

Position Paper: First Language Instruction

Date Originated:	July 2020	Document originated:	YAG Working Party WP 20 015as
Description:	Data tool for public information	Status:	Endorsed by Branch Executive 30/10/2020

CONTEXT

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages to raise awareness of the crucial role languages play in people's daily lives.

In Australia, of the estimated original 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, only around 120 are still spoken. Of these approximately 90 per cent are endangered [1].

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that, in 2019, 230,677 students in Australian schools identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [2]. This figure included ~6% of students in Queensland and 39% of students in the Northern Territory [3].

ABS data also indicates that the non-government share of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been steadily rising, from 8.9% in 2008 to 10.4% in 2017 for Catholic Schools and from 5.0% to 5.7% for Independent Schools over the same period [4].

One in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking an Australian Indigenous Language at home in the 2016 Census [4].

Despite evidence that teaching in First Language (the language which the child and family use in the home environment) delivers academic, social and economic benefits [5], and strong international and national support for inclusive practice [6], in Australia, First Language instruction remains the exception, rather than the norm.

One possible limiting factor for provision of instruction in First Languages is the relatively low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. In 2016, just 2.02% (9184) of Australian teachers identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander [3].

GENERAL STATEMENT

As a union of ~17,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and the Northern Territory, IEUA-QNT has an active interest in industrial and professional issues confronted by members in the course of their work and the broader sociocultural environment in which they perform it.

Further, as part of our organisation's Reconciliation Action Plan, we are committed to actively promoting reconciliation in schools and early childhood education.

We acknowledge that many of the challenges faced by current generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their genesis in dispossession and the unfair and unjust policies and practices of colonisation. We are willing to confront our own ethical and professional responsibility to positively influence perceptions and behaviours of future generations.

As we move toward this goal, we recognise the phrase "First Language Instruction" to have two components:

1. The right of individual students to access the curriculum in their natal language and;
2. The teaching of First Languages to students from all backgrounds to ensure that the language is not lost.

We believe that both components are essential to ensure that students are able to engage fully with formal education and achieve their full potential. Further, we believe that instruction in First Languages offers a unique opportunity to preserve and reinvigorate Australia's First Languages.

In this context, we strongly support First Languages Australia's *Nintiringanyi* – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Teaching and Employment Strategy [7] and the call by World Vision for all schools in Australia to engage a First Nations educator/coordinator [8].

We also acknowledge the contested nature of First Language Instruction (and particularly bilingual education programs) in the Northern Territory and acknowledge the positive impact of the *Growing Our Own* partnership between Charles-Darwin University and Northern Territory Catholic Education [9], which aims to increase the number of First Nations teachers working in remote communities.

SYNOPSIS

Our union supports the right of all students to access education in their First Language and calls upon governments and schools to commit to actions that contribute to the preservation and reinvigoration of Australia's First Languages, including those detailed in First Languages Australia's *Nintiringanyi* – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Teaching and Employment Strategy [7] and World Vision Australia's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments [8].

While we recognise the existence of limiting factors, such as the relatively low proportion of teachers who are suitably qualified and able to deliver instruction in local languages, we believe it is possible to overcome these challenges through initiatives such as engagement of First Nations Liaison/Support Workers and recruitment and training of community members to fill Teacher and School Officer positions.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue	Key Recommendation
<p>In Australia, of the estimated original 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, only around 120 are still spoken. Of these, approximately 90 percent are endangered.</p>	<p>First Language instruction should be offered in a majority of schools as a key mechanism of ensuring preservation and reinvigoration of First Languages.</p> <p>First Language instruction should be embedded in the curriculum, with students other than First Nations students encouraged to learn Indigenous languages.</p>
<p>Long-term educational outcomes are improved when students are able to access education in their First Language.</p>	<p>All First Nations students should be provided with the opportunity to access education in their first language.</p>
<p>There is a shortage of teachers and support staff who can provide instruction in First Languages.</p>	<p>Schools should actively recruit and train community members to fill Teacher and Support Worker positions. Models for training of First Language Teachers should not involve, or create, unnecessary barriers to the engagement of schools with their local First Nations community.</p>

References

1. Department_of_Communications_and_the_Arts. *2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages*. 2019 [cited 2019 03rd September]; Available from: <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/indigenous-arts-and-languages/2019-international-year-indigenous-languages>.
2. Australian_Bureau_of_Statistics. *4221.0 - Schools, Australia, 2019 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*. 2020 [cited 2020 18th August]; Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4221.0Main%20Features102019?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4221.0&issue=2019&num=&view>.
3. Australian_Council_of_Deans_of_Education. *ACDE ANALYSIS OF 2016 CENSUS STATISTICS OF ABORIGINAL TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER TEACHERS AND STUDENTS*. 2018 [cited 2019 9th July 2019]; Available from: <https://www.acde.edu.au/acde-analysis-of-2016-census-statistics-of-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-teachers-and-students/>.
4. Australian_Bureau_of_Statistics. *4221.0 - Schools, Australia, 2017. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS : STUDENTS*. 2018 [cited 2019 9th July]; Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4221.0main+features22017>.
5. First_Languages_Australia, *Global Lessons: Indigenous languages and multilingualism in school programs*. 2018, First Languages Australia: Sydney.

6. Australian_Human_Rights_Commission. *Right to Education*. 2019 [cited 2019 9th July]; Available from: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-education>.
7. First_Languages_Australia, *Nintiringanyi: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Teaching and Employment Strategy*. 2018, First Languages Australia: Hamilton, NSW.
8. World_Vision, *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments: World Vision Australia's submission*. 2020, World Vision: Sydney.
9. Bridging_the_Gap_Foundation_For_Indigenous_Health_and_Education, *Growing Educational Opportunities in Remote Indigenous Communities*. 2020, Bridging the Gap Foundation: Darwin.