THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

The triangularity between language and culture, educational engagement and community cultural health and wellbeing

A literature based research study for the New South Wales context

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This monograph reports on research commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs, Office of Communities, New South Wales Department of Education and Communities. The views, opinions and conclusions expressed within this report are entirely those of the author. These views, opinions and conclusions should not be read as those of the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs or those of Aboriginal Affairs.
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Key Cultural Terminologies

**Aboriginal**

In Australia the term ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Aborigine’ was originally applied by the colonising British as a non-culture specific generic descriptor of us the First Nations peoples of the Australian continent. Under its coloniser application the term ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Aborigine’ portrayed us as ‘natives’, but with an inferred meaning that defined us as ‘primitive’ and/or ‘savage’. All four terms were used interchangeably within everyday colonial dialogue.

In its contemporary Indigenous use ‘Aboriginal’ is an emancipated identity founded on cultural pride. This identity unifies all of the individual Indigenous cultural nations of the Australian continent, with the exception of the peoples of the Torres Strait, who maintain their own unifying identity as Torres Strait Islanders. Under this unifying context our unique status as First Nations peoples is recognised and celebrated, our relatedness as spirit peoples is affirmed, and our shared history as Australia’s subjugated cultures asserted.

*In this report the word Aboriginal is used as a culturally collective proper noun for the First Peoples of New South Wales.*

**Indigenous**

As with the term ‘Aboriginal’ the word ‘Indigenous’ is similarly a non-culture specific descriptor of us, but unlike ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Aborigine’ has not carried within Australia the same historically loaded undertone of ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’.

The contemporary popular use of ‘Indigenous’ emerged out of global Indigenous social, political and academic liberatory discourse and activism. Under this movement ‘Indigenous’ proactively champions our rights and status as First Nations peoples, honours our being as spirit peoples, and bonds us together in our struggle for cultural autonomy.

*In this report the word Indigenous is used as a culturally collective proper noun for the First Peoples of the world and of Australia, beyond New South Wales. In the Australian context the word Indigenous is used as an expression of respect for the spiritual ties that bind the Aboriginal peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia together as this nation’s First Peoples.*
Throughout this report the words language and culture consistently appear in the plural form in order to assert, emphasise and affirm the existence of our distinct cultural nationhood’s. It is an ongoing common misconception that because we use the collective proper nouns 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' that we are all of one culture. The world of Indigenous and Aboriginal being is diverse and comprised of many individual cultural nationhood’s and languages.

‘Country’ is a term that we Indigenous peoples, particularly here in Australia, use as a single word expression to denote our spiritual inter-being with the land, the sea, the sky, and all life and geologic forms therein. Country, in its cultural context, infers far more than just the physical life world, it simultaneously acknowledges and respects the presence of the Spirit Elders who created the physical life world and whose spirit remains omnipresent within the physical life world. The concept of ‘country’ therefore embodies our Indigenous psycho-spiritual mind enmeshing culture, identity and land together so powerfully that one is inseparable from the other.
Author Profile

It is a long standing Indigenous protocol, both nationally and internationally, that Indigenous authors, as a matter of cultural respect, culturally identify themselves to all prospective Indigenous readers. Accordingly, I offer the following profile of myself as author of this report.

My name is Shayne Thomas Williams. I come from the former Aboriginal Reserve at La Perouse, or as we say Lapa, which is located in the south-eastern region of Sydney in NSW. My family have lived in this community for generations, indeed my grandmother Emma-Jane Foot was born on the beach at Lapa in 1884. My parents are Thomas ‘Tom’ Henry Williams, OBE and Iris ‘Boronia’ Williams (nee Callaghan). Through my paternal Grandmother Dolly Williams (nee Anderson) I am Dharawal (Sydney and the Illawarra region NSW). Through my paternal Grandfather Thomas Henry Williams I am Gomilaroi (North-West region NSW). I am similarly Dharawal through my maternal Grandmother Emma-Jane Callaghan (nee Foot) and Dhungutti (Mid North Coast, NSW) through my maternal Grandfather Athol Callaghan. I also maintain a strong cultural affiliation with the Ngurelban/Bangerang peoples (Mid-North region VIC) through my paternal Great Grandfather Hughie Anderson.

In 1989 I completed a Certificate of Business Studies at Tranby Aboriginal Cooperative College in Glebe (NSW). After finishing my studies at Tranby I undertook tertiary study at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Through UTS I gained an Associate Diploma in Adult Education (1993), a Bachelor of Education in Adult Education (1996) and a Masters of Education in Adult Education (1999). I then took a break from study for a few years before returning to complete my doctoral thesis in Indigenous education. This led to me being conferred as a Doctor of Philosophy in October 2007 by Deakin University (VIC).

Throughout my career I have consciously chosen to refer to myself as an Indigenous academic. I have done so in order to proudly affirm my sense of spiritual kinship with all Indigenous peoples, both nationally and internationally, as we are all allies in our struggle for cultural liberation. As an Indigenous academic, and as a strong Aboriginal community person, I am wholly committed to the core principles of Indigenous empowerment, self-determination and cultural sovereignty. As such, I openly assert our right to academic autonomy over our ontology’s, our epistemology’s and our axiology’s, which underpin, contextualise and spiritualise our distinct systems of knowledge. I see this as fundamental to the emancipation of our cultural curricula and our cultural pedagogies for the cultural education of our young people. I see that this is the cultural business of all of us.
Cultural Forward

It was with great pleasure and cultural humility that I accepted Aboriginal Affairs invitation to undertake, as the principal researcher, the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’ which is the basis of this report. As I intimated in my profile, as an Indigenous academic I have spent the vast majority of my professional career working to assert and advance Indigenous cultural teaching and learning. That is why I welcomed wholeheartedly the opportunity that this project represented. I saw this project as a meaningful avenue for examining, and critically evaluating, our long standing contention that our educational engagement and our health and well-being cannot be separated from our need and fundamental human right to nourish our Indigenous cultural identities through revival of our spiritual inter-being with our languages and our cultural praxis.

As an Indigenous academic and community person I cannot, or for that matter will not, write of or speak to any concern within the broad spectrum of Indigenous affairs as though I were a neutral observer. Because of this I have always written in a style that is not stridently academic in the conventional Western sense. In reading this report you will notice that I write in the first person as though I were talking directly with you the reader. You will also notice that I favour the use of collective pronouns. In the case of my predilection for writing as though I were talking, this is a deliberate action on my behalf because this style enables me to invoke the spiritual energy of our cultural ways of ‘yarning’ knowing. As to my use of collective pronouns, it is my way of expressing cultural synergy with the ‘topic’ at hand. I am, we are, the ‘topic’, so I make no separation between myself as author and myself as ‘subject’.

My yarning is unapologetically Indigenous in outlook, and aimed at contributing to the cultural business of Indigenous academia, not Westcentric study of us. For that reason I have consciously chosen to shape the scope and direction of this report in a way that sits more closely within the cultural framework of my Indigenous epistemology. Commensurate with this epistemology, our cultural way of ‘yarning’ knowing can be thought of as both a cultural mode for creating knowing and a cultural pedagogy for teaching and learning knowing. Both forms of yarning are premised on the broader cultural paradigm of ‘storying’, which founds the start point of all knowing within the spirit place of Indigenous ontology. Knowing then grows forward from this place through the creation of holistic story that merges all elements and energies of knowing together as a cultural conduit for cultural edification.

I am, of course, fully aware that my report may be considered unduly detailed particularly with regard to Chapters 2 and 3. Whilst I appreciate that in a Western sense these chapters could be concertinaed together, I believe that if we are truly serious about closing the gap then our Indigenous story needs to be told comprehensively. For that reason I have decided upon yarning in detail i. the concepts of language and culture, ii. who we are, and iii. the imperative to protect our languages and cultures through processes such as revitalisation and reclamation. I have deemed this yarning pivotal to the cultural context of this study. To shrink this yarning would work against the cultural principles of our ways of storying and fail to give full voice to our peoples, our cultures, our realities and our futures. For those requiring a shorter ‘read’ please consult the Executive Summary located at the beginning of this report.
Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Hon. Victor Dominello, NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs for instigating the commissioning of the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’. In commissioning this project you have demonstrated to us the Aboriginal peoples of NSW that you are committed to finding practical ways for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous disparity. At a personal level I felt both uplifted and positive about your willingness to look into the possibilities that the teaching and learning of our languages and cultures present for us in terms of moving us forward towards parity.

I extend my sincere thanks to James Christian, Chief Executive, Aboriginal Affairs and Jason Ardler, Executive Director, Aboriginal Affairs. The unwavering support you have extended to me whilst undertaking this project has been very much appreciated – thank you my brothers for standing strong for our peoples.

I also extend a very sincere thank you to all the staff of Aboriginal Affairs whom I have had the privilege to get to know and work with. Many of you have gone out of your way to provide me with advice, cultural support and practical assistance. For all that you have done I am truly grateful.
Executive Summary

On the 15th of August 2011 work commenced on the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’, an initiative instigated by the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs, Office of Communities, New South Wales Department of Education and Communities.

The key objective behind the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’ was to uncover theoretical, informal and research based evidence within international, national and local [New South Wales] literature explicating the triangularity between the teaching and learning of our Indigenous languages and cultures, our educational engagement, participation and scholastic success, and our community health and wellbeing.

The purpose behind this objective was to synthesise and explain this body of evidence with the expectation of revealing improved directions for the teaching and learning of our Aboriginal languages and cultures within New South Wales, as a key strategy for ‘closing the gap’ between us and non-Indigenous educational attainment levels, especially with regard to literacy outcomes, and the cultural vitality of ourselves and our communities.

Given that the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’ was undertaken as an Indigenous centred initiative the literature was analysed and interpreted from the vantage point of our Indigenous cultural worldview. In order to facilitate meaningful understanding of our worldview it was important that the key concepts of language and culture were explored, so that the intrinsic differences between our perspective and non-Indigenous perspective were made plain.

These differences in perspective were particularly telling with regard to the location of best practice culturally responsive paradigms in education and community health and wellbeing.

The backdrop behind the imperative to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures was also examined closely so as to advance greater understanding of the highly convoluted nature of teaching and learning our Aboriginal languages and cultures within the challenging context of diminished language and cultural praxis.

The relationship between education and community health and wellbeing was found to be so inter-reliant that it necessitates the strengthening agency of a holistic cultural conduit between home, community and educational frameworks.

With regard to the character of the available literature it is astonishingly clear that we Indigenous peoples internationally, nationally and locally [New South Wales] have long constituted a bountiful ‘subject’ for Western academia. The Western fascination with studying us has continued unabated since colonisation, resulting in the publication of an extraordinarily corpulent body of material upon us.

It is all the more surprising, given the vigorous nature of the study of us, that there is a notable significant dearth of Western academically authoritative empirical research into the linkages between our linguistic and cultural praxis and our scholastic performance within the Western mainstream context. It is similarly surprising, given the publicised urgency of the dire state of our health status, that our psychosocial cultural health and wellbeing has not been more comprehensively addressed.

The most remarkable characteristic found with regard to the available literature however, is the extent to which our Indigenous academic publication remains numerically overshadowed by the sheer weight of Western interpretation of us.
Principal Findings

Language and Culture

- Language is equally the medium of communication and the medium of cognition.
- Language and culture are mutually inclusive and therefore not readily considerable in isolation of one another.
- Language is recognisably the core repository of human knowledge.
- Indigenous languages and cultures are immutably spiritual, being embedded within Indigenous ontology’s of country, thus determining distinct Indigenous epistemologies and axiologies.
- Indigenous languages are recognisably uniquely rich in ecological knowledge.
- Indigenous cultural identity remains enmeshed within language even when mother tongue is no longer spoken.
- Indigenous language continues to hold psychological primacy in Indigenous identity as the spiritual conduit between identity and country.
- Where Indigenous languages have been severely diminished or no longer spoken Aboriginal English has a strong linguistic role in positively reinforcing Indigenous identity.

Language, Culture and Protection

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is consistently cited within academic discourse as defining a mandate for Nation States to secure and guarantee through legal ordinance the protection and revival of Indigenous languages and cultures.
- Indigenous language and culture protection policy is unable to guarantee perpetuity in the protection and revival of Indigenous languages and cultures.
- The contrast between the revitalisation of a language and the reclamation of a language is significant demarcating distinct strategic parameters for language and culture revival, including education.
- There is vigorous localised language revival taking place within New South Wales, but it is not systematic across the State.
- The Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative stands out within New South Wales as a positive exemplar for creating functional community-school engagement.
- Indigenous tensions over linguistic veracity in language revitalisation and reclamation significantly convolute the Indigenous language revival process.

Educational Engagement

- Schooling is generally accepted as important to Indigenous language and culture maintenance and revival.
- There is Indigenous discord over how much language and culture should be injected into State mainstream education programming.
State mainstream education systems are seen as having a reconciliation and human rights obligation to be proactive in supporting Indigenous language and culture maintenance and revival.

- Indigenous medium immersion, particularly in the early years, indicates best practice for establishing Indigenous language and culture maintenance and revival within a formal education context.
- Indigenous medium immersion education, particularly in the early learning years, evidences reversal of language shift away from mother tongue.
- There is no convincing evidence to suggest that Indigenous medium education impedes the acquisition of Standard Australian English literacy skills.
- There is evidence to suggest that Indigenous students learning through Indigenous medium immersion acquire academic competencies at a standard equal to and better than students studying through English medium education.
- Indigenous language and culture education programmes not underpinned by immersion principles are less likely to move beyond language awareness.
- The most dominant impediment in Indigenous language and culture education is a lack of qualified teachers who are both proficient in language and fluent in cultural praxis.
- The other major dominant impediment in Indigenous language and culture education is the paucity of quality culturally germane teaching resources.
- A lack of continuity between early childhood, primary and secondary programming in Indigenous language and culture revitalisation education can severely disrupt or otherwise bring to a halt the re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongue.

- Aboriginal language and culture education programmes within the State mainstream education system of New South Wales are not widespread.
- Many Aboriginal students within New South Wales are not assured access to Indigenous language and culture learning beyond Aboriginal Studies.
- The issue of on country versus off country teaching remains highly contentious within Indigenous cultural politics and this has a direct impact on limiting wider distribution of Indigenous language and culture learning.

Community Health and Wellbeing

- Indigenous health and wellbeing is strongly associated with spiritual health and wellbeing.
- There is a tangible interconnection between spiritual health and wellbeing and a broader sense of individual and community cultural health and wellbeing.
- There is a tangible interconnection between Indigenous self-esteem and cultural praxis which includes language competency.
- It can be concluded on the basis of Indigenous interpretation of existing literature that even language awareness can strengthen cultural pride in identity and therefore cultural health and wellbeing.
- International research indicates that Indigenous language competency influences the reduction of Indigenous youth suicide and self-harm.
- National commentary indicates that the risk of premature loss of older language and culture knowledge holders can force accelerated uptake of language and culture knowledge upon oncoming generations, which can then in turn precipitate psychological ill-health.
The status of Indigenous home language and culture has a direct impact on the degree to which a child will uptake Indigenous language and culture.

The robustness of Indigenous language and culture maintenance and revival is significantly dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of a strong home-school-community interface.

Indigenous language and culture 'nests' are identified within the literature as vital for bringing older language and cultural knowledge holders together with the very young.

There is a significant need to establish informal and formal adult community education initiatives aimed at Indigenous language and culture maintenance and revival.
Principal Recommendations for New South Wales

Community Health and Wellbeing

- It is recommended that the New South Wales Government proceed with its current initiative to establish a network of regional Aboriginal Language Centres with consideration to extending their structure, scope and operation to incorporate the following sub-recommendations:-
  i. That these centres become Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives, thereby incorporating within their brief Aboriginal cultural development alongside Aboriginal language development for the benefit of the cultural health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal peoples of New South Wales.
  ii. That the Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives be given responsibility to establish and support local community Aboriginal language and culture 'nests' with the aim of strengthening home-school-community connectivity.
  iii. That these localised language and culture 'nests' be organised as a mechanism for facilitating the bringing together of older knowledge holders of language and culture with upcoming generations so that a stronger language and culture foundation can be developed in order to promote the prospect of a new generation of Aboriginal knowledge holders.
  iv. That the Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives incorporate within their jurisdiction a mechanism for conducting professionally mediated cultural problem solving clinics in order to facilitate the workshopping of cultural issues related to Aboriginal language revitalisation and reclamation.
  v. That these clinics offer formal professional mediation services for situations where cultural impasse between community members stalls Aboriginal language revitalisation and reclamation.
  vi. That the Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives instigate and oversee the provision of informal non-award community based adult language and culture education programmes.
  vii. That the Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives work in close partnership with the State Library of New South Wales and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] to develop an up-to-date State wide languages database for the purpose of supporting Aboriginal communities undertaking language reclamation across New South Wales and the future protection of vital Aboriginal language data.

Education

- It is recommended that the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group [AECG] in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities jointly seek to address the culturally divisive and spiritually difficult polemic of on country versus off country Indigenous language and culture teaching on the basis of the following sub-recommendations:-
  i. That the spiritual practicalities of facilitating the establishment of fluent Indigenous/Aboriginal language education programmes within the New South Wales mainstream education system be investigated.
  ii. That this investigation consider the fundamental right of every Aboriginal child within New South Wales to be provided with an option to undertake learning in an Indigenous/Aboriginal language within the State’s mainstream schooling system.
iii. That this investigation also consider the reconciliation benefit of offering all children the opportunity to undertake learning in an Indigenous/Aboriginal language within the State’s mainstream schooling system.

iv. That the concept of teaching ‘from country’ currently modelled by Charles Darwin University be considered as a way forward for transitioning the pedagogical importance of teaching on country into a classroom context.

v. That the benefit of conducting a local language awareness programme alongside a fluent Indigenous/Aboriginal language programme be considered.

- It is recommended that the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities undertake a formal pilot study into the pedagogical principles of Indigenous/Aboriginal medium programming with a view to implementing whole day immersion language and culture programmes in an effort to help redress the critical endangerment of Aboriginal languages and cultures within New South Wales.

- It is recommended that the New South Wales Government seek to address through the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities the serious polemic of scholastic measurement of Aboriginal students undertaking Indigenous/Aboriginal language and culture learning with the following sub-recommendations in mind:-
  i. That Aboriginal community anxiety about the academic ‘shaming’ of Aboriginal children, learning in an Indigenous/Aboriginal language and culture programme, through competitive assessment be explored with an understanding that Western testing methods can seriously disadvantage Aboriginal children seeking to learn for the benefit of the cultural health of their identity.

  ii. That the possibility of conducting Aboriginal student only language and culture classes be explored as a means of addressing ‘shame’.

- It is recommended that the New South Wales Government seek to urgently address the serious lack of qualified culturally knowledge teachers for school and community education programmes through the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities with the following sub-recommendations in mind:-
  i. Under the auspice of the proposed Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives establish an adult education teaching skills development programme for suitable willing Aboriginal language and cultural knowledge holders.
  ii. Support this teaching skills programme with a training stipend and a graduate cultural teacher payment structure.

- It is recommended that the New South Wales Government seek to develop a specific Aboriginal languages and cultures educational resource fund to be administered by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities to urgently address the significant paucity of up-to-date effective Aboriginal learning materials to support Aboriginal language and culture learning programmes, Aboriginal Studies programmes and the effective injection of Aboriginal perspectives across the Key Learning Areas.
Policy and Legislation

- In response to Australia’s Federal endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples it is recommended that the New South Wales Government seek to secure and guarantee the status, protection and revival of Aboriginal languages and cultures within New South Wales through the enactment of legal ordinance in respect to the following observations:
  
i. Best human rights practice suggests the inception of a distinct Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Act.
  
ii. An alternative to exclusive Aboriginal languages and cultures legislation would be formal explicit embedment of Aboriginal linguistic status and protection within already existing cultural protection ordinance or annexation under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act on the basis of Aboriginal language spiritual extrapolation within country.
  
iii. That formal legal ordinance of this nature would better enable the facilitation of an Indigenous Language and Culture Statutory Authority with full responsibility to administer all cultural, social and educational matters to do with Aboriginal language and culture protection and advancement.
  
iv. That formal legal ordinance would ameliorate the tenuous nature of non-enforceable policy.

- It is recommended that the existing New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy be amended to envelop the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly with regard to Article 13.1 and Article 14.1, and that the concept of language awareness be more expressly written into the policy.

