.

#### **(4) Reflection**

- Critically and constructively reflecting on and questioning linguistic and cultural differences and similarities.

#### **(5) Critically and constructively reflecting on one's own inter-cultural behaviour**

- Articulating the multiple dimensions of one's own inter-cultural space and identity.

(adapted from Liddicoat, Papademetre, & Scarino, 2003; Lo Bianco & Crozet, 2003; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999).

(v) Despite reference to engaging with Indigenous Australians (e.g., p. 9), the Draft Plan overall *implies a one-way street where 'interventions' and 'actions' are 'done' to Indigenous students and their communities*. It consistently conveys deficit view of Indigenous students in both its focus and omissions, including in regard to 'closing the gap/halving the gap'. Likewise, it consistently implies that Indigenous communities somehow lie outside Australian society and legitimate or desirable ways of life. Even a minor shift to '*bridging the gap*' would imply an approach that was more respectful of Indigenous individuals and communities, and would point towards two way exchanges and inter-cultural learning. An inter-cultural, two-way approach would accord true agency and legitimacy to Indigenous students and communities in their interactions with teachers, schools and systems, in contrast to seeking Indigenous compliance, as in the Draft Plan. A more thoroughgoing commitment to two-way processes in planning at all levels is required.

(vi) Although the Draft Plan's brief does not extend to the VET and community sectors, it seems too narrowly focussed on Indigenous students gaining Year 12 qualifications through the school system and does not consider the possibilities for more flexible provision. As is stated (p. 17), many Indigenous learners opt out of school. The Plan should explicitly encourage *the potential synergies between the schools, VET and community sectors* in providing Indigenous students with flexible pathways between these sectors. Likewise, the Plan should support and encourage schools in closer co-operation and collaboration with non-school education providers, for example, in

developing innovative models, accredited curriculum containing competencies written by and for Indigenous students, and developing pathways into work, further training and tertiary programs.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Questions

Our questions are:

### *In relation to language, culture and Indigenous students in general*

- How will the final version of the Plan ensure that systems, schools and teachers identify the knowledge, languages, literacies and skills that Indigenous students bring to their learning?
- How will the final Plan provide a basis for systems, schools and teachers to connect with Indigenous students' knowledge, literacies, skills and community resources as a basis for further learning?
- Will the final Plan offer descriptions, targets, performance indicators and plans for action that acknowledge Indigenous students as additional language/dialect and culture learners and that target these students' actual English, literacy and other learning needs, in contrast to the current depiction of Indigenous students as deficient (despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary)?
- Will the Plan offer genuine opportunities for Indigenous students and their communities to collaborate in an authentic two-way manner with teachers, schools and systems in education planning and provision?

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<sup>6</sup> See the following for descriptions of innovative programs:

[http://www.campusdaily.com.au/read\\_university\\_news.php?id=295](http://www.campusdaily.com.au/read_university_news.php?id=295); <http://www.ashe.com.au>;  
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2196.html>;  
[http://www.muurrbay.org.au/aboriginal\\_lang\\_summer\\_school.html](http://www.muurrbay.org.au/aboriginal_lang_summer_school.html);  
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1734.html>; <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2177.html>

See the following for an analysis of Indigenous students' disengagement with school education:

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2174.html>

*In relation to each of the priority domains*

*A. Readiness for school*

- Why is there no mention of the languages and other knowledge and skills that young Indigenous children bring to school?
- To what extent can the Australian Early Development Index accurately and validly assess the cognitive and language abilities of children who do not speak (Standard Australian) English?
- To what extent does the Australian Early Development Index assume social, cultural and economic norms that apply in remote Indigenous communities? To what extent can it capture the knowledge and skills that Indigenous students actually have, and therefore provide teachers with a basis on which to build their teaching?
- What guidelines are provided to ensure that the Australian Early Development Index is used with Indigenous students in ways that are culturally sensitive (including out of the classroom and with people with whom they feel comfortable) and so allow children to perform at their best?
- Why is maintaining and strengthening competence in children's mother tongues as a basis for English language learning and literacy in English not included as a target?
- Why is research into different pathways to Standard Australian English and English literacy, including bilingual programs, not included as one area for collaborative action and evidence-based policy development?
- Why does the Draft Plan offer no support for developing innovative, culturally and linguistically appropriate ways of assessing Indigenous students, not least those entering pre-schools and schools?