Research and Strategic Planning

- In response to the extreme dearth in Indigenous led research into Indigenous cultural issues and in the spirit of enabling Indigenous self-determination it is recommended that the New South Wales Government fund the commissioning of Indigenous led research, under the auspice of the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, in accordance with the following sub-recommendations:
  
i. That an Aboriginal led qualitative research investigation be undertaken to seek to establish Aboriginal community needs and aspirations for the future direction of language and culture protection, maintenance and revival.
  
ii. That an Aboriginal led quantitative research investigation be undertaken in order to update existing knowledge of the exact State of the Aboriginal languages and cultures of New South Wales.
  
iii. That the results of these research studies be used as the basis for the development of a strategic management plan, including vision statement, for the proposed Aboriginal Language and Culture Collectives, or any future Statutory Authority to be established.
  
iv. That an urgent immediate Aboriginal led full evaluation of all existing Aboriginal language programmes currently offered through the States mainstream education system, and participating private and independent schools, be carried out in order to uncover the effectiveness of these programmes, particularly with regard to Aboriginal student scholastic attainment and Aboriginal uptake of language and culture.
Chapter 1 - The Research Study

1.1 The Research in Theory

On the 27th of May, 2011 the New South Wales Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Victor Dominello MP announced in a press release that “the NSW Government will investigate how to create further Aboriginal cultural and linguistic opportunities as a key way of closing the gap”. The Minister further stated that “this investigation will include thorough analysis of existing best practice and various trends in promoting indigenous language and culture”. On the basis of this public announcement Aboriginal Affairs, Office of Communities, the NSW Department of Education and Communities undertook the commissioning of a literature based research study with the aim of exploring the linkages between Aboriginal languages and cultures, Aboriginal community wellbeing and Aboriginal engagement with the education system.

Minister Dominello poignantly noted in his May press release that he believes that “…through culture and language empowerment, much can be achieved in reducing the gap in Aboriginal disadvantage”. This welcome and constructive conviction essentially informed the tone and strategic purpose behind the briefing document that founded this study. As is the case with all such commissioned studies, a formal briefing document needs to be established in order to determine a set objective for the research, in this case commensurate with Minister Dominello’s announcement, and also to circumscribe the research within specific terms of reference. These terms of reference, which for this project were articulated under the title ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’, provide for the researcher a set of parameters that effectively enclose the research within investigative boundaries that protect the research from veering into un-commissioned areas of inquiry.

2 ibid.
3 ibid.
The stated research objective for this particular project, as set down within the briefing document, was to:

Provide an understanding of the connection between teaching Aboriginal languages and culture and benefits to community wellbeing and engagement with the education system⁴

With this in mind the contracted researcher was instructed to:

Compile existing evidence, synthesise and interpret that evidence for the NSW context, and make recommendations with regard to this objective⁵

The particular terms of reference for this project specifically directed that the research should constitute:

A desk-top survey of existing and up-coming information locally, nationally and internationally on linkages between Indigenous language use and learning of culture, and benefits for the individual and community wellbeing, participation in cultural activities, engagement in learning and other activities and opportunities⁶

Further, the terms of references were explicit in reinforcing and reiterating that the researcher should specifically:

Find out the links between studying Aboriginal language and culture and increased student participation in school life, as well [as] increased parental engagement with the school system⁷,

And as a result recommend:

Courses of action to maximise the benefits of expanding language and culture learning in NSW, based on the available evidence⁸

To that end the terms of reference determined that the researcher should produce a final report that:

Synthesises, interprets and explains the evidence
Relates the evidence to the NSW situation⁹

In that regard it was stated categorically that the analysis of evidence found within the literature should make plain:

The quality of the evidence available...
Any evidence about differences in outcomes related to:
    whether an Indigenous language is a person’s first or subsequent language
    a person’s fluency in the Indigenous language
    how that person acquired their Indigenous language
Any significant gaps in information which limit the ability to make recommendations
Any factors which may limit expanding language use and learning in NSW¹⁰

As the resident Indigenous academic privileged with the opportunity to undertake the literature based research study revealed herein, my first instinct was to cement within my mind’s eye the knowledge place of the research and correspondingly my analytic/interpretative lens. Now it may

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⁵ ibid.
⁶ ibid., p.2.
⁷ ibid.
⁸ ibid.
⁹ ibid.
¹⁰ ibid.
well seem strange to begin a study of this nature by thinking about establishing an analytic/interpretive lens founded on and within a specific knowledge place. After all, it can be argued that the project brief as detailed above merely required the commissioned researcher to undertake a straightforward unambiguous literature review. In reading the project brief and in thinking about its prescribed field of study I reasoned otherwise. I did so because I saw that the work of reading, analysing and interpreting literature may not be entirely objective, just as knowledge itself may not be entirely objective.

You see, we are all socio-cultural beings. Each of us cognises and rationalises from within an intellectual, psychological and sociological context that is culturally informed. We all filter information through the worldview that shapes our socio-cultural lens or outlook, even researchers. On this basis it can be legitimately claimed that qualitative research in particular, even interpretive research based on existing literature, may be subject to a researcher’s cultural predisposition. We need to bear in mind here that qualitative research is principally concerned with delving deeply into, and explaining, human social and cultural phenomena. As Indigenous Botswanan academic Associate Professor Bagele Chilisa put it in her recently published textbook ‘Indigenous research methodologies’, “qualitative research is characterised by multiple realities and therefore multiple truths”.11

Chilisa tellingly corroborated that:

The researcher’s perceptions of reality, what counts as knowledge and values, have an impact on the way research questions are conceived, research approaches, data-gathering instruments, analysis, and interpretation and dissemination of research findings.12

The real possibility that a ‘researcher’s perceptions of reality’ impacts the interpretative trajectory of research places me, as a researcher, in a position of ethical obligation, wherein I am required to disclose up front my personal socio-cultural outlook, and indeed explain how this outlook characterises the reality of my own analytic/interpretive lens, and also how it situates my research in terms of systems of knowledge and knowledge production. This is entirely necessary in order to combat downplay of my research interpretations on the basis of my cultural predisposition or subjectivity as an Indigenous researcher.

In thinking about research, it can be seen that research is essentially the business of either generating new previously unknown knowledge, or locating new understanding through re-examination and re-interpretation of

12 ibid., p. 2.
existing knowledge. Whatever a research enterprise is premised upon achieving in this regard, it always begins from a fixed starting point. This starting point is typically established through the recognition of a problem or the conception of an idea and the concomitant postulation of a singular research question, a set of research questions or a research hypothesis. However research is initiated one thing is patently clear; research is endowed with an intellectual identity, and it is this identity that locates the research within an academic realm and industry of a given knowledge place or system of knowledge.

The research enterprise that is the subject of this report is no different. It too is situated within a particular knowledge system. There is, of course, a tendency among those who remain unconvinced by non-positivist postcolonial and emancipatory research discourse to think of knowledge, and therefore knowledge production through research, as an essentially neutral and objective enterprise that contributes to one holistic body of knowledge. That however, is not quite the case. Just as researchers can be seen to possess socially and culturally determined notions of reality and truth, so too can knowledge, especially knowledge typically ascribed to the multiple disciplines related to social science. Knowledge is not necessarily a singular entity, it can be socially and culturally placed, and it can promulgate a particular relative or subjective way of seeing the world or worldview.

Indigenous Māori academic Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith is a leading figure in Indigenous emancipatory research discourse. Through her critical examination of knowledge and knowledge systems Smith exposed the essentially hegemonic nature of the Western system of knowledge. Smith duly noted in her seminal volume ‘Decolonising methodologies’ that “the globalisation of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge”.13 We Indigenous peoples vigorously counterclaim this view as intellectually repressive. We assert the legitimacy of own Indigenous systems of knowledge, which contrary to popular belief are not statically centred within a traditional/tribal time warp; they are contemporary, dynamic and constantly evolving.

To explain this further, I want to turn your attention to the distinction Chilisa made between Western systems of knowledge and non-Western systems of knowledge. This distinction recognises that one system of

knowledge “...is Euro-Western and indigenous to the Western academy and its institutions; the other knowledge is non-Western and peripheral, and it operates with the values and belief systems of the historically colonized”.\textsuperscript{14} What we can learn from this is that Indigenous systems of knowledge tend to be located beyond the fringe of customary Westcentric academic thinking and research. This has had the flow on effect of positioning Indigenous systems of knowledge as either insignificant or nonexistent. The reality though is that our Indigenous systems of knowledge do exist, and we can see from Chilisa that our voice is that of the historically oppressed.

That said, it is troubling to me that Indigenous academia tends to be exclusively associated with speaking back against the omnipotence of Westcentric knowing. Whilst this is an integral part of what Indigenous academia is, Indigenous academia is far more; it is equally speaking forward through the spirit reality of our Indigenous ontology’s. The research story presented hereunder may well speak back, from time to time, against Western supremacy, but more significantly it will speak forward through the spiritual synergy of our collective Indigenous voice. In short, this research study will occupy a place within our Indigenous systems of knowledge and transmit our Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being. This research therefore unequivocally carries an intellectual identity as a constituent of the industry of Indigenous academia, and defines very particularly my own analytic/interpretive lens as an instrument of Indigenous worldview.

Actually, whenever you engage with Indigenous knowing by picking up and reading an Indigenous voiced book, glancing over an Indigenous voiced article or see or hear Indigenous commentary about language and culture you will be made aware of the existence of one of our most pressing concerns – a concern to ensure the continuity of our languages and by association the cultures to which these languages belong. This concern is global. It is broadcast loudly and clearly through the passionate, anxious, oftentimes fearful, but increasingly optimistic, voice of our academic colloquia and literature. Interestingly, it is actually a concern that can also be found in the sentiment of international, national and local debate, and in the commentary of Western academia. Beyond this though, and more determinedly, it is powerfully voiced through the spiritual psyche of Indigenous community cultural dialogue.

Sitting behind the psyche of Indigenous community cultural dialogue is a significant and arguably officious history. Across the globe we Indigenous people have lived through and survived imperialism and colonialism. In

\footnote{B Chilisa, op.cit., p.4.}
every continent Indigenous peoples can attest to this, certainly Smith has affirmed that “imperialism frames the indigenous experience. It is part of our story, our version of modernity”.\(^\text{15}\) We know firsthand what it is to have our once autonomous lands systematically claimed and occupied by another culture. We know too the smothering consequence of a colonising culture upon our own. In Australia, we Aboriginal peoples, who once owned and occupied what became the state of New South Wales, were the first to feel the full uncompromising impact of British cultural imposition and among the first to suffer language loss and culture loss.

There is much to be read and indeed heard on the matter of Indigenous language loss and culture loss, but perhaps one the most compelling single statements I’ve read in recent times came from Oglala Lakota President of the National Indian Education Association, Ryan Wilson who simply stated that “this is a race against the clock and we’re in the 59\(^{th}\) minute of the last hour”.\(^\text{16}\) This statement of itself may well sound panicked, but it is not. It is a strong, sobering Indigenous voiced observation which imparts to this research a defining context from within the spirit place of our Indigenous knowing. Certainly, the intensity and urgency of Wilson’s meaning is undeniably confirmed when juxtaposed against the unassailable reality that:

> Of the some 7,000 languages today, it is estimated that more than 4,000 are spoken by indigenous peoples. Language specialists predict that up to 90 per cent of the world’s languages are likely to become extinct or threatened with extinction by the end of the century. This statistic illustrates the grave danger faced by indigenous peoples.\(^\text{17}\)

When you further consider the strength behind United Nations author, and Indigenous Maasai expert on Indigenous affairs, Dr Naomi Kipuri’s statement “Indigenous languages have been dying, not only as a result of unintended consequences of colonization and globalization, but also because of deliberate assimilation policies that sought to deny indigenous peoples their own identities and cultures”\(^\text{18}\) then you come face to face with the catastrophic nature of what we Indigenous peoples contend with, and what we absolutely dread in terms of the loss of our languages and our cultures. In the face of such alarming data and statement it would be quite easy, especially for those with a non-Indigenous ‘eye’, to conclude that we Indigenous peoples may as well give up because all seems so utterly and irredeemably hopeless, but is this a legitimate conclusion?

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\(^{15}\) LT Smith, op. cit., p. 19.


\(^{18}\) ibid., p. 58.
In nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America, but also in many other nations as well, the once dominating and antagonistic relations between colonising populations and Indigenous peoples have been challenged, and in many instances are now in a process of change. Reconciliation, as a socio-cultural and socio-political ideal premised on healing and egalitarianism, has become more than a popular catch cry, it has become a corridor of assertion in Indigenous academia and community dialogue alike, and as such a genuine force in inter-cultural nationhood relationships. These relationships centre on the recognition of fundamental Indigenous human rights; human rights that acknowledge our Indigenous entitlement to save, nurture and continue our first languages and cultures, and therefore our cultural identity.

The status of Indigenous language loss and culture loss in concert with Indigenous human rights will be discussed with far greater explanation in the body of this report. Both matters are introduced here because they provide the principal gateway into the socio-political site of the Indigenous research contained herein. This is because this research extends out from the guiding principles of reconciliation by contributing to the advancement of our fundamental Indigenous human right to speak our Indigenous languages and live our Indigenous cultures. It begins from the point of knowing that conscious government effort is being made to redress Indigenous social, cultural and political inequity through recognition and acceptance of the positive value of our Indigenous languages and cultures to the Australian nation.

The reconciliation and human rights gateway into this research thus aligns this research directly with the moral ethos of key Indigenous human rights as articulated in the ‘United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’. These rights are:

**Article 8.1**
Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

**Article 13.1**
Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

**Article 14.3**
States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

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**Article 15.1**

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.\(^\text{20}\)

I must also reveal, in the interests of researcher integrity, that I have a strong personal conviction centred on Article 14.1 which states:

Indigenous peoples have a right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.\(^\text{21}\)

There has been much debate in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous circles alike regarding the myriad of issues that this right provokes. Whether you are an advocate of Indigenous independent education as I am, or not, the prospect that a causal link might be found between the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures, Indigenous community health and wellbeing and Indigenous educational participation means that the socio-political site of this research inevitably encapsulates consideration of our Indigenous right to cultural empowerment through cultural and educational self-determination.

### 1.2 The Research in Practice

There are essentially two fundamental aspects to research – theory and practice. The theoretical framework of this research study has already been explained to you in terms of knowledge place, researcher lens and socio-political site. These pre-positional underpinnings embed this study within an Indigenous liberationist methodology or paradigm. Indigenous liberationist theory and philosophy not only secures the learned authority of the spirit logic of Indigenous ontology, epistemology and axiology, it functions as an apparatus for Indigenous academic emancipation and Indigenous socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic self-determined empowerment. In bouncing off Chilisa’s recognition of methodology as a “convergence” between a “theoretical framework”, “assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge” and “value systems & ethical principles”\(^\text{22}\) it can be seen that this research upholds Indigenous assumptions of knowing and Indigenous valuing of collectivism, spiritualism and autonomy.

Of course theory is all well and good, but the practice of research is altogether another matter. First of all, a genuine conduit between theory and practice needs to be successfully established. In the past I have done this by looking at how the underscoring values inbuilt in the methodology of research suggest criterion for praxis, and how this criterion can be aligned

\(^{20}\) ibid.  
\(^{21}\) ibid.  
\(^{22}\) B Chilisa, op.cit., p.163.
with the methods of research.\textsuperscript{23} However, this is not necessarily either a straightforward or easy process because there is always an inherent risk that theory will be let down by practice. In other words, if the practice of research doesn’t dovetail with the ideals of theory, then theory becomes hollow rhetoric. Of course, the idea that discussion about method is even necessary with literature based research needs to be counterbalanced by recognition that a practical approach to reading, analysing and interpreting literature needs to be located, and it has to be an approach that works with the standpoint of whatever methodology is being employed.

So, how can practice become a medium of theory? In transitioning this particular research study from theory to practice I kept in mind that the briefing document itself set for me a fairly general primary objective and relatively broad terms of reference. Given this, it seemed to me that it would be logical to apply the strategy of informally establishing for myself an operational research hypothesis and to extrapolate this to a series of key guiding questions as a practical platform for the research. When I first read the briefing document’s preamble, two sentences immediately stood out for me. I found both sentences compelling because I saw that they contained within them the essence of a practical research hypothesis that I could set, then apply as a useful tool or yardstick for testing and measuring the content, context and messaging subtext of existing literature on the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures.

The first sentence that struck me simply stated that the “revival and renewal of Aboriginal languages is happening in NSW within Aboriginal communities, in schools and other education institutions, and in the broader community”.\textsuperscript{24} In the second sentence it was observed that there is some research and colloquial evidence to suggest “…that Aboriginal language teaching in schools has increased attendance rates amongst Aboriginal students and has been linked with increased student performance, particularly in literacy”.\textsuperscript{25} It was from these two sentences that I saw the prospect of a triangularity existing between language and culture, community health and wellbeing and education. On this basis I formulated the following working hypothesis:

\begin{quote}
The degree to which Indigenous individuals (students), families and communities will proactively and productively engage with and participate in State mainstream educational systems and programmes, and also cultural and societal programmes, is directly proportionate to the condition of Indigenous individual, family and community cultural health and wellbeing. This in turn is
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{24} Aboriginal Affairs, loc.cit.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
directly extrapolated to the robustness of Indigenous cultural praxis including language usage, and the presence of Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems specifically and mainstream society more broadly.

I will clarify at this point that I fully realise the possible dangers in the postulation of hypotheses. Critics of research method have argued that a hypothesis may have the effect of skewing research findings on the basis that a risk exists wherein the researcher will intentionally work to either confirm or refute a hypothesis in harmony with their own opinion. I could certainly be accused of this, if for no other reason than simply because of my Indigenous being and because of the cultural persona of the research methodology that I have intentionally adopted. As I noted in my doctoral study “by situating myself, as an Indigenous cultural being, within the context of my research I feel my ability to impart a cultural insight borne of my socio-cultural partisanship”. It would, of course, be comfortable for me to plainly state that I have remained as detached as possible, but you will know from my earlier explicit account of my own analytic/interpretive lens that I am looking with a distinct Indigenous eye.

It would not be a quantum leap to suppose that my personal opinion tended to create the opportunity for me to apply a preset, pre-crafted confirmation of my hypothesis. The offset to this however is that no matter how convincing my hypothesis may be to me personally, for my research to maintain academic credibility I still need to either prove or repudiate my hypothesis with a significant body of convincing evidence. This body of evidence must enable my research to stand up to critical appraisal, which in this particular case very much includes critical deliberation on my selection and use of available literature. The reality of my working hypothesis is that it is merely an enquiry device purposed towards facilitating vigorous testing of the proposition that it represents. To ensure that this vigorous testing is accomplished as effectively and openly as possible I have, as previously mentioned, extrapolated a series of key guiding questions to my hypothesis, all of which are aimed at facilitating an incisive verdict on my hypothesis.

The inquiring utility of key guiding questions has the effect of adding an investigative safeguard into the practice of research, particularly in the case of literature based research studies. This occurs because the key guiding questions help to ensure that the researcher is constantly reflecting upon what they have read and reviewing their depth of understanding. For myself, these key guiding questions are an important checking tool because they afford me a certain measure of protection against any danger of forsaking

26 ST Williams, op.cit., p. 112.
the integrity of inquiry to the temptation of premature conclusion. These key guiding questions have also been instrumental in steering my thought processes, so that I could think logically about how best to chronologically scaffold what I feel has become a comprehensive and evocative Indigenous story on language and culture. This scaffold, and the underpinning key guiding questions that have informed the testing of my working hypothesis, are as follows:

**Language and Culture**
1. What are language and culture?
2. What are our ways of knowing language, culture and cultural identity?

**Language, Culture and Protection**
1. Who are we and what is the state of our languages and cultures?
2. Why and how should our languages and cultures be protected?

**Educational Engagement**
1. Why is it important to teach and learn our Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems?
2. What educational paradigms indicate ‘best practice’ for the teaching and learning of our Indigenous languages and cultures?

**Cultural Health and Wellbeing**
1. How does our use of mother tongue and our cultural praxis support our cultural selfhood and how does this determine the cultural health and wellbeing of our communities?
2. What role does adult and community education have in facilitating the revitalisation and reclamation of our languages and cultures within our communities and will it positively support our cultural health and wellbeing?

Whilst the establishment of a working hypothesis and associated key guiding questions provided a useful inquiry device for reading, analysing and interpreting literature, in reality the value of this was negligible without an actual body of literature to engage with. The start point for locating this body of literature, as you would expect, shouldn’t be particularly noteworthy especially since the formal briefing document explicitly called for a ‘desk-top survey’. Whilst ‘desktop’ research per se tends to relate to the business of locating readily accessible published material over and above archival, research and manuscript documentation, the contemporary idea behind ‘desktop’ is now so synonymous with computing that I make the qualification that my search for literature moved beyond the confines of the internet. No doubt much can be found on the internet, but there is a significant non-web based body of monographic, periodical and other material available to be consulted. Abstract level reference to these items can be found via web-based indexes, but the items themselves must always be personally accessed, usually through library collections and the like.

With that in mind, bouncing off the premise of my hypothesis, I began the work of literature searching by conducting a first round or initial literature search via appropriate web browsers, databases and catalogues using general keywords. The keywords I chose to use at this initial stage were
necessarily broad and included Indigenous, Aboriginal, language, culture, education, school, teaching, learning, health and so on. I ran these keywords in a variety of combinations and in a variety of information sources in order to make an intentionally expansive sweep of literature. My purpose for doing so was to first of all reacquaint myself with the sheer volume of material that has been released about us, our languages and our cultures. I also wanted to gauge what percentage of this diverse body of material held promise in terms of the more specific delimiters of my study. I had, of course, always known that we represented a bountiful subject for publication, but as a result of my first foray into the literature again, I certainly had the magnitude of that confirmed.

I ended up collating together a range of sources identified on the basis of a first glance read-through for possible connection with the general idea of my working hypothesis. I then moved on to the process of deeper reading, weeding and sorting, this time thinking more precisely about the context of my key guiding questions. This is where the utility of my key guiding questions proved absolutely invaluable. By continually returning to these questions I was able to look inside the source at hand more effectively in order to make an informed judgement about relevancy as well as academic and cultural merit. The amount of material I ended up flagging as worthwhile from this first search round was significant and certainly strong enough to get the writing process well underway. As I began the work of framing the story behind the literature, I then conducted second round targeted literature searches with an eye to catching any material that I might have overlooked in the first round, and as a means of confirming existent gaps within the literature.

Inevitably with any research study that is based on an examination of existent literature, choice of literature will undoubtedly become a matter of post study conjecture – why did you use that reference and not this reference? Even when literature is either selected or rejected on the basis of relevance and informational quality that of itself may not be enough to whittle down to a workable body of literature. Keep in mind that we Indigenous peoples have been studied for hundreds of years, and our lives, languages and cultures have been ‘glared’ at from every conceivable angle. Having selected items on the basis of application to my hypothesis and key guiding questions, I made one further judgement to do with aptness to the integrity of the study as an Indigenous story. I looked at how each source would help me yarn our ways of knowing. On this basis some sources stood out more than others. You may well find that the scope of what I have relied upon in the end is somewhat eclectic, but it is so because the power of our
Indigenous story was for me a priority over and above Westcentric academic stridency.

Having elucidated the background of this research study from theory to practice, I now invite you to come on a cultural learning journey with me into our Indigenous ways of knowing. I hope that in reading my words you come to appreciate the deeper cultural substance of our health and wellbeing and gain meaningful insight into the challenging place that we occupy within the theory and practice of education. The story I offer you follows a pathway that has been consciously mapped in order to exponentially grow your knowing. Your learning journey will begin with an introduction into the dynamics of Western understandings of language and culture and Indigenous intellectual ‘country’ on language, culture and identity. You will then move on to read about our contemporary cultural geography, including the reported status of our languages and cultures. This will provide you with an effective pathway into understanding the complexities of protecting and reviving our languages and cultures. Following on from this your attention will be turned towards issues to do with education and the broader implications of the importance of teaching and learning our languages and cultures in terms of our community cultural health and wellbeing.
Chapter 2 - Language and Culture

2.1 The Dynamics of Language and Culture

Because the word ‘language’ is so commonly used, generally speaking it is unusual outside of the variant fields of linguistics for anyone to stop and ponder what language actually is or what language actually entails. It would not, for instance, be an unreasonable assumption to claim that we all understand language as essentially the words that we speak to one another and possibly also the words that we write. But is this really all that language is? This is actually an important question especially in respect to the ‘Aboriginal Languages Project’, because one of the two key focal points designated for the research study underpinning this project is language. Given this, the matter of difference between how we Indigenous peoples understand language comparative to non-Indigenous understandings becomes highly relevant. In order to reveal the character of this difference we first need to explore the dynamics of language according to Western ways of knowing.

In the Concise Oxford Dictionary, a leading lexicon of English language, language is defined as “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way”.27 What I found rather informative with this particular definition is that it also included an understanding of language as “any method of expression or communication: body language”.28 If we focus solely on this interpretation we can see that Western understandings of language envelop three core elements – verbal speech communication, written word communication and non-verbal movement communication. Immediately it becomes clear that language is far more than what we say to one another, especially since there is an impression that language can be regarded as the mechanism of non word based modes of communication. I wonder though does this broad definition sit well with the Western academic discipline that focuses on language - linguistics, or specialisations partnered with linguistics.

In the more focused ‘Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics’ language has been conceptualised in the main as the phenomenon of communication, but

28 ibid.
also more specifically as a society’s verbal tongue in the sense of what is commonly known as ‘a language’ i.e. French, English, Spanish and so on.\textsuperscript{29} What was particularly interesting in the discussion provided in this source was the observation that language can be considered a “...system in the mind of an individual”.\textsuperscript{30} This observation grabbed my attention because it seemed entirely logical to me that language does inhabit our mind, and I can appreciate that we use language not only for external communication, but also for processing our internal communications; that is our internal thoughts and dialogues. Instead of just thinking about language as verbal and possibly written and non-verbal modes of communication, thinking about language as a system within the mind enabled me to appreciate that there are psychological qualities to language.

The study of the psychological qualities of language within Western academia falls within the provenance of the domain of the psychology of language and within that the field of psycholinguistics. As the name suggests the psychology of language is a hybrid or interdisciplinary branch of learning based on a fusion between the otherwise discrete disciplines of psychology and linguistics.\textsuperscript{31} In essence this amalgamated discipline takes as its primary concern “…the mental processes that are involved in language use”, in particular “language comprehension”, “language production” and “language acquisition”.\textsuperscript{32} Psycholinguistics certainly seems to involve the study of all three processes, but there does seem to be within this field a greater emphasis on revealing through the study of language a science of human cognition. It appears on this basis that psycholinguistics in particular can also be thought of as being allied with Western cognitive sciences.\textsuperscript{33}

Combined these realms of study are prolific in their output. What is striking about this output is the dominance of scientifically founded rationalisations about the operations of language within the mind. It has to be said that this scientific scrutiny is embedded within a Western knowledge framework and centred on a more confined limitation of language that is predominantly oriented towards speech. Nevertheless in terms of understanding what language is and what language entails this diffuse body of Western knowledge does present some interesting lines of inquiry. The context of these lines of inquiry has been rather succinctly captured in a recurrently

\textsuperscript{30} ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} DW Carroll, \textit{Psychology of Language}, 4\textsuperscript{th} edn, Wadsworth/Thomson, Belmont, CA, 2003, p.3.
\textsuperscript{33} ibid., p.4.
quoted observation advanced by the well known philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who famously claimed “the limits of my language mean the limits of my mind”. The implications inherent in this observation are certainly important to understanding language in the role of cognition, but also the relationship between language, culture and cognition and the teaching and learning of languages and cultures more broadly.

In reading through what would best be measured as a sample range of literature relative to the psychology of language and psycholinguistics I began to appreciate the poignancy of questions such as: i. does language shape and determine our cognition?, ii. does the range and content of our languages determine the limits of our knowing?, iii. is there an implicit or explicit correlation between language and intelligence?, and iv. if language shapes and determines cognition what happens in the case of bilinguals and multilinguals? No doubt there are many more questions to be pondered about the psychological qualities of language, but one thing is apparent, to understand language we need to think of language as more than a tool of communication. Language at the very least occupies a primary place within our individual psychologies. Whilst there is academic conjecture over whether language actions cognition or cognition actions language it does seem to me that these types of postulations are peripheral to appreciating the depth of language as a functional agent of the cerebral process.

I want to add a word of caution here about the benefits of thinking about language as a determinant in cognition. On the positive side realising language beyond the practical utility of communication, especially in terms of this study, broadens analysis of the ways and means of teaching and learning language and culture. On the negative side scientists in the past, most notably anthropologists, but also linguists and ethnographers, have been quick to form judgements about our cognitive capacity based on their entirely Westcentric interpretation of our languages, the meanings inherent in our words and phrases, not to mention a complete misreading of the spiritual character of our languages. What needs to be accepted is that “all societies have languages that allow humans to express ideas of equal complexity: there is no such thing as a ‘primitive’ language, although societies may need to borrow or invent new words, in order to express new concepts”.

Just as there are psychological facets to language, there are assuredly sociological facets. The study of these facets occupies the academic realms.

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34 L Wittgenstein as cited in DW Carroll, ibid, p.375.
of the sociology of language and sociolinguistics. The divide between the two is quite finicky, in fact it has been suggested that these fields may well be “...two sides of the same coin...”.\textsuperscript{36} Whatever the case may be, it appears that the sociology of language is primarily concerned with the explanatory value of the relationship between language and society for understanding human social organisation, whereas sociolinguistics is primarily concerned with the explanatory value of the same relationship for understanding language structure and function.\textsuperscript{37} Accordingly it has been observed that “sociolinguistics takes language as its starting point and draws on society as a necessary background and analytic construct to understand language”.\textsuperscript{38} In contrast “the sociology of language takes society as its starting point and analyses language developments with a view to illuminating the nature of society”.\textsuperscript{39}

Whichever position is taken much can be learnt about the reach of language by looking through a sociological window. According to Professor of Linguistics Ronald Wardhaugh there are four primary slants to understanding the juxtaposition between language and society. These are: i. “social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behaviour”, ii. “linguistic structure and/or behaviour may either influence or determine social structure”, iii. “the influence is bi-directional: language and society may influence each other” or iv. “there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other”.\textsuperscript{40} The fourth slant does tend to lend itself more readily to psycholinguistics, nevertheless the variant points of argument about the nature of the relationship between a society and its language run secondary to the unassailable reality that “language is a communal possession...”.\textsuperscript{41} Language exists for all of us and centres us as cultural beings.

The collective nature of language should be entirely obvious, but it is probably not consciously reflected upon too often outside of academia. Not surprisingly though, through knowing language as a human collective entity we can identify that language is possibly the instrument of all human interaction. We can thus know that language as the operative devise of human communication is influential not only in the cognitive processes of us as individuals but materialises as the conduit between ourselves as

\textsuperscript{38} J Swann et al, loc.cit.
\textsuperscript{39}ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} R Wardhaugh, op cit., p.10.
\textsuperscript{41} ibid.,p.2.
individuals and our social worlds. Even in the case where speech language is not possible communication in one form or another, signing for example, takes place and this communication is governed by established, consistent, stable, translatable and transferable codifications which hold meanings; meanings that are created and reproduced by society for the social function of society. This is manifestly language, and it is as much sociological in nature as it is psychological.

It has been observed that “languages in many ways reflect the culture of a society...”. Appreciating language as a reflection of a society’s culture extends further still how we can know the diverseness of language. Whilst I will be discussing degrees of correlation between language and culture more closely shortly, I want to highlight at this stage the functionality of language in respect to knowledge. One of the most poignant volumes I consulted in my quest to unveil the properties of language was the volume ‘When Languages Die’, which was authored by Linguistics Professor K. David Harrison. Apart from the disturbing reality check Harrison offered on the state of the world’s endangered languages, including Indigenous languages, Harrison presented within this book a compelling justification for recognising that language is unequivocally a core repository of vast tracts of human knowledge.

Harrison affirmed that “languages package and structure knowledge in particular ways. You cannot merely substitute labels or names from another language and hold onto all of the implicit, hidden knowledge that resides in a taxonomy or naming system”. Not only can it be established that language packs and stores knowledge as well as moulds the structure of knowledge, it can also be established that each human language, as a medium of a system of knowledge, is unique or distinct. As Harrison put it:

At its core, all human cognition may be fundamentally the same no matter what tongue a person speaks. This has been the prevailing view in cognitive linguistics for at least thirty years. But some people are beginning to recognize that languages can package knowledge in radically different ways, thus facilitating different ways of conceptualizing, naming and discussing the world.

This way of understanding language contrasts markedly with other understandings within linguistics and psycholinguistics which favour a more universal account of the fundamental structural nature of language. The idea that the cognitive value of language stands no matter what language is spoken is of itself unproblematic. After all, it is reasonable to

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44 ibid., p.53.
45 ibid., p.59.
accept that we all cognise within the precinct of our own language/s. But does this of itself rationalise psycholinguistic theorisation on the universality of language structures? Associate Professor of Spanish and Foreign Language Education Mark K. Warford has suggested that psycholinguistics is shrouded within a Westcentric rationalist thinking that tends to abstract or decontextualise language from its cultural mooring.\textsuperscript{46} He reports that Professor of Linguistics Noam Chomsky is considered “the father of modern linguistics” and that “Chomsky and his followers believe that language learning is largely a matter of universal rule-governed processes in the individual mind”.\textsuperscript{47} Warford appears to contest the strength of this position, favouring a more socio-cultural viewpoint about language and language cognition. I can see why Warford thinks this way, because it remains difficult for me to conceptualise language and language acquisition as an entity beyond the influence of culture?

Chomsky has also been reported by another authority to have asserted that “children are born with an innate, biological programme that prepares them for how languages are structured”.\textsuperscript{48} It may well be reasonable to accept that there are aspects of commonality in language learning that may be organically human. I remain less convinced however that there is sameness or similarity in the technical fundamentals of language structures and grammars, which impact learning. I only have to ponder the complexities of what is colloquially known as African ‘click’ languages, which I discuss further on, to feel justified in refuting this universal thesis. A rather interesting, but technically complex study recently undertaken into “word-order universals” in “four large language families”, including African Bantu languages which feature ‘clicking’ found that “linguistic diversity does not seem to be tightly constrained by universal cognitive factors specialised for language. Instead it is the product of cultural evolution...”.\textsuperscript{49}

The theoretical premise underpinning ‘universals’ has dominated linguistic theory for decades now so it is useful to see science considering its limitations, and looking to the cultural specificity of language. The value of this will become apparent when I consider the revival of our languages in particular, which I do in Chapter 3. Notwithstanding this, Linguistics Professor Neil Smith, who is known for his study of Chomsky’s theories regarding the universal nature of language, commented in the opening passage of his paper ‘Chomsky’s science of language’ that:

\begin{quote}
47 ibid., p.77.
\end{quote}
One of Chomsky’s achievements is to have demonstrated that, despite the easily observable richness of the world’s languages, there is really only one human language: that the complex and bewildering array of different languages surrounding us are all variations on a single theme, most of whose properties are innately given.\footnote{N Smith, ‘Chomsky’s science of language’ in J McGilvray (ed) Cambridge Companion to Chomsky, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, Cambridge Collections Online, State Library of New South Wales, DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521780136;002, p.21.}

My contact with the literature convinces me that whilst there are quite a number of Western academics who wholeheartedly support theories of universality, there are equally those who do not. Without becoming bogged down in an extended discussion about the polemics of the universality of language what can be discerned in concentrating on Harrison’s work alone is that the scale of differing knowledge ways, and I would add communication ways, packaged within these languages, must profile each culture’s language as unique. Harrison cites knowledges to do with ecology, time keeping, geographical mapping and mathematics in order to demonstrate his thesis regarding the diversity of human knowledge locked within the vastness of the world’s languages. These include examples such as:

- the impressively detailed identification of fish species in the language of the Solomon Islands which have scoped well beyond Western knowledge of fish species\footnote{KD Harrison, op.cit., p.42.}
- time keeping systems of the Yukaghir peoples of Siberia, who express time in units relative to kettle boiling\footnote{ibid., p.81.}
- our own nations Yanyuwa peoples of the Kimberley region who calendar time relative to seasonal fluctuations in edible plant growth cycles\footnote{ibid., p.85.}
- The epic storying of the Tofa, Ambae and Tuvan peoples of Siberia who lock geographical mapping within story\footnote{ibid., p.135.}
- The mathematical concepts of the Kaluli peoples of Papua/New Guinea whose counting mechanisms are related to gradations on the body\footnote{ibid., p.174.}

There are many more examples that can demonstrate the knowledge cargo of language, but perhaps one of the best known anecdotal examples centres on the number of words that Inuit peoples have for snow. This example is widely known but was specifically cited by Benjamin Lee Whorf, an amateur linguist, who crops up consistently within literature pertinent to both psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.\footnote{DW Carroll, op.cit. pp. 376 - 399 & R Wardhaugh, op.cit., pp.216 – 222.} It is asserted that the Inuit peoples have a vast array of words all referencing snow. What is interesting about this index of words is that each word is a highly specific articulation of knowledge of the myriad ecological conditions of snow. It is a trend we can see with many of our Indigenous cultures such as the Ifugao peoples of the
Philippines who similarly have a vast number of words denoting highly specific conditions related to rice growing, and the Sámi peoples who have a vast vocabulary related to conditions of reindeer herding.\(^{57}\)

Carroll duly noted that:

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\text{whatever the final consensus might be on Eskimo snow words, the more general notion that languages differ in the degree to which they differentiate various lexical domains does not seem to be at issue. The question is whether these differences lead to differences in thinking. Whorf suggested that they did, in the sense that when we encounter a particular word on a regular basis, it may influence our habitual thought patterns (that is, the kind of thought process that comes easily or naturally to an individual).}\]\(^{58}\)

For some reason this view of language is perpetually referenced, even though it is also perpetually refuted. In fact Whorf’s view is well known as the ‘Whorfian hypothesis’ or the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’, the ‘Sapir’ aspect acknowledges Whorf’s mentor linguist Edward Sapir. A rather easy summary of this hypothesis has been offered by Wardhaugh who clarified that Whorf’s viewpoint proposed that:

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\text{...language provides a screen or filter to reality; it determines how speakers perceive and organize the world around them, both the natural world and the social world. Consequently, the language you speak helps to form your world-view. It defines your experience for you; you do not use it simply to report that experience. It is not neutral but gets in the way, imposing habits of both looking and thinking.}\]\(^{59}\)

The idea that speech language helps reinforce worldview is to my mind perfectly reasonable, but does the use of speech language alone define worldview? I’ll explain why I ask this briefly because I’ll be addressing this in far greater detail in the next section of this chapter. Basically, I accept that language is a carrier of knowledge. I only have to look at what I cannot access in my own cultures knowledges because of the decimation of my languages to know that categorically. I also accept that language as the carrier of knowledge reflects the culture to which it belongs. Language, for me, has a cultural identity because it is culturally produced and is culturally reproduced. Can I then conclude that it also exclusively determines worldview? I would argue that this is perhaps difficult to affirm because even though I mostly speak English, or more correctly Aboriginal English, I still maintain a very strong Indigenous cultural worldview; how do I do that if I don’t fully converse in my mother tongues?

Language itself is often cited as the key mode of cultural identity, and undoubtedly it appears so for peoples who are privileged to have their full mother tongue/s, but cultural identity as you will read further on is

\(^{57}\) KD Harrison, loc.cit.
\(^{58}\) DW Carroll. op.cit.,p.378.
\(^{59}\) ibid., p.219.
multifaceted involving not just speech language. Perhaps cultural identity is more closely sustained by the power of ideologies, philosophies, principles and values embedded within ontological concepts and epistemological concepts. Coloniser languages such as English have of course been successfully morphed by us to promote our unique identity and therefore our worldview. Here in New South Wales, but also throughout Australia, we call this ‘Aboriginal English’, but there are also forms such as Creole languages as well. My point here is that when it comes to cultural identity, language is certainly a factor shaping identity, or in the case of Aboriginal English shaped by identity, but the actual use of mother tongue itself is perhaps not completely defining of identity. So in understanding what language is and what language entails it is possibly unwise to become overly keen about the use of speech language as being the whole font of worldview and identity.

That said, one matter that may complicate this view to a certain extent is the idea of language as power. Now I admit that it sounds very strange that language should have power given that language is an abstract rather than physical entity, but as you will find from reading Chapter 3 there is a politics to language that does invoke power and which does hold significant implications for the teaching and learning of our Indigenous languages and cultures. The hegemony of English over us the colonised is a primary case in point, as is the Westcentric psycholinguistic rationalisation of the nature of language as universal. I think though we can make a differentiation between what can be considered language per se and what can be considered the consequence of the actions of users of language, or the theorisations offered by Western academics who subscribe to specific standpoints about the nature of language founded within their own unique system of knowledge.

This then marks a cut off point between exploring Western ideas about the phenomenon of language itself and the wider dynamics of language application. Smith meaningfully wrote “whatever we do, language is central to our lives, and the use of language underpins the study of every other discipline. Understanding language gives us insight into ourselves and a tool for the investigation of the rest of the universe”.60 This seems wholly certain; definitely I have found that language conflates communication in its many forms with individual cognition and societal knowledge banking to form a single all encompassing entity that stands preeminent in all personal and social life worlds to the point where basic human function seems utterly impossible without it. Language is intrinsic to us as individuals and intrinsic to us as social beings. Its alleged universality is by any standard

60 N Smith., loc.cit.
moderated by the sheer magnificence of the diversity of what we as humans have created as instruments for the function and perpetuation of our own distinct cultures.