### ***B. Engagement and connections***

- Why is cultural identity foregrounded throughout this section but never coupled with linguistic identity?
- Why are connections depicted as a one-way street in which Indigenous students and communities comply with mainstream school expectations but no value is accorded to Indigenous knowledge, languages and community resources? *How* are Indigenous cultures (and languages) to be actively recognised and validated (p. 9, line 7)?
- Why are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders languages mentioned only in the context of the possibility (!) of out-of-school programs? What messages does this send to students and their parents about the value of their languages? Given already low school attendance rates, where is the evidence that optional extra classes out of school would be successful?
- Why is there no mention of Indigenous teachers in this section (cf. p. 15)?
- How will personalised learning plans (action point 15) avoid becoming lists of student deficits in the absence of assessment data that reveals what students know and can express in languages/varieties other than Standard English and where the assessment used assumes social, cultural and economic norms that do not apply in these students' communities?

### ***C. Attendance***

- Will linguistic alienation be considered in evidence-based research as a possible factor influencing attendance? (To be more concrete: It is well attested by our members that young children from communities where English is rarely heard and spoken even less are immediately alienated when confronted with classrooms in which English is the only language used. Dialect and creole speakers can be equally marginalised when their ways of talking are branded as inferior.)

- Will the collection of evidence on what works in improving attendance and evidence-based attendance strategies include or exclude consideration of how schools respond to the linguistic diversity of Indigenous students documented in the MCEETYA (2006) report?

#### ***D. Literacy and numeracy***

- What is meant by ‘whole-of-school approaches’ to literacy and numeracy?
- Given that ‘Indigenous students are widely dispersed across schools in remote, rural, regional and urban Australia’ and that the majority of these students ‘attend regional and urban schools where most of their peers are non-Indigenous’ (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 13), how will whole-of-school approaches to literacy meet the distinctive language backgrounds and learning needs of Indigenous students in schools where they constitute a minority?
- Is the term ‘whole-of-school approaches’ intended to exclude specialist EAL/D pedagogies to meet Indigenous students’ learning needs?
- If so, how does this *a priori* exclusion accord with the Plan’s commitment to evidence-based policies and the mass of research and experiential evidence that already exists in regard to these pedagogies’ effectiveness? (see Goldenberg, 2008, for a meta-analysis of relevant research).
- How will the assessment tools required by the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships themselves be assessed for their diagnostic appropriateness for Indigenous students?
- Can the Australian Early Development Index be used in conjunction with the tools developed by various state and territory jurisdictions for planning, programming, assessment and reporting on learning English as a second/additional language/dialect, for example, *The ESL Scales* (Australian Education Council, 1994), *The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia ESL Bandscales* (McKay, 2007), *The ESL/ESD Progress Map* (Department of Education and Training, 2009), *The ESL Steps* (NSW Department

of Education and Training, 2004a) and the *IEP Curriculum Framework* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004b)?

- How will the focus schools assist those Indigenous students who are speakers of traditional Aboriginal languages, creoles and Aboriginal English in learning Standard Australian English as a foundation for the proposed ‘integrated approach to reading’?
- How will the Plan ensure that the proposed professional development for teachers and principals includes provision of sound linguistic information about the Aboriginal languages, creoles and varieties of English that their students speak?
- How will the Plan ensure that the proposed professional development is directed towards enhancing teachers’ and principals’ active two-way engagement with Indigenous students and their communities?

***E. Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development***

- Why is cultural competence a priority target for professional development but not language competence, and knowledge about languages and language issues?
- Why is building teacher expertise in teaching English to speakers of other languages and dialects not mentioned as a priority target?
- Why is there no mention of supporting Indigenous teachers in maintaining, developing and utilising their languages?
- Why is there no mention of valuing Indigenous languages and varieties in relation to the National Curriculum (p. 16, point 28)?
- Why is there no mention of evidence-based, linguistically authenticated research to inform classroom pedagogy (p. 16, point 33)?
- Why is there no mention of tailoring operations in line with schools’ linguistic contexts, for example, where English is effectively a foreign language or where Standard Australian is not used?