Culture, like language, is another common use word that we all appear to understand. The frequency with which it appears in everyday speech seems to suggest that its meaning is entirely unproblematic for us, yet within Western academia it remains a theoretical difficulty.\(^\text{61}\) The late Raymond Williams, who was a highly respected and renowned cultural theorist, evocatively wrote that “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language...mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought”.\(^\text{62}\) It appears that over the centuries Western conceptualisations of culture have evolved considerably, and nowadays denote concepts that Williams affirmed align more readily with the processes of “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” and artistic endeavour, but also the machinery of a society’s given way of life.\(^\text{63}\)

In terms of this study it would be easy for me to simply say that the definition that I will be relying upon relates to the idea of culture as a way of life, but that would not facilitate meaningful understanding of the deeper dynamics behind the word culture, especially given that Western conceptualisations about culture have literally and profoundly penetrated into our Indigenous life worlds, and at a global level. It would not be an exaggeration to say that historically, because of the Western ideology of racial superiority that was formulated and justified on the basis of a very narrow and highly prejudicial understanding of the fusion between the notion of culture, the notion of civilisation and the notion of progress that we Indigenous peoples are still heavily occupied with the business of rebuking Western hegemony. I suspect I would not be undertaking this very study if this ideology had not been so successful in permeating and directing the fundamental mindset of the British Empire, which precipitated the long term multi-generational subjugation of us.

This mindset was successful, highly successful, and it was undoubtedly the realisation of this that underscored why I first chose to critically examine Western ways of thinking about culture, civilisation and progress when I was working on my doctoral thesis. I soon came to realise that there is an

\(^\text{61}\) T Bennett, ‘culture’ in T Bennett, L Grossberg & M Morris (eds), \textit{New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society}, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2005, pp. 63 - 69.

\(^\text{62}\) R Williams, \textit{Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society}, Flamingo, Condor, 1983, p.87.

\(^\text{63}\) ibid, p.90.
intense political undertone belying the seemingly harmless nature of the word culture. I saw how the politics of culture quintessentially illustrates the suppressive powers of language, and how easily the context behind a single word can be construed to produce far reaching consequences. At the time that I first looked into this, I drew heavily upon the work of William’s and Professor of Sociology Chris Jenks because both academics stood out as noted authorities on the study of culture, and both had coincidently authored volumes entitled ‘Culture’. It is my intention to return once again to their insightful expertise in order to explain my critique.

Williams’ abridged account of culture explained that the etymology of culture is allied with the concept of growth because originally culture was more an agricultural term, though it came to be applied in reference to the human experience as early as the 16th century. I noted in my thesis that “the idea of culture as growth at first seems entirely safe especially since no human society is static, or any human being for that matter”. Growth is after all normally fundamental to all of us, and it is as much cognitive as it is physical. Despite noting this, I then moved on to assert that the idea of culture as growth was not as innocuous as one might suppose. I based my contention on the observation that when the idea of culture as growth is extrapolated with notions of civilisation and progress, culture is infinitely more potent. Williams noted an interesting transition in the inference of culture in England in the 18th century that brought culture as growth all the more closer to the idea of human cultivation, and inevitably perceptions about what typified a ‘civilised’ human being.

The idea of human cultivation still has currency today. We only need look at a standard Western definition of culture to appreciate this. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary Western understandings of culture proclaim culture to be “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. A refined understanding or appreciation of this” as well as “the customs, ideas, and social behaviour of a particular people or group”. Clearly the first interpretation in this definition speaks to the idea of human cultivation, if only by mention of the word achievement. The additional reference to ‘refined understanding’ is more telling because it does nothing to ameliorate the intensity of this interpretation of culture as indicative of the possibility of a more advanced or developed level of human consciousness. The growth metaphor is really quite visible. The second

64 ST Williams, op.cit, p.22.
65 R Williams, op.cit, p.87.
66 ST Williams, op.cit., p.23.
67 ibid.
68 R Williams, op.cit., p.88.
69 Concise Oxford Dictionary, loc.cit.
meaning, however, appears unrelated to the first, certainly there seems to be no suggestion of refinement or perhaps even sophistication.

This apparent disparity in contemporary Western definitions of culture substantiates rather well just how diffuse a term culture remains. I want to look at both these overarching concepts of culture in greater detail in order to better understand what culture actually is, and what culture entails. Beginning with the first interpretation, it has to be said that when conceptualisations of culture are intimately linked with the process of growth, and indeed cultivation, especially in relation to intellectual and artistic endeavour, there is always an inherent danger that measurements expressing what constitutes ‘refined’ achievement of growth and/or cultivation will be applied in order to decide what is and what is not ‘cultured’. Jenks observed that when culture is associated with notions of process there is an implication of “…not just transition but also a goal in the form of ‘culture itself’; it is here that hierarchical notions begin to emerge such as the ‘cultured person’, or ‘cultivated groups or individuals’ and even the idea of a ‘high culture’…”.

There is on this basis a recognisable aspect to culture that substantiates that culture may be implicit in the business of social stratification. Historically, social stratification was most visible during the years of colonial expansion and occupation by the British and other European empires. Cultivation of the ‘cultured self’ and ‘cultured society’ became a serious preoccupation for these empires, and intensified significantly during the Victorian era of the British Empire. These empires subscribed to the belief that a ‘cultured person’ was a ‘civilised person’. It has been observed that:

 civilizations and culture, in this conception, showed a progressive tendency towards what were regarded as higher moral values, and this enabled the Victorian mind to construct a hierarchy of cultures or civilizations which provided a rationale for colonial activities by apparently higher-order Western civilizations.

This was echoed by Professor Tony Bennett who corroborated that when:

 used as a way of dividing colonized populations into separate groups identified in terms of ways of life, the ethnographic concept of culture was integral to the development of colonial systems of rule which aimed to segregate populations along racial and ethnic lines.

It appears then, that even the second definition of culture as a way of life is not altogether innocent of negative connotation. Jenks pointed out that the concept of culture being a way of life was promoted through the discipline of early anthropology as a way of marking human existence off from animal

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72 T Bennett, op.cit., p.68.
existence.\textsuperscript{73} “In an early sense culture was precisely the collective noun used to define that realm of human being which marked its ontology off from the sphere of the merely natural”.\textsuperscript{74} There would, therefore, be some expectation that under this definition of culture all human societies would’ve been viewed with far greater equality. This however was not the case. As Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith put it “the ethnographic ‘gaze’ of anthropology has collected, classified and represented other cultures to the extent that anthropologists are often the academics popularly perceived by the indigenous world as the epitome of all that is bad with academics”.\textsuperscript{75}

It seems that all that really happened with the variation between the understanding of culture as an intellectual, artistic or aesthetic process and the understanding of culture as a way of life was a merger. By whatever definition you choose to cite there is no getting around the fact that understandings about culture led to the application of hierarchies of cultures and civilisations that relegated us Indigenous peoples to the bottom rung of the Western evolutionary ladder. Actually, when you think about it culture as a way of life held no meaning for us at all at that time because we weren’t seen as having a recognisably civilised or even basic human way of life. This was even further exacerbated by the idea of progress, which when used as a measure of the cultivation of civilisation and ultimately culture, convinced Western societies that we were incapable of ‘growth’ because of our so-called ‘primitive’ being. This understanding of culture, and its effect, really didn’t abate significantly until well into the twentieth century.

In Australia the residue of this early thinking still permeates how our cultures are thought about today. In reflecting upon this at a personal level, I still come across attitudes towards our peoples and cultures which reflect the discriminatory ‘civilisation-cultivation-progress’ ideology of early colonialism. Historically, the British presumed that our only salvation lay in expunging from us our cultural being so that we might take on the mores of their own allegedly ‘progressive’, ‘civilised’ and ‘cultured’ society. That presumption was entrenched within a sense of superiority that still lingers today, no matter how subtle. It is all well and good to assume that this form of thinking is redundant within contemporary Australian society, but if it is, why then has our current Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda felt the need to remind Australians of the hurtful nature of racism. Mick recently

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[73] C Jenks, op.cit., p.8.
\item[74] ibid.
\item[75] LT Smith, op.cit., p.67.
\end{footnotesize}
reiterated that we remain the butt of “...disparaging comments dressed up as jokes”. 76

For me, it is dreadfully disturbing to continue to read comments such as “in Australia, racism undermines the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and redressing racism has been identified as a national priority”77 or to come up against headings such as ‘Racism: a major impediment to optimal Indigenous health and health care in Australia’,78 which not only highlight that our peoples still experience racist attitudes, but that our actual health and wellbeing is seriously compromised because of it. I will reflect upon these sources later on, I mention them now to highlight that racism remains an issue for us, and it does so because of the historically bias way culture was conceptualised. Knowing that culture was, and possibly still is, defined in this way, backgrounds the deeper layers of why it is difficult for some people to accept the relevancy of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures.

It has to be said, though, that this more draconian way of understanding culture has been significantly tempered over the years through vigorous critique emanating out of Western academic disciplines such as sociology, contemporary anthropology and cultural studies. It has also been energetically refuted through Indigenous counter hegemonic assertion. Culture nowadays is still extrapolated with the arts, and still embraces the goal of becoming ‘cultured’, but it is more popularly accepted within Westcentric societies that being ‘cultured’ does not of itself necessarily equate with some form of higher order human status, though Jenks does suggest that the intellectual and artistic aspects of Western society can lead to “...senses of particularity, exclusivity, [and] elitism...”.79 Current understandings of culture as a way of life, however, have been successfully rehabilitated to move substantially away from all of this, in fact I have previously referred to the potential of this way of knowing culture as emancipatory.80

Jenks has noted that “in its most general and pervasive sense it [culture] directs us to a consideration of all that which is symbolic...”. 81 In clarifying

79 C Jenks, op.cit., p.12.
80 ST Williams, op.cit., p.24.
81 C. Jenks, op.cit., p.8.
this context of culture as a way of life it has been similarly observed that “when social scientists use the term culture they tend to be talking about a less restrictive concept than that implied in everyday speech. In social science, culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted...”\textsuperscript{82} Under this definition, culture sweeps within it what the late Professor of Sociology Tom Bottomore has termed all the “...ideational aspects of society...”\textsuperscript{83} Interestingly, Bennett credits the influence of Raymond Williams in freeing culture as a divisive term stuck on a “...normative view of culture [which] turned out, in practice, to have strong connections with the particular values of ruling groups and classes...”\textsuperscript{84} because Williams greatly expanded how culture could be understood.

Culture we can thus know is now far more than a metaphor for Westcentric ‘high culture’ or ‘civilised’ identity. Culture may well have existing links with the arts, literature, music and so on, but these links, even within a Western mindset, can be said to spotlight, rather than nullify, the inference that culture is overwhelmingly a term that encapsulates all those aspects of human being that have been created not only for amusement or aesthetic pleasure, but for day-to-day social functioning. Culture by Western definition is patently art, music, song, dance, literature, language, values, ideology, philosophy and so on. Culture, from a Western standpoint, can be all that determines the sociological aspects of a human individual’s collective identity. As you read on I would like to encourage you to stop and think about this Western delineation between what is and what is not human; it is surely a major point of departure between Western ways of knowing and our Indigenous ways of knowing.

2.2 Indigenous Ways of Knowing Language, Culture and Identity

What you have read thus far snapshots Western concepts of language and culture. It would be inaccurate, however, to assume that Western understandings of language and culture parallel completely with Indigenous understandings of language and culture. Undoubtedly there are many similarities, but there are also noteworthy points of departure that are particularly significant, especially when it comes to deliberation on matters to do with our education and our community health and wellbeing. Instead of launching headlong into an itemised account of what these points of departure entail I am going to begin my yarning here by paying my respect to the profound voice of one of Australia’s most esteemed Indigenous Yolŋu leaders and Yolŋu linguists, the late Dr Marika. Dr Marika was instrumental in working to sustain her languages and played a key role alongside fellow

\textsuperscript{82} J Scott & G Marshall, loc.cit.
\textsuperscript{83} T Bottomore cited in ST Williams, loc.cit.
\textsuperscript{84} T Bennett, op.cit., p.67.
Yolŋu leaders in designing culturally founded school programmes for Yolŋu children.

During her lifetime Dr Marika remained a strong advocate of bilingual two-way or both-way education philosophy. Dr Marika was conversant with multiple clan languages; indeed it is known that English was possibly her fourteenth language. Dr Marika was a Director with Reconciliation Australia and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS]. In 2006 Dr Marika was named Territorian of the Year, in 2007 she received her honorary doctorate from Charles Darwin University, and in 2009 she was posthumously made a Member of the Order of Australia at the Garma Festival on her own country in East Arnhem Land. For me her words continue to resonate with deep cultural meaning and carry within them the deep spirit energy that contextualises our Indigenous languages. In her testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in 1999 Dr Marika said:

...the language of our old people is esoteric. It defines the land where they come from. It has boundaries. It has boundaries out in the sea also—the sea and the land; there is nothing different about that. I would like to tell you that the land has multilayers of literacy for Yolŋu. It is text. It is what these old people sing and dance. It is what they educate our children about.

...land and language go hand in hand. It is all linked together, because without language we cannot define our land.85

In the words of Dr Marika I hear attestation of the presence of our languages within country. In yarning our ways of thinking language and culture I make it known up front that each word that we have or should have and each communicative medium that we use or would use has the strength to bring us home to country and sustain us within the spiritual realm of country. This is not an idealistic statement about what language once was for us, it is a forthright cultural declaration that I make so that there is no lingering doubt over the reality that for us Indigenous peoples language remains omnipresent within our spirit memory, even in those of us who have been forcibly excised from language. Language for us has spiritual presence and spirit character. It is not a singular or isolated entity of culture and it cannot be culturally intellectualised outside the ontological mainframe of country. There is deep cultural emotion to be heard and expressed within our yarning about language and culture. Throughout this research study you will hear the deep pain in this emotion.

When I first began to imagine how I might story our ways of knowing language I reflected upon words I’d once heard in the documentary ‘First Australians’. In Episode 3 a missionary is quoted as saying in reference to our ceremonial praxis, usually termed corroboree, that we displayed “...shocking gestures in satanical excitement...” and that our praxis amounted to being “...a real festival of the enemy of the soul”. The thought of these words of course highlighted afresh the suffering and pain of our forebears, but oddly they also triggered me to stop and think about what corroboree genuinely is. I realised in sweeping aside all of the myriad reasons behind why corroboree might be held that corroboree at its most fundamental level is essentially purposed for communication. By recognising this I was able to reaffirm to myself that our Indigenous understandings of language centre as much on human to spirit communication as human to human communication.

Dr Marika emphasised spirit communication in her reference to the song and dance of her ‘old peoples’. Song and dance are core mediums of the knowledge, law, lore and pedagogical praxis of corroboree. When I pondered what corroboree is in relation to the spirit communication of song and dance I remembered what I’d been taught by my own family Elders about language. Language for us is not just speech word, it is song phrase, sound phrase, sign phrase, movement phrase, image phrase; and it is an integral part of us, part of who we are. The New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2004 ‘New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Policy’ certainly affirmed that for us “…language is much more than just words. It is a direct link to land and country. It holds traditional songs and stories. It is about spirituality and deep meaning, and it reflects unique cultural concepts and ways of looking at the world”. This way of thinking language is mirrored in the voice of many other Indigenous peoples.

Here in New South Wales Wiradjuri Elder Uncle Stan Grant Senior, a respected knowledge holder of Wiradjuri language, emphasised that “Wiradjuri has its own way of thinking...”. Gumbaynggirr spokesperson Aiden Ridgeway similarly said that language “…goes to the heart and soul of one’s identity and gives connection to family, country and community. It instils a sense of enormous pride and provides the strength from which to

87 ibid., Episode 3 ‘Freedom for our lifetime’.
see the world...”.

90 Yawuru spokesperson and noted Indigenous leader Pat Dodson also stressed that “language is important because language is the one that gives you the way to interpret the world, how you can express things in your own imagery and gives you an insight or a window into a different world”. This same sense of language comes through in international Indigenous voice as well. Leading Indigenous Arapaho academic Professor Stephen Greymorning worried “…if we lose our language we won’t be able to think in the Arapaho way”.

91 The interconnectivity between language, worldview and identity seems entirely innate for us. Even within the media representations of government there is recognition of the place of Indigenous language within Indigenous identity. I found the exact same extrapolation of language to identity in the publicity of the Indigenous Affairs Advisory Council for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services of the Northern Territory Government, in which they assert “Aboriginal languages are the ‘heart and soul of the Northern Territory’ and Aboriginal language and culture is the core of Aboriginal identity”. This fundamental idea of language as identity is very broadly accepted, certainly Kipuri affirmed that language “...is not only a communication tool, it is often linked to the land or region traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples; it is an essential component of one’s collective and individual identity and therefore provides a sense of belonging and community”.

92 Of course, the association of identity to language is not unique to us; many non-Indigenous societies also claim their sense of national or cultural identity on the basis of language. However, the politics that surround Indigenous counter colonial representation makes emphasis of this point particularly important for us. This is something I will discuss more thoroughly further on because language as a face of our identity also articulates who we are as members of distinct cultural nationhood’s, and that in turn has bearing in the delineation of the precincts of our lands. Apart from being a fundamental aspect of what forms our worldview and identity, language is naturally the instrument of our human to human and human to spirit communications. It is with spiritual communication that

92 S Greymorning, ‘Running the gauntlet of an Indigenous language program’ in J Reyhner, G Cantoni, RN St Clair & E Parsons Yazzie (eds), Revitalising Indigenous Languages, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, 1999, <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL_2.html>
94 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, op.cit., p.58.
one of the most significant points of departure between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing language can be found.

This point of departure centres on literacy. In Western thought there is a very close association between language and literacy. Literacy, by Western definition, tends to be associated exclusively with the written medium, it being commonly defined as “the ability to read and write”. Historically, our reliance on orality was referenced within Western systems of knowledge as evidence of our alleged ‘primitivism’, in that we were said to be illiterate. The issue of literacy is interesting though because our reliance on orality invoked the creation of multidimensional spiritual literacies. In reflecting back on the words of Dr Marika about the correlation between language, literacy and country, I was drawn to the instructive account of Indigenous research methodologies offered by Chilisa. Chilisa rightfully noted that our research methodologies are open to modes of literacy that include “…language, cultural artefacts, legends, stories, practices, songs, rituals, poems, dances, tattoos …”.  

To me Chilisa’s expansion of what can be thought of as sources of literature is not only illustratively useful in terms of demonstrating the conceptual breadth of our modes of literacy, it also provides a solid representation of the diverseness of the communicative forms that constitute Indigenous languages. For us, language steps well outside the standard medium of speech in the same way that our spiritual modes of literacy step well outside the limitations of Western writing. Apart from the challenge this represents to notions of us as purely ‘oral’ societies, it signals that we understand language very expansively. There is an analogy for us between that which is spoken and that which is sung, toned, signed, danced and imaged. When we speak of language we often think in these wider terms so our understandings of language imply more than just a lexicon of words. Our languages also contain lexicons of sound vocabulary, lexicons of sign vocabulary, lexicons of movement vocabulary and lexicons of image vocabulary.

These vocabularies are highly complex and normally regulated by knowledge stratifications determined through the spirit laws/lores defined within our ontology’s. In turning to image vocabulary as a case in point, one need look no further than the artistic output of one of Australia’s strongest and internationally renowned Indigenous art companies, the Papunya Tula artists’ movement of the Central Western Desert region, to understand the reality of image vocabulary. In her documentary ‘Art + Soul’, Indigenous

95 Concise Oxford Dictionary, loc.cit.
96 B Chilisa, op.cit., p.60.
Eastern Arrernte/Kalkadoon art expert Hetti Perkins describes the work of the Papunya Tula artists as encompassing encrypted knowledge. In using the phrase encrypted knowledge Hetti is effectively emphasising the deeper communicative dimensions of Indigenous image language. These artworks can only be fully read, interpreted and comprehended by persons educated into the spirit vocabulary that is embedded as seemingly non-descript dots, strokes and swirls.

You see in order to produce a readable imaged record of knowledge there has to be in place and in use an established, consistent, stable, translatable and transferable set of codifications of meaning – in short a language. There are many famed artists connected with the Papunya Tula movement, but by way of example I want to turn your attention to the work of the late Anmatyerre artist Mr Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. In his work ‘Mt Denison Country’ Mr Tjapaltjarri has recorded information related to the spiritual geography of his country. The work itself is highly intricate containing many coloured, cylindrical and lineal elements, and it is no doubt aesthetically valuable. To my cultural mind, however, the artistic merit of this work runs second to its literary value. When I look at it, even though I cannot read it, I can nonetheless appreciate that it carries voice; that it speaks visually of Anmatyerre country and Anmatyerre ways of knowing.

If however you find the idea of a painting as having literary legitimacy somewhat disconcerting then I invite you to consider the Ngurrara Canvas, a massive 10 x 8 metre panelled work created in response to the Westcentric need for material forms of evidence to substantiate the merits of a Native Title claim. This claim was successful on the basis of this work. Its acceptance in Australian mainstream law to my mind set a meaningful precedent for recognising our myriad forms of literacy as language. I understand though that the idea of an image vocabulary may be hard for non-Indigenous peoples to appreciate. Dr Marika did note that our languages are esoteric, that is spiritually cryptic. She did so for a very good reason. They are without doubt complicated, and this complicated nature was noticeably confirmed by Meiki Elizabeth Apted who studied the seemingly enigmatic spirit language of Inyjalarrku song in North West Arnhem land.
Apted noticed that Indigenous song language was highly complex, involving “...non-decipherable, non-translatable, non-interpretable linguistic material ...” that is never found within everyday speech.101 According to Apted non-Indigenous attempts have been made over the years to try and interpret this language, and in some instances degrees of interpretation have been possible when song and story correlate, or song is communicated using non-law/lore spirit language used in everyday speech, but by and large spirit song language remains impenetrable to linguistic science.102 Apted’s observation that “…Inyjalarrku songs are composed from a recognizable set of word-like forms that form a kind of quasi-lexicon” is telling in that it corroborates my assertion that our languages do comprise song and sound lexicons.103 I, of course, question the idea of quasi, but I do understand that for Western linguists the idea of spirit language is difficult to unpack because we are talking about a lexical body which confronts accepted Western understandings of linguistic feature.

Linguist Dr Michael Walsh also looked into the qualities of Indigenous song language in his consideration of existing research and literature entitled ‘Australian Aboriginal song language: So many questions, so little to work with’.104 What I found most revealing, but personally disturbing, about Walsh’s study was just how fascinated Western linguists are with the scientific dissection of what is a deeply spiritual and most sacrosanct form of our human-spirit communication. Walsh did, however, highlight that our song languages in particular are in peril, even in cases where “...everyday spoken language remains healthy”.105 He also reflects Apted’s finding that song language can range from having “...little, or no, connection with the host language” through to being “quite similar to the everyday spoken language”.106 What I felt with both Apted and Walsh was that their interest in our song languages was too concentrated on trying to expose Westcentric technical aspects of language, rather than the profound ontological place of language.

The highly secret, intense and experiential spirit language of song is usually communicated within specific time space such as dream and in a vocabulary specific to the spirit communicator. These songs are sung usually by those persons who are highly ranked as spirit knowledge holders

101 ibid., p.94.
102 ibid., p.95.
103 ibid., p.100.
105 ibid. p.130.
106 ibid.
and who transmit ceremonially through the spiritual praxis of country. Walsh indicates that song language was once widespread, though he is less specific in terms of the prevalence of secret spirit language.\textsuperscript{107} At a personal level I know from my late mother’s testimony as a Dhungutti Elder, that our cultures along the North Coast of New South Wales did maintain knowledges and communicate knowledges within modes of non-speech language. Mum learnt as much as a child when participating in female dance ceremony herself. On this basis it would not, in my estimation, be a wild assumption to presume that all our Australian Indigenous cultures at one time possessed these non-speech sacred spirit language forms.

In fact in one particular study, undertaken in 1967 by the late and renowned Professor of Linguistics Ken Hale, it was revealed that a highly secret and sacred language form of the Lardil peoples of Mornington Island in Queensland intriguingly contained within its structure ‘click’ tongue.\textsuperscript{108} Click tongue is radically unlike speech tongue because it centres on sound lexicons that contain a variety of what Western ears hear as click and other mouth movement noises. These sounds all carry specific meaning. Hale pointed out that Lardil click language “…has click consonants, otherwise only found in Africa”.\textsuperscript{109} In Africa these Indigenous tongues are reported to number somewhere around 30, with 120,000 or more speakers.\textsuperscript{110} The Indigenous click languages of Africa and Australia demonstrate the amazing diversity of Indigenous mother tongues. They certainly demonstrate that speech language is but a small component of the holistic entity that is language for us Indigenous peoples.

In thinking about the remarkable diversity of language form that click language represents I was prompted to think back on conversations about language I had with my late second cousin Aunty Vera, who was a Dhungutti speaker. I remember her advice about the position and movement of tongue to create certain sound. Actually, the use of speech language was sometimes forbidden under law/lore. A fine Warlpiri example of this can be found in ‘Keeping Company’ an informative volume produced for health professionals working with our peoples.\textsuperscript{111} In this volume it is made clear

\textsuperscript{107} ibid., p.134.


\textsuperscript{109} ibid., p. 37.


\textsuperscript{111} C Franks & B Curr, Keeping Company: An Inter-cultural Conversation: Irikwatherre, Yatjarre, Tantye/Rantye, Nyaparntji-Nyaparntji, Kepenhe, Janku-Janku, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn, J Foster (ed), Spencer Gulf Rural Health School, Whyalla, SA, 2007.
that the death of a person can precipitate the use of sign language over a set period of time, as does avoidance law, which relates to systems of kinship relationship that determine rules of interaction.\textsuperscript{112} I well remember my mother and Aunty Vera talking to me about how Dhungutti avoidance worked. I appreciate though that there is an assumption that these forms of law are now largely defunct within our Aboriginal cultures in New South Wales, and that therefore sign language is effectively gone. I refute this, however, not only on the basis of spirit memory but also on the basis of Aboriginal English, which as you will read about later significantly embodies signing.

The use of language too can be seen in dance. There is actually a close association between song and sound vocabularies and movement vocabularies. Dance contains choreographed movement that can be read and learnt from. Together these mediums enable the transmission of knowledges such as laws/lores, histories, land ownership and ecological data.\textsuperscript{113} For this to occur through dance, song and music each medium must be framed within a vocabulary that enables this transmission in a highly stable, consistent and longitudinal way. Dance is not haphazard or free-form for us. In her study of Indigenous song Dr Jill Stubington not only affirmed the interconnectivity between dance, music and song, she importantly highlighted that dance and song “...are more properly regarded as work that has to be done”.\textsuperscript{114} Whilst Stubington doesn’t see either song or dance as a specific language per se her account of Yolŋu cultural praxis leaves no doubt that there is a synthesis between cultural praxis and the communication of knowledge.

In her forward to Stubington’s study Dr Marika makes plain the importance of mediums such as song which speak to “...how we came to be here, how we should live our lives and how we are related to the land, the plants and animals which surround us”.\textsuperscript{115} It is clear from this just how complex the balance is between language, cultural praxis and the teaching and learning of knowledge. Bonnie Deegan, former Jaru Chairperson of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, noted in her forward to a Bardi language dictionary that “language is vital to the culture of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley. If language is lost then knowledge is lost – knowledge of laws, songs, dances and bush tucker”.\textsuperscript{116} I hear in the words of Dr Marika and

\textsuperscript{112} ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} ibid., p.34.
\textsuperscript{115} ibid., p.vii.
\textsuperscript{116} G Aklif (compiler), \textit{Ardiyooloon Bardi Ngaanka One Arm Point Bardi Dictionary}, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Halls Creek, WA, 1999, p.v.
Bonnie Deegan confirmation of Harrison’s conceptualisation of language as knowledge. Indeed this has been reiterated by Indigenous Māori academics exploring research. In reflecting upon colonisation they noted that colonisation “led to the suppression of not only indigenous ways of knowing, but also the languages for ‘knowing’.”\(^\text{117}\)

For Martin et al. deep access into the spiritual knowledges of Māori cultures rests upon the utility of language.\(^\text{118}\) In Western academia language tends to be framed within a discrete discipline, but we can learn from the Māori academic experience that Indigenous academics tend not make any such separation. In discussing the juxtaposition between language and culture and the issue of preservation Indigenous Navajo academic Dr Timothy Begaye observed that “according to many Native people, preservation is a complex challenge because language and culture are broad and inclusive concepts that are better understood as inclusive terms...”.\(^\text{119}\) This then brings me to the matter of how we Indigenous peoples intellectualise culture. For us language and culture come together as the embodiment of ‘country’ which defines our ways of seeing the world [our worldview], our ways of knowing the world, our ways of doing within the world, and our ways of being within the world.

Begaye’s study of Indigenous American perspective on language and culture similarly revealed that there was a tendency among the Indigenous teachers he interviewed to associate the concept of culture with the past.\(^\text{120}\) Culture was also variously highlighted as being synonymous with foundational customs, beliefs and values. It is true that when we talk about culture that we turn back towards our foundational ways of knowing, doing and being. Again in Western academia history separates the past from the present, but for us there is no such division. Our foundational ways give us our means to make sense of our contemporary place within the world. This much is evident in the words of Ridgeway and Dodson, which I introduced to you earlier on. It might help to think of this in terms of a psycho-spiritual compass which points the way for us to understand and explain. It gives us continuity with our spirit Elders who remain spiritually living for us.

I have mentioned spirituality quite often, but I am yet to define what I mean. For me personally spirituality is so intrinsic to my being that it is almost mundane, and I know it to be so for most other Indigenous peoples. It is not,

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\(^{118}\) ibid.  
\(^{120}\) ibid, p.48.
as many would suppose, a matter of religion, because Indigenous spirituality works well beyond belief.\textsuperscript{121} It is, as I've already noted, but emphasise again, the basis of country, and as such it is our ontology, our epistemology and axiology. Kipuri in reiterating Indigenous Opaskwayak Cree academic Dr Shawn Wilson expressed our spirituality as defining our relationships with our “...environment as custodians of the land; it helps construct social relationships, gives meaning, purpose and hope to life. It is not separated but is an integral, infused part of the whole in the indigenous worldview”.\textsuperscript{122} In thinking about belief, the departure is that we don’t ‘practice’ our spirituality as religious ritual in the Western sense; we think it, speak it, sing it, sign it, dance it, and image it so that we live it.

My purpose with this section has been to demonstrate the major points of departure between our Indigenous ways of knowing language and culture and non-Indigenous ways of knowing language and culture. These points of departure are most stark in terms of the sheer magnitude of what Indigenous language is and what it entails. Indigenous speech language turns out to be but one aspect of a much wider body of language, which in turn sits within a complex system of spirit knowledge that is essentially culture. To reinforce what culture for us is I defer to the words of Ngalu Patsy Bedford of the Bunuba peoples who said:

\begin{quote}
I think when we say ‘culture’ a lot of people say, ‘Oh, well, that’s when you go Law time or Barurru time.’ But culture means more than that. It’s how you live, how you talk, how you just present yourself. That is all part of culture. What you eat. So, our young people these days don’t realize culture not only means ceremonial times. Land, language and culture can never be apart because that is the core that lifts up who we are”\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

In my earlier reflection upon my own Indigenous being I posed a question along the line of - how can my cultural identity be so strong when I don’t have my full mother tongues? This question is particularly applicable to us the Aboriginal peoples of New South Wales because of our diminished access to our full mother tongues; one of many legacies we now live with because of the impositions of colonisation. I would think though, based on what you have just read in the preceding section, that you would be inclined to conclude that the bond between language and culture is so strong for us Indigenous peoples that one cannot possibly survive without the other. I want to explore this more thoroughly because I appreciate the importance of speaking directly to the understandable confusion that we Indigenous peoples create ourselves when we say language and culture are as one for us, yet in cases where our languages are no longer fully there for us we still

\textsuperscript{121} United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, op.cit., p.60.
\textsuperscript{122} ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} New Legend..., op.cit., p.49.
turn round and say that our cultural identity remains strong – how can we make such a claim?

In his explanation of the relationship between language and culture Wardhaugh noted that:

the exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate, people from a wide variety of backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it seems so obvious as to be a truism.\(^{124}\)

It is no doubt a truism for those peoples around the globe whose languages have not been fragmented or lost. We can certainly know that there is a deep interconnectivity between language, cultural knowledge and cultural praxis. The manner in which an individual person sees and experiences the world is not neutral of this tripartite structure. As I’ve already highlighted in the degree to which Indigenous languages are complete informs the degree to which Indigenous cultural knowledges are complete and this does in turn inform how cultural praxis manifests.

Even so, can we automatically assume that fragmented or lost language, knowledge and cultural praxis means fragmented or lost cultural identity? Professor of Social Sciences and Linguistics Joshua A. Fishman who is well known and respected within his fields, and enthusiastically referenced, looked into the heart of this very issue in a speech he gave in 1994 at the Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium. I feel it worthwhile to bounce my own discussion of this against the thoughts of Fishman who significantly addressed the key question ‘what do you lose when you lose your language?’,\(^{125}\) which was coincidently the title of his paper. In addressing this key question Fishman pondered the bond between language and culture.\(^{126}\) By looking into the dynamics of this bond I can more meaningfully open up how the relationship between culture and cultural identity can be known, and thereby discover the degree of co-dependency existent between the two.

Fishman begins his analysis of his key question by reflecting upon the experience of the Indigenous peoples of America, who like us here in Australia were subjected to relentless coloniser campaigns to eradicate language and cultural praxis. He asked:

What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to secure

\(^{124}\) R Wardhaugh, op.cit., p.215.
\(^{126}\) ibid, p.3.
sensitivity, wisdom, and some kind of recognition that one has purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life? 

I can’t help but feel spiritually emotional reading Fishman’s questions, since these trigger within me a train of thought that leads me to stop a while and meditate upon what our forebears went through as they were made to give up mother tongue of country. The spiritual confusions alone would have been monumental. I can see though the expediency of these questions in enabling Fishman to work towards identifying what exactly is lost when language is lost, or to my mind forcibly disconnected.

Fishman begins by identifying that an “indexical relationship” is lost. He explains this by saying that “a language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones the concerns, artifacts, values, and interests of that culture”. It seems to me that the crux of what is being said here is that there is a distinct cultural context to language, a context that may either vanish or appreciably dilute when language is lost. This may well be the case to a certain extent, although what struck me about Fishman’s words was his reference to values, because I have long maintained that the essential ideologies that underpin a society’s core values are more readily an informing agent of cultural identity than either language or cultural praxis alone. My point being that in reference to our Indigenous values, here in Australia in cases where our languages have been lost or damaged, our core values have remained strong.

In my doctoral thesis I made a particular study of our values, noting that our core values align with the social, cultural and political spheres of being. I based this contention largely upon personal reflection about my own cultural being, though clearly I had considerable wider community knowledge and experience driving my theorisation as well. In surveying Indigenous views on our values I came across an informative point of view put forward by Indigenous academic Professor Paul Hughes. Hughes noted “we do have a long history and over that time we developed a social structure and attitudes to life that exist today. Even in the Aboriginal people of a highly urbanized area such as the east coast of New South Wales these traditional values and attitudes exist”. The point that our ‘traditional’ values remain continuous regardless of our degree of cultural dispossession was what I found to be most important in Hughes assertion.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{127}ibid, pp.2-3.}\)
\(\text{\textsuperscript{128}ibid., p.3.}\)
\(\text{\textsuperscript{129}ST Williams, op.cit., pp.32-42.}\)
\(\text{\textsuperscript{130}P Hughes as cited in ST Williams, ibid., p.35.}\)
Even without language and the deeper layers of cultural praxis we remain highly collective, highly spiritual peoples, unswervingly motivated toward autonomy. This may sound like a sweeping over generalisation, but I defend my claim on the basis of my observation that we consistently project evidence of adherence to a culturally driven shared Indigenous worldview; a worldview that appears common to all of us Indigenous peoples within Australia, but I also sense is common with Indigenous peoples internationally. You will have noticed, for instance, in my writing perpetual reference to us Indigenous peoples as spirit peoples. I do this because we all maintain ontology’s centred within spiritual ways of knowing and thinking. Our ontology’s similarly embed us within a spiritual matrix of relational systems which weave us into vast extended kinship networks encompassing all around us: life form and spirit form. Autonomy represents our fellowship too because it speaks for all of us contemporarily as the basis of our fight for cultural sovereignty.

Confirmation of what I am contending isn’t particularly hard to find. Kipuri makes clear our spiritual valuing in her observation “Indigenous peoples have rich and diverse cultures based on a profound spiritual relationship with their land and natural resources”. She highlights our collectivism in the statement “another salient characteristic of indigenous cultures is that they are based on a collective perspective”. Autonomy comes through also in the assertion “for indigenous peoples, globalization is a mixed blessing. It both constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for empowerment and an unprecedented threat to the autonomy of their cultures”. Throughout the literature predicated to explaining us the overarching discourse of who we are at a global level is the same – we are spiritual, we are collective and we value highly our right to empowerment and self-determination as a matter of cultural autonomy.

In juxtaposing the idea of a shared Indigenous worldview against the sheer diversity of cultures comprising our Indigenous worlds, I do of course come up against the fundamental conundrum - if we all belong to different cultures, have different languages, different cultural knowledge ways and cultural praxis how can we share commonality in worldview? This conundrum actually flags tensions within Indigenous and non-Indigenous academia because there is a confusion in how we assert on the one hand our distinctness and in doing so reject the generality of indigeneity, but then on the other hand turn around and use without reservation the collective identifiers ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal’ and make statements centred on

131 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, op.cit., p.52.
132 ibid.
133 ibid, p.70.
unified being. I can certainly be seen as doing this, and it could be construed as somewhat incongruous, but it is not, because of worldview, because of values and indeed because of the structural and content similarities in our knowledge ways.

This matter actually comes up regularly within research literature that takes us as ‘subject’. A case in point can be seen in Associate Professor Brian Bishop’s abridged research article on the psychological importance of community, which was co-authored by Simon Colquhoun and Gemma Johnson. These authors certainly note the dangers inherent in making generalisations concerning us, but they also point out that research does reveal meaningful similarities between us, in this instance in terms of how we conceptualise community.\(^{134}\) In taking community as an example, how we conceptualise community relates directly with how we conceptualise cultural identity and enact cultural identity. There is an overarching values relationship here. In the case of Bishop et al.’s informants, who have an operational skin based kinship structure, or for Indigenous persons like myself who have awareness of the deeper layers of kinship section, of even those of us who do not, we still nonetheless have in common, regardless of identifiable differences, a tremendous sense of valuing of collectivism as extended family.

Through my analysis of collectivism I can see that cultural identity, although informed very directly by language and culture, nonetheless seems to have a more overarching presence. In his definitional synopsis of identity Professor Kevin Robins suggested that identity comes down to a matter of perception.\(^{135}\) Identity it seems is a phenomenon of how an individual perceives their psychological persona. This persona includes cognitively embedded data about an individual’s social world. Values are a core part of this data. Values play an important role in the shape of identity both at an individual level and a social level. At the social level values are cohesive; they are a fundamental part of what creates societal homogeneity. I described values myself as being “…cognitively internalised, socially orienting referents”.\(^{136}\) I further highlighted their role in signalling “…difference between societies reflecting ideological orientations”.\(^{137}\)

In returning back to Fishman, what I found thought provoking in his analysis of ‘what is lost when language is lost?’ is the issue of whether or not the fundamental social context of our identity, our ideological orientations,


\(^{135}\) K Robins ‘identity’ in T Bennett et al., op.cit., pp. 172 - 175.

\(^{136}\) ST Williams, op.cit., p.31.

\(^{137}\) ibid., p.32.
dissipates when our mother tongues are damaged or gone. In thinking about this I reflected upon the thoughts of Raymond Williams concerning his own Welsh mother tongue. In a posthumous collection of Williams’ thought a very poignant discussion can be found that looks at what occurs for Welsh people who, because of loss of Welsh mother tongue, express using English language.\textsuperscript{138} Williams argued that the output of Welsh literature “…is at once autonomous and important”\textsuperscript{139}. He is also resolutely determined that:

The work of the English-language writers of industrial South Wales is unmistakably indigenous; its English in tone and rhythm is not an English literary style. There seems good justification, in these writers and in the everyday speech of the valleys, for the recent significant assertion, from within what has been the ‘nationalist’ tendency, that English is a Welsh language. A distinctive culture is using that diverse and flexible language for its own unmistakably native writing and speech.\textsuperscript{140}

This is how I feel about my own writing. Yes, I am using English, but not for the transference of English context or English ideas, I am using English because I have been deprived of my own mother tongues, but I am communicating through the spirit-mind of my Indigenous cultural context, my identity, and this is unmistakable.

Whilst I find Fishman’s arguments compelling I wonder, citing values as a prime example, if perhaps it is not always the case that ideationally founded outlooks usually couched within language are completely lost. Fishman moves on to say the single most important entity vulnerable in language loss is culture itself. He says that “…most of the culture is in the language and expressed in the language” and that on this basis “…you are losing all those things that are essentially the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about”.\textsuperscript{141} In reflecting back upon Harrison’s discussion of knowledge loss as a result of language loss, it is hard to refute Fishman. When I then extrapolate this to what I wrote about how we Indigenous peoples conceptualise language and culture it is all the more so. The difficulty is not so much the fact that language loss and culture loss go hand in hand; it is whether or not they then signal identity loss.