- Why is there no mention of the importance of two-way teaching and planning?

***F. Pathways to real post-school options***

- Does participation ‘fully in society’ include participation in and development of Indigenous communities?
- Will the final Plan assume that employment pathways are static and cannot be developed within Indigenous communities?
- How will the final Plan encourage collaboration between the school, VET and community sectors in responding to the many Indigenous students who drop out of school?

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

As we have already noted, the Draft Plan does not acknowledge that many Indigenous students will not have sustained access to Standard Australian English and therefore are not proficient in it when they enter schooling ***but will have many other language skills that are essential for language learning.*** Successful outcomes in the different priority domains will depend on acknowledgement and actions that respond to this fact.

The Plan offers ***no basis for specialist programs in teaching English as an additional language/dialect.*** Research shows overwhelmingly that these programs are the most effective means of assisting learners towards desired outcomes in Standard English, literacy and general educational performance (Goldenberg, 2008; Howard Research & Management Consulting Inc., 2006).

The Plan does not address the potential linkages between school, community and VET educational sectors.

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

We are pleased that MCEECDYA is committed to formulating a national Indigenous Education Action Plan.

We strongly endorse the goals articulated in the Draft Plan (p. 2) and believe these are fundamental for Australia's future.

We endorse the six principles in the Draft Plan (p. 4) as a sound and inclusive framework for an Indigenous Education Action Plan.

We believe that the goals and principles articulated in the Plan provide a potentially adequate basis for targets, performance indicators and actions that acknowledge and respond to the diversity of Indigenous students' language and cultural backgrounds and learning needs. We are therefore puzzled by the Draft Plan's consistent failure to elaborate such responses, especially given the clear descriptions of linguistic and cultural diversity in the documents on which the Draft Plan is built.

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

In regard to its commitment to evidence-based policy development, the Plan would be strengthened by:

- less ritualistic and more discriminating use of the phrase 'evidence shows' and similar wording
- attention to the wealth of international and local research and experience in regard to second/additional language learning and its relationship to learning literacy in the standard language, education more broadly, and the foundations for effective teaching
- indicating that the evidence to be gathered and used as a basis for policy-making will not be confined simply to a focus on English literacy but will include systematic attention to language issues.

*In regard to language and culture*, the final version of the Plan should eliminate references to 'cultural competence' and instead should carefully consider the notions of *inter-cultural competence* and *two-way learning* in developing its proposals for each priority domain.

In regard to learning Standard Australian English and literacy in English, the final Plan should:

- use the words ‘**language**’, ‘**(Standard) English**’ and ‘**literacy**’ with much greater care and precision
- attend, as appropriate, to **the different learning needs and language backgrounds** of speakers of Indigenous languages, creoles and Aboriginal English
- specify actions that will support **specialist programs in English as an additional language/dialect** for these speakers.

## **SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR EACH PRIORITY DOMAIN**

### ***READINESS FOR SCHOOL***

An evidence-based approach to Indigenous students should not be confined to research that documents failure. For example, the OECD *Starting Stronger II* project (Bennett & Tayler, 2006) offers a positive model for assisting second/additional language learners’ readiness for formal schooling.

Assessment of Indigenous children’s readiness for school in relation to their health and well being, social competence, emotional maturity, language, cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge should be in the language or variety of English with which they are most comfortable. It should be socially, culturally, cognitively, interpersonally congruent with these children’s experiences and expectations.

It follows that material in this section that relates to the Australian Early Development Index should be redrafted to allow for improving the Index in line with these principles or for using alternative but equivalent assessment tools as appropriate, for example, *The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia ESL Bandscales* (McKay, 2007), *The ESL Scales* (Australian Education Council, 1994), and *The ESL/ESD Progress Map* (Department of Education and Training, 2009).

***Suggested rephrasing of Targets (see italics)***

Increased proportions of Indigenous children participating in quality early childhood education and development and child care services *that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, that support the home culture and language(s), and that are used as the foundation from which to develop new knowledge and skills.*

All Indigenous children in focus schools will be equipped *to develop* basic skills for life and learning (i.e. in the five developmental domains ... general knowledge *as these apply to their local context and their developing ability to operate in Australian society more generally*).

**National collaborative action**

**Re 2:** We support the use of the Early Years Learning Framework and the development of an Educators' Guide with a strong Indigenous component.

***Suggested rephrasing of National Collaborative Actions (see italics)***

2. MCEECDYA will support the use of the Early Years Learning Framework in all early childhood settings to ensure family and community engagement from the outset of a child's education. The Framework also supports the *inter-cultural* competence of early childhood educators in developing and delivering programs for young children. An Educators' Guide, which is being developed to support educators in their use of the Framework, will have a strong Indigenous component *encompassing knowledge and strategies for teachers' to develop their cultural, linguistic and contextual knowledge about the communities in which they teach and to assist them in engaging with these communities.*

***Add (see comment on 7 below):***

MCEECDYA will commission further development of differentiated on-entry assessment frameworks for Indigenous students (based on existing work by the

Commonwealth, States and Territories) and guidelines for their use in particular settings (see above).

### **Systematic and school-level actions**

**Re 4:** The Australian Early Development Index should not be the only basis for identifying priorities. These should also be negotiated with families and communities in culturally appropriate ways.

**Re 6:** This identification should include documentation of students' linguistic backgrounds and starting points, and that strategies should clearly build from these.

**Re 7:**

(i) Literacy researchers and educators have long recognised sets of crucial *pre*-literacy skills – these should be included in any on-entry assessment program.

(ii) Without due attention to identifying and describing Indigenous students' knowledge, skills and understandings in and through their primary language or dialect, any on-entry assessment will produce a distorted and largely negative picture of these students.

(iii) Assessments that are culturally incongruent or linguistically alien in their content or administration will yield invalid data on children's development.

(iv) It is unclear whether the on-entry assessment program will be uniform across schools and pre-schools, specific to individual providers or differentiated in relation, for example, to remote/urban settings and/or students' age and/or students' first/dominant language(s). Developing valid assessment programs would be beyond individual schools and pre-schools. This action should be re-allocated to the national collaborative action section and allow for the development of a number of differentiated assessment frameworks and guidelines for their use in particular settings (see above).

***Suggested rephrasing of Systemic and School-level Actions (see italics)***

4. Education providers will work with focus schools as early as possible in 2010 to:

- analyse data where available from the Australian Early Development Index *and, as appropriate, in conjunction with EAL/D specific assessment tools.*

6. Focus schools will, in 2010 *or as early as possible*, document students' language backgrounds (in Standard English, Aboriginal English, creoles and/or traditional Aboriginal languages), conceptual knowledge and other skills across all languages to address their readiness for school.

***Add (separate action):***

*Focus schools will in 2010 identify strategies that can build from students' languages, knowledge and skills across these languages, and commence implementing these strategies as early as possible. Language backgrounds, strategies and resources will be identified in school plans and other public documents.*

7. Education providers will develop a linguistically and culturally appropriate on-entry assessment program to assess students' *pre-literacy*, literacy, *pre-numeracy* and numeracy skills. This will help in identifying students at educational risk and implementing early intervention strategies.

***ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS***

This section should be revised to acknowledge that 'engagement and connection' is a two-way street and to give substance to what is meant by 'active recognition and validation of Indigenous cultures' *and* languages.

***Re 10:*** Commissioning a *feasibility* study into 'how *out-of-school* schemes *might* work' could not be more tokenistic in its framing and substance, and completely vitiates the Commonwealth's stated commitment to 'supporting languages education in Australian

schools’ (announced by Minister Gillard in December 2008).<sup>7</sup> We are deeply concerned that the only mention of Indigenous languages in the Draft Plan is in this context. Symbolically and in reality, out-of-school schemes designate Indigenous languages (and other learning areas) as unimportant and marginal to mainstream concerns. Moreover, the wording ‘teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages’ implies that these languages are not being *used* by Indigenous students in their daily lives – although true to some extent for many students, many others live in contexts where these languages are used within families and the community.

***Suggested rephrasing of various points (see italics)***

A sense of cultural *and linguistic* identity, and the active recognition and validation of Indigenous cultures and languages by schools, is critical to student wellbeing and success at school.