Is it possible that whilst cultural knowledge may be lost that our ways of thinking and knowing, for instance our ways of valuing and philosophising, are more resistant to loss? Fishman moves on to cite the “symbolic relationship” of language in terms of what is lost when language is lost.\textsuperscript{142} He explains that language literally “stands” for a culture as a whole and that

\textsuperscript{139} ibid, p.67.
\textsuperscript{140} ibid., p.62.
\textsuperscript{141} JA Fishman, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{142} ibid., p.3.
as such it represents culture within the mind. This is an interesting observation because if language as a discrete entity wholly represents culture within the mind, what do values and the like do, and what then is the interplay between culture and cultural identity. No doubt there is much to ponder on this, but in relating this to my own Indigenous life being I am inclined to see that the symbolic qualities of language are not altogether lost. I say this because there is an interesting aspect to the symbolism of language which does have great bearing on cultural identity for us and that is the relationship between language and land.

In Dr Marika’s submission on language she noted that language and land go hand in hand. I would say they do so, on two fronts. The first is as I’ve discussed already, the synthesis between language and knowledge which in the Indigenous context is bound to country. The second relates to how language literally signifies country for us; how it names the identity of our families and communities in relation to country and the boundaries of country typically thought of as cultural nationhood. Bishop et al. observed in their study that interviewees uniformly focused understanding of community on “…the theme of language, or more specifically, language groups”. 143 So community was not only seen as collectively founded, it was seen as collectively inclusive of land. This is common to Indigenous peoples across the board; that is we all see ourselves, our identity, as part of kinship with land.

Professor Alan Rumsey’s earlier consideration of the interplay between language and territory in reference to us provides a constructive clarification with regard to the amalgamation between kinship, language, land and identity. 144 Rumsey realised that for us language is situated within country; that is that language is an actual part of country, instilled by our spirit Elders and that as kin of country we have a relationship with that language, but we don’t own it, it owns us. 145 Rumsey summarised this by stating that “the links between peoples and languages are secondary links, established through the grounding of both in the landscape”. 146 Bishop et al. likewise noted that “the land is often referred to as a parent, sometimes father, and more often mother” and that “from these spiritual links with the land flow relationships between members of the group and as part of these

143 B Bishop et al. op. cit., p.4.
145 ibid.
146 ibid., p.206.
relationships, the language and skin groups of each member give Aboriginal
people their associative bonds”.147

Kipuri emphasised that for us “dichotomies such as nature vs. culture do
not exist...” in that we understand our being as not “…outside the realm of
nature, but as part of nature...”.148 Clearly Kipuri understands as I do that
our kinship with country remains powerful; we still have this spirit
association deep within us even when language is not present or minimal.
Language is never really absent from us because our identity is directly
expressed and symbolised within the language of country – I am Dhungutti,
I am Dharawal. It is through knowing these language identifiers that I
anchor myself as a Dhungutti person and a Dharawal person. I know my
relationship to country on the basis of where my languages remain
spiritually located. Kinship thus centres us within the country of our
languages, so our languages give us cultural identity; it is an inseparable
fusion. The centeredness of language within country can be highly complex
and in many instances involve multiple dialects under broader cultural
collectives, but the theme is the same whatever the language complex is; the
geographical place of language names our identity.

Fishman, having noted lexical loss, cultural loss and symbolic loss,
poignantly turned around and said that these were merely academic
observations.149 He then moved on to discuss what is implicated in language
loss at a more emotional level, and it is here that Fishman’s work becomes a
particularly meaningful source for understanding the complex nature of
Indigenous cultural identity. Fishman highlighted the sanctity of language,
the kinship of language, and the responsibility of language as factors in
language loss.150 Although I’ve just discussed the kinship dimensions of
language it is worth recording that Fishman was very mindful of the bonding
quality of language: “we are tied to each other through the language”.151 This
bonding quality underpins an inviolable relationship with language; a form
of reverence for language that we hold because we know language as given
to us by our creators, our spirit Elders. Greymorning affirmed that “…we
have been given something sacred, and we recognize its sacredness...”.152
We have not lost this.

In reading Fishman, what struck me most vividly about his understanding
of language loss in relation to culture was what he had to say about

147 ibid., p.5.
148 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, op.cit., p.52.
149 JA Fishman, op.cit, p.4.
150 ibid, pp. 4-5.
151 ibid., p.5.
152 S Greymorning, loc.cit.
responsibility. Fishman very astutely observed that “another thing people
tell you about their language is that they have a sense of responsibility for
it”.\textsuperscript{153} That is certainly true of us Indigenous peoples, we not only feel this
responsibility keenly we sense it in a way that perpetuates our relationship
with our languages even in the face of loss. I will talk more about this in
Chapter 3, but it is worth noting here that responsibility is highly political
for us and motivated by the wider Indigenous project of decolonisation. I was
touched though by Fishman’s confronting alignment of language loss with
the loss of a family member.\textsuperscript{154} Certainly this captures the emotional
intensity of loss for us, but it clouds the knowing of our cultural identity
which is stronger and gives us the impetus to challenge the pain of loss.

In bringing the matter of cultural identity into focus from our Aboriginal
perspective here in New South Wales, the multi-faceted, multi-layered and
multi-stratified language forms that we once all spoke, sung, signed, danced
and imaged with fluency remain omnipresent in our spirit memories, even
today, even when we have suffered language loss and culture loss. We
maintain our cultural identity through the very name of our cultures,
through the kinship to language that these names assert, through our
reverence of language as cultural knowledge and cultural praxis and
through our unending feeling of responsibility to language and the
relationships that are interwoven into this because language denotes land;
our country. So what we \textit{don’t} lose when we lose language is our cultural
identity. Does the ability to speak mother tongue matter? - YES, but not
because we have lost knowing who we are, it is because mother tongue
underpins our spiritual responsibility to country.

The charge that our lack of fluency in our own mother tongues makes us
less Aboriginal is utterly unfounded. It seems though that understanding
the importance of language as a strengthening agent of identity is
sometimes morphed into an assertion that speech language is \textit{the} primary
indicator of Indigenous identity, meaning that Indigenous identity cannot be
fully legitimated without it. There is also an additional assertion within
Indigenous sovereignty discourse itself that suggests that only first language
can adequately voice Indigenous self-determination and self-governance\textsuperscript{155}.
The argument here is that coloniser languages are not appropriate for our
expression of our sovereignty. Whilst it can be argued that these assertions
meaningfully recognise the power and value of our languages, on the other
hand they also, unintentionally I feel, erode the identity premise of so many

\textsuperscript{153} JA Fishman, op. cit, p.5.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} M Viatori & G Usbigua, ‘Speaking sovereignty: Indigenous languages and self-determination’,
of us, which is embedded within cultural concepts that work beyond the confines of the utilisation of speech language, and need to because of language decimation.

In their article on the Zapara peoples of Ecuador Maximilian Viatori and Gloria Usbigua highlight this by noting that “many indigenous activists, community leaders, and educators in the Americas claim that self-determination cannot be articulated using the languages of their colonizers”156, but they also point out how problematic this assumption is for those of us who do not have full mother tongues. Does this mean that we are less recognisably Indigenous without the benefit of full ‘authentic’ language? Viatori and Usbigua assert that:

These questions raise several issues with the use of language to delineate officially recognized sovereign indigenous nations. First, this equation is founded on Western colonial misconceptions of indigenous languages as indicators of an indigenous group’s “authenticity” - the stereotyping of indigenous culture as unchanging and unaltered by the pressures of modern capitalist society…Second, this discourse establishes that valid Indians are only those who speak a language that is distinct from “Western” society. 157

It turns out that whilst language and culture are virtually synonymous cultural identity is far larger because it is so deeply and profoundly the ‘brain’ of our cultural persona. So long as our cognition, our emotion and our socialisation are embedded within the spirit being of country our cultural identity will survive and continue to breathe within us. That, however, is not enough for us, it never has been. It is a matter of survival that our forebears, and ourselves, have maintained our grip hold on whatever remains for us, and we engage within the spirit of this so well that it gives us strength of identity. Notwithstanding this, we are serious about language loss and culture loss because we understand that to have our speech languages, sound languages, song languages, sign languages, movement languages and image languages means to be more culturally holistic again within the richness of our foundational spirit realms and spirit communication realms.

156 ibid., p.13.
157 ibid, p.11.
Chapter 3 – Language, Culture and Protection

3.1 The World’s Indigenous Languages and Cultures

Thus far I have examined what language and culture are and I’ve explored the complex juxtaposition between language, culture and cultural identity. In all of this I have taken a collective approach referring to us primarily as Indigenous, but I have not been more specific. For me the storying language and culture naturally begins with yarning language and culture. Now that I have attended to this it is time for me to be more precise about who we are. However, before I move on to discuss our cultural geography I want to clarify what it is to be Indigenous. As you will have gathered from all that you’ve read thus far the term Indigenous stands as a useful unifying descriptor for the ‘first peoples’ of a given country or continent. Interestingly though the United Nations, who is a powerful force behind the assertion of Indigenous human rights, hasn’t actually adopted a formal definition of what it is to be Indigenous. They have done so out of deference to our fundamental right to create for ourselves our own definitions of our indigeneity.158

Even so, the United Nations does point to a “working definition” formulated by Jose R. Martinez Cobo which reads:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.159

This is actually a fairly well rounded definition because it sweeps within it the essence of core factors that we primarily cite when identifying ourselves as Indigenous or Aboriginal. These are:-

- our ongoing connectedness to our lands because of our ancestral relatedness that makes us First Nations peoples of these lands,
- our experience of invasion, colonisation and historical subjugation,
- our status as cultural minorities within broader contemporary nation states.

159 ibid.
Although all three factors may not uniformly apply to all cultural nations or peoples who identify as Indigenous they do sit well with the majority of us both internationally and nationally, and they certainly provide me with my spiritual bond and sense of brotherhood that underpins why I use the term Indigenous.

So who identifies as Indigenous? Well, the United Nation estimates that we number around 370 million peoples worldwide, yet we only account for 6% of the world’s population.160 Our country’s, that is our spirit homelands, are located throughout Africa, the Arctic, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Pacific, Central America, North America and South America. We remain present, though not always rightfully recognised by those who seek to dominate our territories, in virtually every continent on planet Earth. Further, we all have our own unique cultural language names for our distinct cultural identities. By way of example only, we are the San of Africa, the Inuit of the Arctic region, the Ainu of Japan in the Asian region, the Wiradjuri of Australia, the Sámi of Europe, the Māori of New Zealand in the Pacific region, the Mayan of Central America, the Navajo of North America and the Zapara of South America. It would literally take pages upon end to create a full list of exactly who we are and even then there would be a great risk that such a list would be incomplete.

The image I want to affirm, and encourage you to form, is one of an incredibly vast and complex network of distinct cultural identities and nationhood’s that absolutely exist alongside the conventional Western geographical images that have been created as human maps of the world. These maps invariably leave our territories unidentified and therefore leave us unrecognised and under-acknowledged. In terms of individual statistical accounts of us, it is difficult to locate complete, reliable or up-to-date statistical data, often because dominating nation states do not want to give us formal credence for political reasons, or otherwise feel that it is unnecessary to do so. For example, Japan hadn’t been in the habit of officially identifying within its census the Ainu peoples, though it now recognises the Indigenous status of the Ainu, but only began to do so in 2008.161 As for numbers, it appears that in the Hokkaido region of Japan, where many Ainu live, that they number 23,782 though this figure is believed to be an under estimation.162 Whatever the case is, it is clear that the Ainu represent only a very small percentage of Japan’s population.

161 ‘Historic move to recognise the Ainu’, *Weekend Australian*, 7 June 2008, from Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre, EBSCOhost.
It is relatively common to find that we represent small minorities in national populations, though Papua/New Guinea springs to mind as an exception because virtually the entire national population is Indigenous. In South America Bolivia likewise stands out as an exception in the Indigenous world with the national census apparently reporting that Indigenous peoples number above 60% of the national population, whilst Indigenous peoples account for an impressive 40% of the Guatemalan population.\(^{163}\) That said what I find worrying about the Indigenous peoples of Central and South America is the apparent trend that “...the indigenous themselves feel the need to hide their real ethnic and linguistic affiliations, among other reasons to defend themselves from the racism and discrimination that has yet to be overcome...” and even more disturbingly the thought that “…state officials and census takers do whatever they can to make sure the number of indigenous decreases with each count”.\(^{164}\)

It is a reality that many Indigenous peoples across the globe remain dominated. Domination ranges from active state sanctioned suppression through to situations where minority peoples find themselves struggling for cultural autonomy against an imposing cultural force. This is the case within the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, who are all dominant Western nations who have struggling minority Indigenous populations. In the United States the Indigenous population has been calculated at 2,447,989 as at 2001,\(^{165}\) though it is expected that more recent census data yet to be broken down will reveal a larger figure. This sounds like a high number but it is not when you consider that it amounts to .87% of their national population.\(^{166}\) In Canada as at 2006 the Inuit, First Nations and Metis populations combined were 1,172,790 which amounts to 4% of the Canadian national family.\(^{167}\) New Zealand is significantly different in that its Māori population may only be 565,329 as at 2006, but that accounted for 14.6% of national numbers.\(^{168}\)

In Australia according to our 2006 census we were estimated to number a mere 517,200 peoples or 2.5% of our total national population.\(^{169}\) More recent census data won’t be available until 2012, and I expect that when it

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164 ibid., pp.201-202.
166 ibid.
is released that this figure will increase, though not drastically. A state by state breakdown reveals a far more interesting picture about us because it is commonly assumed that the vast majority of us live in the Northern Territory. In actuality it is here in New South Wales that the highest Indigenous population can be found with 139,994 of us being Aboriginal, 5,083 of us are Torres Strait Islanders, and a further 3,101 of us are both Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander. What I find compelling in this figure is that we have some 8,104 peoples with Torres Strait Islander identity. This is significant and something that we should not ignore particularly in terms of education, where there is a tendency to assume that we are all only Aboriginal.

The figures I have quoted thus far only give broad populations numbers, they show absolutely no indication of who we are in terms of our specific cultural identities. In looking at the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia it can be seen that there are literally hundreds of distinct Indigenous cultural nationhood’s, language groups and identities, but do keep in mind that these figures expand enormously when the rest of the world is taken into consideration. The United States for instance formally recognises 565 Indigenous tribes, as well as the Indigenous peoples of Hawaii. In Canada the 2006 census revealed that 60 different First Nations languages are known to be spoken, which gives some indication of the likely number of actual different Indigenous cultures. The Inuit are additional to this. New Zealand on the other hand is quite unique in having only 1 overarching cultural nation, but there are nonetheless “...whanau, hapu, iwi (extended family, sub-tribal groupings and tribe)...” divisions.

Here in Australia it is widely accepted that there were some 250 language groups, with a further estimated 600 plus language dialect communities. These figures, however, should only ever be thought of as approximate. A quick scan of literature can reveal significant variations in these figures, for example Bishop et al. suggests a figure of 270 distinct language groups with an additional 600 - 700 dialects. It really does depend upon what source you happen to consult. The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, which
remains a significant reference about us despite its early 1994 publication date, provides a series of regional maps that are considered quite plausible. In these maps some 30 distinct Aboriginal cultural nations are identified along the south east coast region of New South Wales, while the Riverine Region, which sweeps in a very large part of inland New South Wales, but also the border region with Queensland and the tip of Victoria, suggests another 46 cultural nations.\textsuperscript{176}

I acknowledge that the ethno-geographical maps these figures emanate from remain contentious for some Indigenous communities, but even so they do serve a useful purpose in highlighting that we are not as homogenous as might be supposed apropos our specific cultural identities. Despite this amazing diversity, as I've explained already, there are remarkable experiential and values similarities between us nationally and internationally. Foreign colonial domination and hegemonic cultural subjugation are themes that arise time and time again within Indigenous discourse across the globe. In his forward to the United Nations report on the state of our Indigenous being Mr. Sha Zukang, noted that:

Indigenous peoples are custodians of some of the most biologically diverse territories in the world. They are also responsible for a great deal of the world's linguistic and cultural diversity, and their traditional knowledge has been and continues to be an invaluable resource that benefits all of mankind [sic]. Yet, indigenous peoples continue to suffer discrimination, marginalization, extreme poverty and conflict. Some are being dispossessed of their traditional lands as their livelihoods are being undermined. Meanwhile, their belief systems, cultures, languages and ways of life continue to be threatened, sometimes even by extinction.\textsuperscript{177}

One of the most poignant well rounded recent volumes reporting who we are and what our circumstances are is ‘The State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples’ which was published in 2010.\textsuperscript{178} I’ve already referenced this volume often and will continue to do so, but I take a moment now to stress its value as a salient literature source because this publication story’s exceptionally well the startling parallels between us Indigenous peoples in terms of our educational position, our contemporary health, social and economic wellbeing, and the state of our languages and cultures. The state of our languages and cultures in particular, as you will have gathered from Chapter 1, may at best be termed catastrophic. Indeed in one source I have consulted it has been described as apocalyptic.\textsuperscript{179} Over the course of my reading for this research study I have consulted many sources and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{176} The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT, 1994, p.946 & p.1009.
\bibitem{177} United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, \textit{State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples}, op.cit., p.v.
\bibitem{178} ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
invariably they use similar terminologies. The most practical and telling synopsis for me, however, came from Harrison’s study of the world’s endangered languages.

Harrison contrasted the loss of the world’s language diversity, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to the loss of animals, fish and plants by likening language loss to bio-diversity and species loss, an issue that many are passionate about. He wrote that comparatively the loss rates are “fish 5%”, “plants 8%”, “birds 11%”, “mammals 18%”, whilst language loss towers over this at a staggering “40%”. This unequivocally means that the world’s languages are vanishing at a colossal rate and it is certain that our Indigenous languages are a huge part of what can only be described as a global disaster. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] have certainly recognised the urgency of this disaster on their ‘Endangered Languages’ website which categorically highlights that:

It is estimated that, if nothing is done, half of 6000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century. With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages.181

If we look at the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia for evidence of Indigenous language loss the enormity of what is being said more broadly at the international level becomes all too real. Professor Teresa L McCarty for instance reported that only 175 Indigenous languages are current in the United States, and that only 20% of these 175 are being passed on to new speakers.182 McCarty quoted one source as saying that 125 of these 175 languages are highly likely to disappear because of the age of speakers. She notes “in a very real sense, Indigenous language loss is terminal”.183 In his essay published in 1992, well before McCarty’s article, Professor Michael Krauss had brought attention to Indigenous Alaskan and Soviet languages noting that of 50 languages 45 were “moribund”, a term that basically means on the brink of extinction.184

Krauss more optimistically noted that in the 1990’s in Alaska specifically the Central Yupik Eskimo and Siberian Yupik Eskimo languages were being

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180 KD Harrison, op.cit., p.7.
181 UNESCO, Endangered Languages
183 Ibid., p.148.

[53]
taught to oncoming generations.\textsuperscript{185} That sounds promising of itself, until you realise that another 18 Indigenous Alaskan languages were not recorded as being passed on. It is bewildering to say the least. Some years later in 2000 the Navajo peoples showed the greatest number of Indigenous language speakers in America, followed by the Pueblo, Eskimo and Apache. The same story can be found in many other studies to do with Indigenous language loss in America. Most quote statistics from the 2000 national census which shows that in Indigenous America, including Indigenous Alaska, slightly more than 27% of the Indigenous population reported speaking a language other than English at home, though 17.8% of this percentage reported speaking English very well.\textsuperscript{186}

Canada shows a similar downward trend. Only 25% of First Nations peoples have indicated that they speak their own languages, and of these Cree appears to be the strongest with approximately 87,285 speakers, followed by Ojibway with 30,255 reported speakers.\textsuperscript{187} Inuit mother tongue rates are impressively higher at 69%, though it is acknowledged that English is beginning to dominate within the home.\textsuperscript{188} That concern over Indigenous language continues to be mentioned in relatively recent literature suggests to me that efforts to maintain and revive Indigenous languages within the United States and Canada are yet to produce wide sweeping reversal of language shift. The domination of English is something I will discuss more thoroughly later, but it is a trend that shows up consistently in Indigenous language statistics, even in New Zealand, which to my mind has one of the best possible scenarios for Indigenous peoples to hold onto mother tongue.

In New Zealand there is one overarching Māori language, te reo Māori, though dialects are present. According to the New Zealand 2006 national census data 23.7% of the Māori population could speak Māori at a conversational level.\textsuperscript{189} Broken down, this figure reveals that a $\frac{1}{4}$ of this 23.7% were aged 15 - 64, whilst just under half were 65 and over.\textsuperscript{190} A comprehensive survey of the “health” of Māori language conducted in 2001 revealed that 42% of Māori peoples had at least some language proficiency, though what was particularly interesting to me was the difference that was noticed in degrees of proficiency between speaking and listening, especially in those who identified that they had a reasonable level of skill.\textsuperscript{191} Listening

\textsuperscript{185} ibid., p.5.
\textsuperscript{186} S Ogunwole, op.cit., p.7.
\textsuperscript{187} Statistics Canada, op.cit., p.8.
\textsuperscript{188} ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Statistics New Zealand..., op.cit.
\textsuperscript{190} ibid.
skill showed at higher rates of proficiency than actual speech rates. The implications of this are significant because they indicate that whilst Māori can be understood by many, it is not necessarily used as an everyday mother tongue and that does flag danger for Māori mother tongue.

So we come now to our own country. The difference between New Zealand and Australia couldn’t be starker. Our 2006 census data revealed that of the 517,200 of us only 52,000 of us reported speaking in our own languages\textsuperscript{192}; a staggering figure. Further, it was categorically stated that:

\begin{quote}
Of those Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language at home, almost three-quarters (74%) live in Very Remote Australia, with 14% living in Remote Australia. Only 4% of Indigenous people who speak an Indigenous language live in Major Cities. Over half (56%) of all Indigenous language speakers live in the Northern Territory where 59% of the Indigenous population speak an Australian Indigenous language.\textsuperscript{193}
\end{quote}

The languages of the Daly River region and Arnhem Land have the highest speech rates, followed by the Torres Strait then Western Desert languages.\textsuperscript{194} Distressingly, from my perspective, New South Wales together with the Australian Capital Territory showed the highest rate of English speech – 93\%.\textsuperscript{195} I read this two ways: i. as proof positive of the hegemony of English and ii. proof positive of the ongoing urgent need for proactive action to redress Aboriginal language loss as an immediate priority.

In the 2009 annual report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, who was Tom Calma of the Kungarakan and Iwaidja peoples, it was reported that out of the 250 languages acknowledged to exist within this country only 18 are known to be spoken fully by all generations, and that only 100 languages exist in one form or another, with most being considered endangered.\textsuperscript{196} If these statistics aren’t bewildering enough Tom’s department goes on to corroborate that “the loss of languages in Australia has received international attention. A significant international study on language endangerment has singled out Australia as a place where languages are disappearing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world”.\textsuperscript{197} What I want you all to keep in mind, is that these are just basic figures based on speech languages alone, they make no account of specific speech dialects, or indeed the myriad of other language forms that are part of us.

The observation that our languages are in greater peril than anywhere else in the world is not a new observation. Krauss wrote in 1992 that:

\textsuperscript{192} Australian Bureau of Statistics, op.cit., p.35.
\textsuperscript{193} ibid., p.36.
\textsuperscript{194} ibid., p.37.
\textsuperscript{195} ibid.
\textsuperscript{196} Australian Human Rights Commission, op.cit., p.58.
\textsuperscript{197} ibid.
For the rest of the world, the worst continent by far is Australia, with 90% of 250 aboriginal languages that are still spoken now moribund, most of those very near extinction. It would seem that English-language dominance in the ‘English-speaking world’ has achieved and continues to achieve the highest documented rate of destruction, approaching now 90%. Even as general statistics these figures are extraordinarily illustrative of our language status across the globe. For any Indigenous person they are painful; they create within us a feeling of mourning, just as Fishman has said. To gain a far more meaningful insight into these figures in terms of individual general speech language’s it is possible to consult a number of online databases. Here in Australia the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies provides access to a number of language resources including the informative AUSTLANG: Australian Indigenous Languages Database, which can be searched in all manner of ways.

A search under New South Wales on AUSTLANG reveals reference to 118 Aboriginal languages, the vast majority of which fall into the various categories of high endangerment or non-use. In looking at my own Dhungutti language I am told that our word list is medium, our grammar is small and that we have a language indicator score of 0, which means that our language is no longer fully spoken. My Dharawal language is likewise recorded as having only a small word list, with a ‘sketch’ grammar and again a language indicator score of 0. A database of this nature may not be entirely accurate in every case, but it is certainly a very strong tool for gaining a reasonable impression of the specific status of any of our languages. At the international level the online version of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger serves a similar purpose to AUSTLANG, although the print version appears to be more detailed in nature.

It is all well and good to know the statistics on language loss, but we have to ask ourselves - why are languages disappearing? Harrison says that:

Languages do not literally ‘die’ or go ‘extinct’, since they are not living organisms. Rather, they are crowded out by bigger languages. Small tongues get abandoned by their speakers, who stop using them in favour of a more dominant, more prestigious, or more widely known tongue. We lack an appropriate technical term to describe people abandoning complex systems of knowledge like language. So we rely upon metaphors, calling in ‘language death’, ‘language shift’, ‘threatened languages’, ‘extinction’, ‘last words’, or ‘vanishing voices’.

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198 M Krauss, op.cit.
200 ‘Dhungutti’, ibid.
201 ‘Dharawal’, ibid.
203 Harrison, op.cit., p.5.
What I want to make known is that in the case of Indigenous peoples this abandonment is not something that we have just undertaken for the sake of acquiring something that is allegedly ‘better’, it is something that has happened to us. In their ‘open-ended conclusion’ to the volume ‘New world of Indigenous Resistance’ linguist Associate Professor Lois Meyer, together with Julianna Kirwin and Erin Tooher provocatively questioned “why not just admit that these languages have been intentionally suffocated or shamed out of existence, and thereby acknowledge the physical and psychological violence committed against their speakers by colonizers and nation-states alike?”

I think any Indigenous person who reads this question would feel as I do, that it strikes at the very truth of our experience. One of the most effective means of achieving hegemony is not through physical violence, it’s through psychological violence, the kind of psychological violence wherein you bludgeon the people you want to suppress over and over again telling them how ‘primitive’ they are, and how ‘primitive’ their languages are. Meyer et al. say that “centuries of language domination have instilled in indigenous peoples fear, distain, even hatred, of their own languages, stifling their desire to speak their own tongues or pass these on to their children”. Even more provocingly they say “the cultural suffocation of these languages has caused great personal and collective trauma. Parents insist that their children learn the dominant language and forget their own, to spare them, they say, the suffering and shame they themselves have endured.”

The consequence of generations of hegemony over us Indigenous peoples means that many Indigenous peoples have felt that mother tongue acquisition must take a subordinate position to the survival need to acquire dominant tongue. This feeling is without doubt being actively challenged especially within Indigenous academia where arguments for research to be freed from the ideological constraints of Western centric languages and embedded in mother tongue are strong. Similarly there is a strong Indigenous groundswell of community repossession of language, but the damage of hegemony has been extensive. That is no doubt why the UNESCO Atlas of Endangered Languages is able to use the language gradations – vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. AUSTLANG similarly uses ‘NILS’ [National Indigenous Language Survey] endangerment grades which determine the status of

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204 L Meyer & BM Alvarado, op.cit.
205 ibid., p.394
207 ibid., p.395.
208 B Chilisa, op.cit.
209 UNESCO, op.cit.
Australia’s Indigenous languages as – 5. strong/safe, 4. unsafe, 3. definitely endangered, 2. severely endangered, 1. critically endangered and 0. no longer fully spoken.\textsuperscript{210}

The late Professor Stephen Wurm, who was a noted linguist, explained these forms of terminologies thus:

A good yardstick for recognizing the level of endangerment of a language...is the use of a threatened language in various generations of a speech community, especially that of children and young adults. If they begin not to learn the language anymore and 10-30 percent do not, the language is potentially endangered. If there are only a few children speakers left, and the youngest good speakers are young adults, the language is endangered. If the youngest good speakers are largely past middle age, the language is seriously endangered. If only a handful of mostly old speakers are left, the language is moribund. If no speakers seem to be left, the language is believed extinct.\textsuperscript{211}

To an Indigenous eye and ear these types of phrases are terrifying. That we have come to this stage though isn’t surprising given this nation’s history of contact with us; a history that in later years sort our complete assimilation into Western mainstream society, at the expense of our languages and cultures. In a paper written by the extremely well-known and respected anthropologist the late Professor A.P. Elkin in 1963 Elkin opened with an enthusiastic endorsement of Wurm who had, according to Elkin, made a “...well argued plea to Government and Mission representatives not to encourage the Aborigines to drop their old culture too soon during the period of transition before readaptation has taken place”.\textsuperscript{212}

This plea may sound quite conciliatory towards us, but it was not. Elkin went on to enthuse that this plea presented an “...indispensable means of assisting the process of assimilation”.\textsuperscript{213} I have no desire here to reduce the well meaning of either Elkin or Wurm in terms of my peoples; certainly Elkin expressed his favour for integration as a more amenable alternative to assimilation.\textsuperscript{214} Nonetheless, Elkin’s focus on values and the use of our languages to convey Western values to us, coupled with the idea that the preservation of our languages was worth undertaking simply because our languages represented a useful tool for the state project of assimilation had within it both undertones of paternalism and undertones of hegemony. The latent message in this for us was one that said our languages were only

\textsuperscript{210} National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005, Report submitted to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in association with the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p.125.


\textsuperscript{213} ibid.

\textsuperscript{214} ibid., p.154.
valuable because they might help us to become more functional in the so-called 'better' Western way of life.

All these years later we are once again looking at the functionality of our languages as a means to enable greater levels of acumen in Western ways of knowing and doing. In particular the current House of Representative’s Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, under the chair of the Honourable Mr Shayne Neumann, will be looking into a range of issues related to the teaching and learning of our languages including the relationship between Indigenous students undertaking language learning and their learning competencies, especially in terms of English literacy proficiencies, and the benefits or otherwise this has in terms of closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage.\textsuperscript{215} The study that you are currently reading is indeed premised on the same sphere of interest and purposed towards similar goals.

I am very mindful, however, of the fact that we need to be very careful in this second wave of thinking about the practical benefits of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures with the idea that it will procure Indigenous English language proficiency and the like. Our intentions cannot be in any way linked to the original idea of transitioning us out of mother culture and assimilating us into dominator culture. Our languages and cultures are not tools to be used in this way. I was resolute in Chapter 1 that our motivations must be underpinned by Indigenous human rights, human rights that centre on access to language and culture regardless of socio-economic advancement. For me, as an Indigenous person, I see that dominator cultures have a clear cut moral and ethical obligation towards us and our languages, which they have played a key role in destroying.

\textbf{3.2 Protecting Indigenous Languages and Cultures}

In surveying the vast body of literature on Indigenous languages and cultures I have reached the conclusion that the obligation to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures can be discussed in reference to four distinct imperatives:

\begin{enumerate}
\item a human rights imperative,
\item a reconciliation imperative,
\item a scientific imperative, and
\item an Indigenous cultural sovereignty imperative.
\end{enumerate}

These imperatives are applicable internationally, nationally and here in New South Wales. Further, these imperatives serve as tangible justification for all levels of government in identifying and actioning social, cultural and

political priorities for us commensurate with our right to maintain our languages and cultures. The need to show quantifiable evidence of advancement of Indigenous participation within Westcentric mainstream society should never overshadow or otherwise usurp this, but it can have a supportive role. Economic rationalism has its place, but I emphasise that it should not be the only informing factor for securing language parity.

The obligations underpinning the responsibility of government to redress the wrongs of the past have been articulated loudly and clearly in the 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'. In Chapter 1 you were introduced to several articles from this declaration, which actually contains some 46 articles covering a wide range of cultural, educational, land, language, social and political rights.\(^\text{216}\) This covenant of rights was formally adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on the 13th of September, 2007. In adopting this Bill of Rights the General Assembly affirmed among other things that:

> ...Indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such

> ...all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust\(^\text{217}\)

It may seem unnecessary to be again focusing on this covenant, but the messages enshrined in the rights of this covenant are important to hear because they spell out Indigenous standpoint on the imperative to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures from further threat of decimation.

When the declaration was formally adopted by the General Assembly there was an overwhelming 143 votes in favour of declaration, 11 abstentions, and only 4 votes against the declaration.\(^\text{218}\) It should come as no surprise that the 4 dissenting nations were the United States, Canada, New Zealand and our own country Australia, the four most dominant Western nations with Indigenous populations. This declaration at the time was seen as an abject threat to the authority of these nations. Subsequent to this vote there has been a turnaround in the sentiment of this opposition. Australia indicated formal endorsement of the declaration on the 3rd of April, 2009, New Zealand on the 19th of April, 2010, Canada the 12th of November, 2010 and finally

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\(^{216}\) United Nations, loc.cit.

\(^{217}\) ibid.

the United States on the 16th of December, 2010. Even so, each country has stopped short of writing our declaration into law.

From our Indigenous perspective the reluctance to write our declaration into law can be read as fear based because of the potentiality for reparation over past injustices, including enforced Indigenous child removal – a practice common in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The formal endorsement of this document, however, can be read as moral and ethical acceptance that we should not be required to relinquish our languages and cultures in-order to participate in the dominant culture. My hypothesis that our engagement and participation in the frameworks of mainstream society is proportionate to our cultural health and wellbeing is supported through our declaration because it articulates our desire to be culturally sovereign peoples, and our right to have States facilitate this. This human rights imperative annexes well with the discourse of reconciliation.

Here in Australia reconciliation is founded on principles related to righting the historical wrongs of the past through acknowledgement of the reality of the events of history, which includes public acceptance that policies aimed at language and cultural destruction did exist and were implemented. Reconciliation is also about achieving Indigenous social and economic parity. Alongside this goal sits the key premise of reconciliation, our right to have our languages and cultures valued as integral to the national landscape. In terms of reconciliation representing an imperative for protecting our Indigenous languages and cultures well known Indigenous Bagaarrrmugo/Guggu Yakanji spokesperson and Director of the Cape York Institute Noel Pearson said it best when he expressed the view that:

We will have true reconciliation when millions of Australians speak our Australian languages from coast to coast. It is then that we will have the keys to our landscape, our history, our art, our stories. The Australian languages, and the literatures and cultures that live or have lived through them, are the most important things we have in Australia. Their revival, growth and use in all social, political, educational, commercial and cultural domains are the most important matter for Australia’s future.

The meaning in Noel’s words is unmistakable. In the broader frame of this newspaper piece he is clearly saying that as much as English may be the

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dominant discourse in this country, and may well be the dominant discourse behind Westcentric globalisation, there nonetheless is a moral and ethical imperative to recognise and reconcile with the historical reality of this country as one that belonged to and remains quintessentially Indigenous in foundation. Noel does not step away from the reality that all Indigenous peoples inevitably require the skill to communicate effectively in English, but he also points to the fact that it is perfectly possible to be functional both in Indigenous languages and cultures and also English. His opinion brings into sharp focus, and I feel questions, the either or notion that implies that us Indigenous peoples have to have one or the other, not both.

Professor Michael Christie, a long time advocate of the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures, and also recent recipient of the Northern Territory’s Australian of the Year award has been very widely reported echoing the outlook of Pearson by asserting that all Australians should take the time to learn an Indigenous language. Christie has said to non-Indigenous Australia that "learning the culture would help us reflect on the narrowness of some of our own Western European culture". He also made it clear that “Australian children should be given the opportunity to learn an Aboriginal language at school, in addition to the foreign language classes on offer”. In Christie’s opinion I read acknowledgement of our historical dominion over this country, and our proprietary right to have our languages and cultures take centre stage in the educational institutions of our nation, underpinning the reconciliation imperative to protect and advance our languages and cultures.

If, however, the moral and ethical imperatives set through the ideals of reconciliation and the fundamentals of Indigenous human rights remain either unpalatable or unconvincing then perhaps the imperative founded on the interests of Western science will persuade. The imperative to ensure the survival and revival of Indigenous languages and cultures can be argued along Western oriented ‘scientific’ lines, and it is these arguments that sound far more convincing to a Westcentric ear. Reflecting back upon Harrison we know that language and knowledge are strongly entwined. We know too that language loss signals knowledge loss. Now it may be thought that the loss of Indigenous knowledge is of little or no concern to the health and wellbeing of the ‘modern’ globalising world, but that thought would be entirely wrong.

223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 KD Harrison, op.cit.
Hale, before Harrison, poignantly stated that language is “...the intellectual wealth of the people who use it”.226 Hale further stated that “loss of local languages, and of the cultural systems that they express, has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, the priceless products of human mental industry”.227 This loss is of immeasurable importance to the holistic nature of the human bank of knowledge, which extends well beyond the borders of Western science. Harrison’s outstanding comparison of language loss to loss in biodiversity was more than likely inspired by Krauss who some years earlier made the same comparison.228 Krauss lamented the lack of serious attention given to language loss and in doing so challenged linguists’ to see the urgency of the matter; “surely we linguists know, and the general public can sense, that any language is a supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism”.229

The comparisons of Krauss and Harrison together with the attestations of linguists of the calibre of Hale stand as evidence that the crisis in language loss is akin to a crisis in knowledge loss. Indigenous Ibaloi-Igorot rights activist of the Philippines, Joji Carino, made plain the necessity behind the continuance of Indigenous languages, which she confirmed are “...vital to the conservation of biodiversity”.230 Carino has observed that our knowing of country is “critical” to scientific research aimed at uncovering the complexities of ecosystems because “many traditional practitioners are experts at reading indicator species that provide very early warning signals of impending environmental or food catastrophes and changes such as global warming”.231 The Australian Human Rights Commission had also made it known in their report released a year before Carino’s assessment that “Indigenous cultural knowledge is increasingly playing a role in preserving the biodiversity of Australia’s fragile eco-system”.232

The Commission cited Indigenous knowledge of fire abatement, climate patterns and animal species as significant to the development of a global knowledge bank that is needed in order to answer the potential disaster of global warming.233 There are without doubt many other examples of this, but one I found particularly interesting relates to the Boreal forest region of the North American continent. The Indigenous peoples of this region were

226 K Hale, op.cit, p.36.
227 ibid.
228 M Krauss, op.cit, pp. 7-8.
229 ibid., p.8.
231 ibid.
233 ibid., pp.62-63.
acknowledged by the David Suzuki Foundation for their unique knowledge of this region.234 The Indigenous knowledge contained within the Boreal region “is unique to and intrinsically tied to this region and the rich variety of plants from which this knowledge stems...” lending “...tremendous weight to the significant conservation value of the Boreal region”.235 Metis researcher Amanda Karst noted in her study that Indigenous storying of the region had embedded within it vast amounts of ecological data; data about plants species and historical events that are otherwise unknown to Western science.236

Karst, like Carino, does not hesitate to point out that Indigenous loss of language and cultural praxis embedded in the region would be a disastrous loss for humankind. It is abundantly clear that if these vital Indigenous knowledges, which are categorically embedded within languages, are further eroded through the demise of knowledge Elders, without that knowledge being handed on to the next generation, then the ecological integrity of world knowledge itself could be said to be under threat. Carino argues that “the future of indigenous peoples is closely linked with solutions to the crises in biodiversity and climate change, which must incorporate respect, protection and promotion of indigenous peoples’ rights as an essential component of a global strategy”.237 The imperative to protect Indigenous languages and cultures is directly implicated in this.

In the spirit of Ryan Wilson’s238 analogy with the ticking of a clock many nations across the globe, certainly in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and in the United States have reacted to the burden of obligation to respond proactively to stemming the tide of perishing Indigenous languages and cultures. In one sense, our language loss and cultural loss has become a ‘cottage’ industry for enthusiastic anthropologists, linguists, sociologists and the like. Our loss does continue to create us as ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ of Western academia. It is a vexed situation for us. On the one hand we recognise our need for ‘expert’ help; on the other hand we recognise our lack of status as our own ‘experts’. We seem too readily to slip to the margins. Certainly the vast majority of literature that I have thus far engaged with is non-Indigenous in orientation, and more oriented toward Western scientific ways of understanding rather than Indigenous ways of understanding.

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235 ibid., p.3.
236 ibid.
238 D Frosch, op.cit.
This impasse between ways of knowing brings me to the fourth imperative behind the need to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures and that is Indigenous cultural sovereignty. Our right to speak mother tongue as a basic human right is inexorably embedded in issues to do with cultural sovereignty. Fishman confronted us with the question - “What are you going to do with the mother tongue before school, in school, out of school, and after school?” Because that determines its fate, whether it is going to become self-renewing”. This question doesn’t hold back, its gets straight to the heart of intention in the protection, revitalisation and reclamation of Indigenous languages and cultures because it asks us directly – do we want a living museum relic of our culture?, or do we want a living, breathing, spiritually alive materialization of culture that is ever-present in the day to day being of our everyday life worlds?

If we truly want our languages back as organs of communication and knowledge then we have to take the matter of cultural sovereignty seriously, otherwise we risk relegation of our languages and cultural praxis to the status of artefact; an article from a disenfranchised way of life. Viatori and Usbigua focused on the status of language in the political context of sovereignty demonstrating that language can be asserted as a representation of sovereign being. In this regard sovereignty is a political paradigm, but sovereignty can be far more than political. Indigenous Comanche leader Wallace Coffey together with Indigenous Yaqui Professor Rebecca Tsosie have examined the issue of sovereignty and determined that whilst sovereignty is constrained within the politics of territorialism and governance, cultural sovereignty is more expansive and anchors the sanctity of our languages and cultures as autonomous ways of life.