The involvement of Indigenous Australians *at all levels of* educational decision-making and the participation of *Indigenous principals, teachers, other Indigenous* education workers and community members in schools and classrooms *provide positive role models and build connections, contributing to* a positive impact on educational outcomes. Similarly, teachers and principals should go beyond the classroom and school in seeking to engage with Indigenous communities as invited and appropriate.

**Performance indicators**

***Add:***

- Increased numbers of Indigenous participants in identified levels of educational governance and provision.

**National collaborative action**

10. As part of a National Strategy for Indigenous Languages, *MCEECDYA will commit to implementing the recommendations from the DEEWR Indigenous*

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Releases/Pages/Article\\_081208\\_105313.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Releases/Pages/Article_081208_105313.aspx) (viewed 23/2/2010)

*Language Programmes in Australian Schools Report, which support the National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008.*

**Systemic and school-level action**

16. Education providers will review the role of *Indigenous teachers and other* education workers to maximise their ability to work in partnerships with Indigenous students, their parents and *other* teachers to improve educational outcomes.

***ATTENDANCE***

More attention should be paid to the barriers to Indigenous students' school attendance, for example, school locations (and young people's general reluctance to travel far from home) and school cultures.

***Re 18:*** Guidelines for building the evidence base of what works in improving Indigenous student attendance should include careful attention to how schools respond to the diverse linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts within which they operate.

***Re 21 and 22:*** Guidelines for schools in developing evidence-based attendance strategies should include explicit attention to how schools respond to and seek to enhance the linguistic, cultural and conceptual resources that students bring to their schooling.

***LITERACY AND NUMERACY***

This section should be completely redrafted to give appropriate place to the necessity for many Indigenous students to learn Standard Australian English, learn literacy in English, and to recognise the role of bilingual/bidialectal models of bi-literacy development. It is impossible for students to achieve literacy successfully in a language which they do not know, yet the actions proposed in the Draft Plan assume (incorrectly) that all students speak Standard English.

Despite the introductory claim, English literacy is *not* a universal basis for lifelong learning, even in Australia. This statement (line 2) devalues the lives, languages and

achievements of some Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in both the past and present, not to mention the many millions who live in non-English speaking countries. Substantive claims can be made for the importance of English and literacy in English without resorting to such manifestly incorrect statements, which betray a monolingual English mindset. The Plan should adopt a higher standard of precision and a more informed understanding of where policies to promote literacy sit in relation broader social, cultural and linguistic concerns – see 2.1 (iii) - (v) above re. language and culture.

The planned national curriculum, to our knowledge, is *not* linguistically inclusive and therefore cannot be culturally inclusive, as is claimed, although we acknowledge the considerable efforts being made to include Indigenous perspectives. The Plan should position current work on the national curriculum as an interim step towards more fully developed inclusiveness (see above suggested reworking of National Collaborative Action 10).

Whole-of-school approaches will not accommodate the diversity of Indigenous students identified in the MCEETYA (2006) report in learning Standard Australian English, literacy or numeracy. It is unclear how these approaches can be reconciled with anything but negatively framed personalised learning plans (see Targets for **Engagement and connections**).

Data and diagnostic instruments currently used through the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships require improvement if they are to capture learning needs and progress of Indigenous learners of Standard Australian English. The MCEETYA (2006) report describes what these tools reveal and their limitations:

While national aggregated data presented in these reports masks the impact of Indigenous diversity on Indigenous educational outcomes, it provides a useful overall picture and indicator of the need for systemic change. (p. 13).

The current lack of attention to the distinctive pathways of learners of Standard English in these data means that they cannot and do not support *diagnosis or teaching* – see above on effective pedagogies (**Distinctive pathways and learning needs**). The Plan should commit to refining data collection to allow valid diagnosis and targeted teaching.

**Re 25 and 26:** Whole-of-school approaches may be appropriate in schools with a relatively homogeneous intake of Indigenous students. However, given that the majority of Indigenous students ‘attend regional and urban schools where most of their peers are non-Indigenous’ (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 13), whole-of-school approaches will do little to assist these students, will perpetuate the *status quo* of ignoring their distinctive learning trajectories and local literacies, and hence also perpetuate inequality by failing to support them towards desired educational outcomes.

***Suggested rephrasing of Literacy and Numeracy (see italics)***

Mastering the basics of numeracy and English literacy is *fundamental to participation in contemporary Australian economic life and to accessing the wider public domain. Ensuring that young Australians achieve and go beyond these basics, starting with early childhood learning, is one of the most important and effective ways of assisting individuals towards this participation and broadening their life choices and options.* [The phrasing ‘life choices and options’ comes from MCEETYA, 2006, p. 14].

Governments are working together to improve *Standard Australian English* literacy and numeracy outcomes by:

- implementing *a national curriculum that includes attention to linguistic and cultural diversity*
- supporting teachers to improve their teaching of literacy and numeracy, including *through whole-of-school approaches [omit ‘implementing’]*
- *supporting the use and development of pedagogies that are sensitive to and engage with Indigenous students’ languages and cultures*
- use of data provided through the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnerships.

**Targets**

***Add:***

*Development of linguistically and culturally appropriate assessment tools that record Indigenous students’ progress towards NAPLAN benchmarks.*

*Review of NAPLAN to ensure that tests do not discriminate against Indigenous students.*

### **National collaborative action**

23. The Australian Government will work with education providers to develop and maintain a national database of effective, evidence-based *bilingual/bidialectal strategies for teaching Standard English, literacy and numeracy, and will develop this data base* to support the sharing of best practice.

24. The Australian Government and education providers will work together to support access to family literacy and numeracy programs, *including bilingual programs*, for Indigenous Australians and *will target participation of Indigenous families in intensive support playgroups.*

### **Systemic and school-level action**

25. Focus schools will by January 2011 have in place *both differentiated and whole-of-school approaches to the teaching and learning of Standard Australian English, literacy and numeracy which:*

- *build from and develops students' existing language(s), conceptual knowledge and skills, and literacy practices in their home languages and uses of English*
- *in literacy, in the first three years of school (and beyond if necessary), uses an integrated and balanced approach to reading that develops phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension based on the languages and varieties that students actually speak and that starts by building a firm foundation in spoken English*
- *in numeracy, provides intensive, scaffolded, structured and language- and age-relevant teaching to accelerate learning, with continuity of approach for both teachers and students, and*
- *in English, literacy and numeracy, uses data collected from tools that can (i) monitor Indigenous students' progress along their actual learning pathways, and (ii) drive whole-of-school improvement in regard to students' progress*

*and the school's approach to linguistic and cultural diversity.*

26. Teachers and education workers in focus schools will participate in appropriate professional learning by January 2011 to support *differentiated and whole-of-school two-way* approaches to the teaching of *Standard English*, literacy and numeracy, *and the use of data on student performance to drive individual and whole-of-school improvement.*

### ***LEADERSHIP, QUALITY TEACHING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT***

This section is characterised by vague, aspirational statements about teacher quality and leadership. More substance is needed in specifying what supports quality in teaching and excellent leadership in Indigenous education contexts. For example, this section should be revised to address:

- the chronic problem of principal and teacher turn-over in remote area schools and schools with high populations of Indigenous students
- the chronic lack of teachers with specialist expertise in ESL pedagogies and approaches to Aboriginal creoles and Aboriginal English
- the need to develop a cadre of teachers with special expertise in teaching Indigenous languages
- the development of strategies for inter-cultural engagement.

In regard to defects in professional preparation and development, we observe that many teachers and principals have minimal or no knowledge about the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students, appropriate inter-cultural responses (at program, teaching and interpersonal levels) to differences in language and culture, and models of distinctive and whole-of-school approaches to language, cultural differences and inter-cultural communication.

If approaches to (*inter-*)cultural competence are not to be tokenistic, knowledge about and of Indigenous languages, creoles and Aboriginal English must be central to professional education. Schools must also adopt genuine two-way inter-cultural approaches with Indigenous staff and local communities in planning their programs, developing their teaching resources and adopting particular teaching methods.

Section 8.c.ii. of the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 includes the goal of ‘an increase in the number of Indigenous people who are employed or otherwise involved in education: as special teachers of the culture, history, contemporary society and languages of Indigenous people’. This statement could be used as a basis for improving the specificity in this section.

Professional development hours are a minimal performance indicator. Some expected *effects* of professional development should also be specified.

***Suggested rephrasing of specific items (see italics)***

**Outcomes**

Focused in-service professional development of principals and teachers to increase their *inter-cultural and linguistic understandings and approaches*, and equip them with specific teaching strategies to successfully teach [*sic* – split infinitive should be eliminated] and lead improvements in the learning outcomes of Indigenous students.

**Targets**

- Increase in professional development hours on Indigenous education and *inter-cultural and linguistic* competence training undertaken by principals and teachers.
- *(Re-) establishment of pre- and in-service training programs in Indigenous languages for teachers.*

***Add:***

- *Increased retention rates of principals and teachers in hard-to-staff schools.*
- *Increased numbers of Indigenous teachers and assistants who speak*

*Indigenous languages, creoles and varieties of English.*

**Performance indicators**

- Number of professional development hours on Indigenous education and *inter-cultural and linguistic* competence training undertaken by principals and teachers.
- *Assessments by participants, colleagues and, if possible, Indigenous students and their communities of the quality and effectiveness of professional development programs.*

**Add:**

- *Participant evaluations of professional development activities*
- *Number of teachers and principals who speak Indigenous languages, creoles and varieties of Aboriginal English*
- *Number of teachers and principals who report increased understandings of cultural and linguistic issues in Indigenous education contexts*
- *Number of teachers and principals who report increased confidence in their ability to work in inter-cultural Indigenous contexts*
- *Number of teachers and principals who report increased and more effective engagement with Indigenous students and communities*
- *Numbers of teachers and principals who report changes in their practices in relation to Indigenous students and their communities*
- *Retention rates of principals and teachers in hard to staff schools*
- *Improved attendance and school performance of Indigenous students vis à vis professional development activities.*

**National collaborative action**

28. MCEECDYA has agreed to the development and implementation of a national curriculum by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority that will include Indigenous perspectives to ensure that all young Australians have the opportunity to learn about, acknowledge and value the cultures *and languages* of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.

32. MCEECDYA will ensure that requirements for teachers to have knowledge and

understanding of the learning needs of Indigenous students, *including those stemming from their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds*, are included in the forthcoming National Teacher Professional Standards Framework (Standards for Teachers and School Leaders).

33. MCEECDYA will consult with the higher education sector to establish a coalition of universities, based on the New Zealand model, to provide evidence-based culturally *and linguistically* authenticated research that can directly inform classroom pedagogy.

#### **Systemic and school-level action**

36. Education providers will deliver professional learning to teachers to ensure high levels of *inter-cultural and linguistic understandings and competencies* to inform the best teaching strategies for Indigenous students.

37. Education *authorities* will give priority to focus schools when attracting or placing high performing leaders and teachers who have *cultural and linguistic pre-service and in-service training relevant to Indigenous education*.

38. Principals of schools in disadvantaged areas will have the flexibility to tailor operations to meet the needs of the local Indigenous community. This might include extending operating hours and providing onsite or co-located services such as health care, after hours study support, *bilingual programs, ESL programs*, sporting programs, child care and parent support programs. Principals might also partner with other schools to share resources and facilities, develop joint initiatives and provide peer mentoring and support.

#### ***PATHWAYS TO REAL POST-SCHOOL OPTIONS***

This section is unrealistic in its assumption that pathways to further education, training and employment for Indigenous students lie solely (or even mainly) through schools and that the Plan's goals can be realised solely or mainly through the school system. The reasons why Indigenous students choose to leave school should be accorded more weight, attention and respect. Given that these students *do* leave school in large numbers, the Plan

should acknowledge and encourage more flexible, integrated and collaborative approaches that bring together schools, community and VET providers.

The claims made for formal education should be tempered and more precise. Successful education is *not* always ‘the means to employment and economic independence’ (p. 17), as professionals and holders of doctoral degrees who drive taxis will testify.

The focus on Indigenous students’ deficits in regard to national benchmarks should be contextualised to acknowledge the barriers created by the education system, the availability of education and training in rural and remote Australia, and the labour market. Participation in the higher levels of education and the labour market is to some extent a two-way street, not least in Indigenous contexts. If schools and other educational providers do not respond to Indigenous students’ language and cultural needs, students will drop out. Employers often undervalue the linguistic and cultural skills and credentials of their own employees and of job applicants, including Indigenous young people. Education providers, employers and other bodies may need to provide conditions and support that meet the needs of Indigenous young people (cf. the arguments for supporting parents of new-born babies or the needs of carers). Indigenous students from remote areas who are in the senior years of schooling or who are seeking employment may also need appropriate forms of support.

This section should be redrafted to include targets, performance indicators and actions that will encourage and extend use of new technologies (including providing appropriate equipment) in improving access to education for Indigenous students, especially those in rural and remote locations.

If Indigenous students are to ‘achieve positive outcomes’ for themselves and their families, then education and employment opportunities that value their knowledge and skills must be increased both locally and more broadly. Targets, performance indicators and actions should include attention to developing employment pathways and opportunities, for example, in legal, environmental, artistic, media and community domains. They should address the need for support for Indigenous employees in adapting to specific employment pathways.

***Suggested rephrasing of specific items (see italics)***

**Outcomes**

- Improved progression rates for Indigenous students to *vocational and higher* education, *and skilled* and professional occupations.
- *Improved retention rates of Indigenous students in vocational and higher education.*
- *Improved collaboration between the school, community and VET sectors in developing programs for Indigenous student*
- *Improved access to education through new technologies*
- *Improved and broadened employment opportunities for Indigenous students.*

**National collaborative action**

***Add:***

*MCEECDYA will collaborate with bodies responsible for community and vocational education to support the development of innovative cross-sectoral approaches to programs and pathways for Indigenous students.*

*MCEECDYA will institute an investigation into how new technologies can increase Indigenous students' access to education and training, collaborate with relevant bodies in extending these technologies to Indigenous students for use in educational and training programs, and will monitor the results of innovative developments in the use of interactive technologies.*

*MCEECDYA will collaborate with employer bodies in commissioning research into barriers to attracting and retaining qualified Indigenous employees, and in developing guidelines and models to attract and retain qualified Indigenous employees.*

*MCEECDYA will develop proposals for a whole-of-government approach to extending worthwhile employment opportunities for Indigenous people both nationally and locally, including in remote communities where languages and*

*cultural expertise is essential.*

**Systemic and school-level action**

***Add:***

*Education providers will be supported and encouraged to develop innovative uses of interactive technologies with Indigenous students.*

*Education providers will explore with private and government employers ways of broadening the post-school employment options of qualified Indigenous students and language speakers.*

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## References

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**Addendum**

Date: Tue, 2 Mar 2010 20:56:28 +1100  
From: [j.lobianco@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:j.lobianco@unimelb.edu.au)  
Subject: Response to Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010–2014  
To: [robert.jackson44@hotmail.com](mailto:robert.jackson44@hotmail.com)  
CC: [adrianotruscott@hotmail.com](mailto:adrianotruscott@hotmail.com); [Adriano.Truscott@det.wa.edu.au](mailto:Adriano.Truscott@det.wa.edu.au);  
[helenmmoore@optusnet.com.au](mailto:helenmmoore@optusnet.com.au)

Dear Robert,

I have only recently become aware of the Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft, 2010–2014 and of the response to this Draft Plan from ACTA, ALS and ALAA. I have now had a chance to read these documents and I write to express my support for the arguments made by the Associations. It is regrettable that the Australian Academy of the Humanities one of whose sections brings together Australia’s preeminent linguistic scholars was not consulted in this work. It would have been appropriate and useful for the Draft Plan to have been referred to the Academy so that its expert members could have offered advice and suggestions.

From my reading of the Draft Plan I believe that there is much of value in its proposals, especially its goals and principles. It is commendable that MCEECDYA has decided to embark on a nation-wide approach to closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian students.

However, I am deeply concerned that the Draft Plan pays scant attention to the crucial importance of language as the foundational ability for all learning. I am also concerned at the rather superficial treatment of issues of culture and identity.

The response from the Associations is soundly based in effective pedagogy and empirical linguistic research regarding the best ways for Indigenous learners to be supported to obtain high standards of literate English as they maintain and develop their unique and distinctive language capabilities. This seems to me to be the primary obligation of public education for these learners.

Yours sincerely

Joseph Lo Bianco

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