Cultural sovereignty according to Coffey and Tsosie “...seeks to revitalize and affirm the values and norms embedded within Native belief systems”. They point to the role of language in cultural sovereignty noting that:

...the tangible repatriation of Native culture represented by the return of ancestral remains and cultural objects is only one aspect of cultural restoration. Restoration of language, spirituality, and Native educational systems are other components of the repatriation of culture.

Coffey and Tsosie meaningfully discuss the intangible aspects of culture, our values and philosophies, which go hand in hand with our languages. They assert that:

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239 JA Fishman, op.cit., p.13
240 M Viatori & G Usbigua, op.cit.
242 ibid., p.203.
243 ibid., p.207.
Native languages constitute an important repository of knowledge about tribal concepts of spirituality, values, and philosophy. By acquiring this foundation, Indian people are able to regain their identity, which helps overcome the negative legacy of colonialism and promotes healing.244

If we are serious about the interplay between the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages, Indigenous educational success and Indigenous community health and wellbeing then we need to stop and take on board the reality that the teaching and learning of language in an Indigenous context is far more than merely the finding, transmitting and safekeeping of discrete lexicons of words. It is about the repatriation of spiritual being, philosophical praxis, values and knowledge. It is about the autonomy of our ways of knowing, doing and being. Language can never sit outside of this. It is far wider and infinitely more complex than just words. So for me the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures is centred within the repatriation of spirit being. It is our right to have this repatriation and it defines the cultural sovereignty imperative to protect Indigenous languages and cultures.

In synthesising all four imperatives [human rights, reconciliation, science and cultural sovereignty] together there seems little moral or ethical room for Nation States to not be actively engaged in partnering us in the protection and repatriation of our languages and cultures. The question for me is - what is actually being done at the practical level to protect Indigenous languages and cultures? We know on the global stage that the ‘Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ sets an international human rights standard for individual Nation States. In my consultation of the literature I found that Norway is a nation that stands out over other nations by setting a political benchmark for all other nations to follow. In 1992, in response to the 1990 International Labor Office’s (ILO) convention on Indigenous peoples the ‘Sámi Language Act’ was enacted into Norwegian law, thereby legally constituting “...Sámi and Norwegian as equal languages with equal status”.245 This was some 15 years before the UN declaration.

According to Professor David Corson “the act’s stated purposes are to enable the Sámi to safeguard and develop their language, culture, and way of life, and to give equal status to Sámi and Norwegian”.246 He also noted that “Norwegian is becoming a second language. As the status of Sámi increases, following the Sámi language laws, parents in Sámi areas now choose to have their children educated in Sámi-medium rather than in Norwegian-medium

244 ibid.
246 ibid.
classes”. The Norwegian Government has certainly made it clear that “Norway was established on the territories of two peoples, Norwegians and Sámi, and that both these peoples have the same rights to develop their cultures and languages”. To that end the Norwegian Government has declared that “the state shall take steps to ensure that the Sámi people can further develop and strengthen their own culture, their own language and their own business and industry and community life”.

The example set by Norway is outstanding in assuring that the Sámi have the political, social and cultural room to work towards achieving their cultural sovereignty. The pathway towards this is no doubt long and there is some evidence to suggest that whilst political change can be strong in terms of protecting Indigenous languages and cultures, political protection is a first yet very necessary step in a more complex process. In a more recent reading on Sámi languages Corson’s observations were partially confirmed in that with respect to “North Sámi” language within Norway it is reported that “…language shift to Norwegian has been stopped and partly reserved”. However, Professor Leena Huss makes it clear that this is not the case across the board. There are still difficulties associated with “Sámi-medium education” and there are issues with moving Sámi populations.

Huss points to high numbers of Sámi moving to live in Oslo, Norway’s capital city, and she advises that there are similar trends in population movements in Finland and Sweden. This has impacted language revitalisation, which Huss advises is far stronger in Sámi Administrative regions. Huss also makes it clear that “minor Sámi languages” remain highly endangered. “The five Sami languages are not all mutually intelligible…”, so the idea of one unified language medium is problematic, and the risk of the more popular North Sámi tongue dominating is real. Knowing that there are multiple rather than one Sámi language means that realising political language and cultural protection at the level of praxis is nowhere near as simple as it might seem. New Zealand is another case in point, in that political change has occurred, yet problems still appear to exist with Māori education and Māori wellbeing.

247 ibid., p.499.
249 ibid.
251 ibid., pp.125-129.
252 ibid.
253 ibid., pp.130-131.
In New Zealand great political strides have been taken in protecting Māori mother tongue. In 1987 the ‘Māori Languages Act’ was formally enacted into New Zealand law thereby acknowledging Māori as an official language of the nation. As part of this legislation the New Zealand Government set up the Māori Language Commission, Te Taurawhiri i te Reo Māori, whose purpose is to promote Māori language to New Zealand’s entire population. This sets a sound political example, but has it impacted? The latest statistical evidence does show an increase of 1,128 Māori speakers between 2001 and 2006, which is certainly encouraging. The Māori Language Commission also optimistically says that it expects the number of Māori speakers to more than double in the coming years – a very impressive forecast. No matter what the internal struggles may be for either the Sámi or Māori peoples their languages at least are being politically embraced by their Nation States.

In Australia, however, the political climate is different. A comprehensive keyword search of the Parliament of Australia website reveals that there is no standing parliamentary Bill dedicated to the recognition and protection of our languages. Whilst there are Bills about us and our variant socio-economic conditions, which no doubt broach the subject of language, language itself does not stand as the sole entity of an Act of Parliament. It could of course be argued that it is difficult to enact a national language Bill because it means working into law recognition of multiple distinct languages and dialects, but I wonder whether or not a collective approach could be taken. Certainly, in a study undertaken into Indigenous languages in South Australia it was noted that “there is a strong feeling that rights in language and rights to use language should be recognised in Australia...and that such rights should be based on traditional Aboriginal understandings...”.

The South Australian study was indeed very appealing in terms of how it recommended i. the instigation of legislated Indigenous language policy at the State level, ii. that language rights be considered in terms of ‘Treaty’ and ii. that dual naming rights be similarly legislated. Although these recommendations were made at a time when the former Aboriginal and

255 ibid.
256 Statistics New Zealand, op.cit.
257 ibid.
260 ibid, p.22 & 25.
Torres Strait Islander Commission was still functional, the sentiment behind them remains strong in Indigenous political assertion. One only need look at recommendation no.40 (b) listed in the report of the ‘International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages’ to appreciate this. This group urges Nation States to “use the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other relevant human rights standards as the basis to develop policies and laws related to the promotion and strengthening of indigenous languages”.261

As for Australia, in 2008 a federal level study of Indigenous language programming in Australian schools was published. This comprehensive volume, authored by Dr Nola Purdie in collaboration with Tracey Frigo Clare Ozolins, Geoff Noblett, Nick Thieberger and Janet Sharp was very revealing in terms of Australia’s policy approach to our languages.262 One of Purdie et al.’s key findings was that “there is considerable variation across the States and Territories in current policy and practice related to Indigenous languages programmes in schools. Some States have strong policy documentation; several have none”.263 This finding, of course, pertains specifically to education, but even so, it gives a reasonable indication of the casual pace of protection and advancement of our languages generally. Purdie et al. do draw attention to the ‘National Policy on Languages’ which was published in 1987.264 This particular policy incorporated Indigenous languages under a wider multicultural umbrella, nonetheless Purdie et al. reported that it has been recognised as “...the first Australian public policy recognition of Indigenous languages”.265

This policy recognition was extremely important for us because it began the process of acknowledging at the national level the status of our languages as significant within the national circumstance. More recently in 2009 the Federal Minister for the Arts, the Honourable Mr Peter Garrett MP, together with the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the Honourable Ms Jenny Macklin MP, announced a National policy on Indigenous languages. In a press release of the time it was noted that the policy would focus not only on drawing “national attention” to our languages, it would encourage our languages to be maintained through extension of our “everyday use” of language. Further it was advertised that this policy was aimed at promoting

263 ibid., p.x.
265 N Purdie et al., op.cit., p.25.
recognition of our languages by Governments when interacting with our communities who speak mother tongue “fully”, it was aimed at endorsing and supporting the revival of our languages in situations where we no longer have functional full mother tongue and very importantly it was said to back “the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools.”

‘Indigenous Languages: A National Approach’, which appears as Appendix 3 in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioners 2009 Annual Report, stipulated that “the Australian Government is committed to addressing the serious problem of language loss in Indigenous communities” and recognised that this would call for “… coordinated action among the bodies involved in support of Indigenous languages, including government, language organisations and educational and research institutions”. Most importantly from the perspective of the context of this research study this national policy noted that:

Given the centrality of language to strong Indigenous culture, and the broader social benefits of functional and resilient families and communities, better targeting support for Indigenous languages as part of a broader national focus on Indigenous culture generally, will contribute to the overall well-being of Indigenous communities.

The trouble with policy though is that whilst it can be strong on intent, it is almost always far weaker when it comes to the power of enforcement, and it is vulnerable to the tides of change in government. We are yet to see how ‘Indigenous languages: A National Approach’ pans out, but it must be said that policy alone can never substitute for the legal authority instilled in an Act of Parliament. The Australian Human Rights Commission was quite critical of Indigenous language policy in Australia, asserting that:

The current situation regarding support and promotion of Indigenous languages is fraught by differing and contradictory policies across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments. On the one hand, the Commonwealth has a National Approach which acknowledges the value of Indigenous languages and supports their preservation and promotion. On the other hand, some state and territory governments have policies which ignore Indigenous languages or limit Indigenous language teaching in the interests of promoting English literacy. Current Indigenous language policy in Australia is inconsistent and in some cases contradictory.

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268 ibid., p.184.

Interestingly, Adriano Truscott and Professor Ian Malcolm pay considerable attention to policy and its effect in terms of our Indigenous languages.\textsuperscript{270} I gained from their study a corroborating sense that policy is only ever as good as the practical steps that are taken under a policy’s theoretical direction. What happens on the ground demonstrates the value or otherwise of a given policy. In our case Truscott and Malcolm suggest that policy aimed at Indigenous language revitalisation, however well intentioned, remains subordinated to the wider sweeping intent surrounding “Standard Australian English (SAE)”.\textsuperscript{271} Truscott and Malcolm have pointed out that “…the effect of the way in which the objective of SAE literacy is pursued can be to deny the essential place of Indigenous languages in people’s lives and in the continuance of their cultures”.\textsuperscript{272} These authors show concern for the struggle that inevitably takes place between the need for all Australians to acquire Standard Australian English, and the language re-acquisition goals of Indigenous language revitalisation. In this struggle revitalisation tends to run secondary to the primacy of English first policy.\textsuperscript{273}

There is always going to be a tension within Australia between the need to secure nationwide use of Standard Australian English and our demand that our languages be sustained as first languages, particularly in the Northern Territory where we have our greatest number of mother tongue speakers. One would think that the Northern Territory would stand out within Australia as the most likely place to have the most enlightened policy approach towards our languages, yet according to Professor Jane Simpson, Dr Jo Caffery and Dr Patrick McConvell the Northern Territory does not appear to be working within the spirit of what is being espoused at the Federal level,\textsuperscript{274} nor indeed their own rhetoric which claims Indigenous languages as the States ‘heart and soul’.\textsuperscript{275} They contend that “language rights are only as strong as the implementation of relevant policies”.\textsuperscript{276} Like me, they also identify that “…without explicit protection in law, Indigenous communities have no control over government policies…” which means we are left at the mercy of those chosen to implement policy, and their interpretations.

\textsuperscript{271} ibid., pp.7-8.
\textsuperscript{272} ibid.
\textsuperscript{273} ibid.
\textsuperscript{275} NT Government..., loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{276} ibid., p.7.
As it stands, Simpson et al., whose paper represents a hard hitting account of the amazing debacle surrounding the dismantling of Indigenous bilingual education programming through the Northern Territory Government’s insistence that teaching be undertaken within the medium of Standard Australian English in “the first four hours” of the teaching day, did not hold back in concluding that:

Leaders today are willing to sacrifice Indigenous cultural heritage, identity and rights in the name of ‘closing the gap’. In fact, gaps can be closed much more effectively by working with Indigenous communities to harness their cultural and linguistic background and heeding their wishes. Leaders may truly value Indigenous languages and cultures but they can nevertheless become ensnared in the current rhetoric and consequently succumb to pressures to hit out at targets such as bilingual education, despite Two-Way learning being one of the significant gains Indigenous people have made over the last few decades.277

What also came across in their study was the complete abrogation of Indigenous parental and community right to have a say in the education of our children, especially after the Federal Government’s Intervention. Our Indigenous languages were left utterly unprotected. Simpson et al. suggested that:

The introduction of bilingual education among Indigenous people in the Northern Territory was possibly the most important step taken to maintain Australia’s endangered languages. Its curtailment will surely have a severely damaging effect on the state of health of Indigenous languages, as well as on Indigenous people’s perception about how their enormous contribution to Australia’s heritage is valued.278

The example of the Northern Territory shows just how easily the status of our languages can change, yet our languages and cultures are embedded within this nation’s very landscape; they certainly deserve to be legislated as official national languages.

My central concern, however, is New South Wales, and it is pleasing to know that we do have a formal policy that advances the status of our Aboriginal languages. Our ‘Aboriginal Languages Policy’, is particularly strong in terms of articulating Government commitment to supporting the revitalisation of our languages.279 The policy for instance affirms that:

Revitalisation, as a practical strategy for stemming our language loss and resurrecting our languages out of loss provides one means of ensuring protection of Indigenous languages and by default cultures. John Hobson, Kevin Lowe, Susan Poetsch and Michael Walsh suggested in their

277 ibid., p.6 & 37.
278 ibid., pp.36-37.
279 New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs, op.cit.
280 ibid., p.5.
introduction to their volume ‘Re-awakening Australian Languages’ that “language revitalisation is underpinned more fundamentally by notions of cultural sovereignty”. From an Indigenous standpoint this statement certainly rings true at the level of theory, but I wonder whether it is true also at the level of praxis.

Before I move on to address the process of language revitalisation it is important that you know that whether an Indigenous language initiative is purposed towards maintenance, revitalisation, renewal or indeed reclamation there is a socio-political setting, especially within the United States, Canada, New Zealand and here in Australia, that situates the reality of these initiatives. McCarty discussed this in reference to Indigenous America explaining that:

Indigenous language revitalisation confronts not only a colonial legacy of linguicide, genocide, and cultural displacement, but mounting pressures for standardisation. Those pressures are manifest in externally imposed ‘accountability’ regimes—high-stakes testing, reductionist reading programmes, and English-only policies...

McCarty moved on to assert that “in the context of these demographic transformations and the larger forces of globalisation, we are witnessing increasing intolerance for linguistic and cultural diversity”. If we reflect upon the interplay between language and knowledge this intolerance jeopardises not only speech maintenance and revival, it jeopardises knowledge maintenance and revival and therefore cultural praxis maintenance and revival, and on this basis it can wound cultural identity.

Turning this around rests in no small measure on turning language endangerment and loss around. Western academia certainly has an interest in this. In Western academia there is a tendency to fixate on finding exact terminology to name and classify any situation likely to become an area of academic interest. The fields of linguistics are no exception to this. In relation to the business of redressing our language loss the most frequently mentioned linguistic terms within the literature are ‘revitalisation’ and ‘reclamation’, though ‘maintenance’, ‘revival’ and ‘renewal’ also appear quite often. There are without doubt many definitions offered with regard to these terminologies, however of all the interpretations I’ve read the straightforwardness of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] was refreshing. They simply stated that:

Language revitalisation means that the language is still known and used by the community, but only by a few people, usually the oldest members

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282 TL McCarty, op.cit., p.159.
283 ibid.
of the community. Languages of this status can be learned in part by listening to old people, and recording their speech. Language reclamation usually means that relearning the language has to rely primarily on old records such as tapes and historical documents. People in the community may remember and use a few words, but to learn the language beyond this level will require more than referring to Elders’ knowledge. Elders are still vital to this process due to their authority and their cultural knowledge.  

The VCAA break this down further on their language revival tab on their website by noting that ‘language revival’ involves ‘language revitalisation’, ‘language renewal’, which applies “when there is still some language in the community, but it is not used for everyday purposes” and ‘language reclamation’. Purdie et al. have also looked at these terms too, and make an important distinction between ‘language maintenance’ and ‘language revival’. Language maintenance, as the name suggests, centres on situations where our Indigenous languages remain as first mother tongue. The principal concern for language maintenance is to ensure the continuance of mother tongue and therefore the avoidance of language endangerment. Language revival on the other hand is an umbrella term covering already transpired degrees of language endangerment and loss.

The concept of language maintenance sounds relatively uncomplicated because it is centred on keeping healthy that which is already there. In the case of our languages spoken across all generation’s maintenance tends to centre on ensuring that each new generation is educated into thinking and speaking within these languages, but because the risks of endangerment are so high recording of language and cultural data has become paramount. In her personal reflection on Indigenous languages Indigenous linguist Jeannie Bell made it clear that “even in a community where the languages are strong, language maintenance takes lots of work and resources”. A recent example of this is the major Australian Research Council funded initiative currently underway in the Northern Territory under the direction of Professor Christie, which aims to create “...a living digital archive of endangered literature in more than 16 Indigenous languages”.

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286 ibid.
287 N Purdie et.al., op.cit, p.xi.
288 ibid.
One issue I would raise here is that digital and other forms of recording language and cultural data are extraordinarily involved in relation to our languages because there are many negotiations that must be undertaken with regard to what is and what is not recorded and/or managed under restricted access. The reason for this is as I’ve discussed earlier, many of our language lexicons package highly restricted, sacred or gender specific knowledges, and the laws/lores that govern these knowledges must always be adhered to. That said, digitising language and cultural material is a key strategy in language maintenance as is education, which you will find is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4. In cases where fluent elderly speakers are present, but where language is not spoken across the generations, maintenance strategies such as digitisation and education must dovetail with revival strategies.

Christie has made it clear that “it’s a terrible tragedy that most of the Australian languages are dead and will never be spoken again and yet we don’t seem to be terribly worried about how we ensure the vitality and the ongoing viability of the languages we still do have.”291 The challenge in these words is utterly unmistakable in terms of maintenance, but what does this mean for us Aboriginal peoples here in New South Wales. For one thing, language revival for us is all about reversing the idea of ‘never to be spoken again’. Even if we can’t achieve full fluency again, we cannot disregard the concept of language maintenance on the basis that our mother tongues are no longer our first languages because whatever we manage to revive we must work to keep alive, so for us revival will always dovetail back in with maintenance.

Bell commented that “it’s probably hard for non-Aboriginal people to understand how much our own languages enrich our lives as Indigenous peoples. To speak our language, even if we only know a few words, give us a real connection with our land and our culture”.292 Bell also said, “The thing that I would like to get over to people is you don’t have to be speaking a language daily for it to be important to you”.293 This resonates with real meaning for me because these words sound so similar to my own mothers. Mum witnessed firsthand enforced language shift so she realised all too well how important holding onto one single word could be, and she knew she didn’t have to speak her language everyday for it to still be there inside her spirit, keeping her strong within country. Words such as these underpin the real emotional spirit behind language revival and language maintenance for us.

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291 ‘Australians should learn an Aboriginal language...’, op.cit.
292 J Bell, op.cit., p.169.
293 ibid., p.165.
In the first instance, however, language revival is more pertinent to us here in New South Wales because of the extent of our language loss, which is as I’ve explained already considerable. Board of Studies New South Wales Aboriginal Education Inspector Kevin Lowe of the Gubbi Gubbi peoples of Queensland, together with linguistic Anna Ash confirmed several years ago that:

Though there are some languages within the state which are widely supported and in a relatively healthy state, all NSW languages are acknowledged as needing immediate and on-going support to sustain even small programs that aim to improve access and use of language. In NSW, there are no communities where an Aboriginal language is known by a critical mass of its adult population or even where the language can be heard to be fluently spoken unrehearsed.294

This is a very telling statement, and although revival programmes have been well underway since the time of this statement, it nonetheless appears that this observation remains true for a great many of us. Nevertheless, we do still have sufficient language knowledge holders in some of our cultural nations to make language revival possible and practicable.

In terms of language revival Purdie et al. note that there are three categories to be considered – ‘language revitalisation’, ‘language renewal’ and ‘language reclamation’, though they also mention the additional category – ‘language awareness’.295 Language revitalisation and renewal begin from the position that there is enough existing knowledge of language, even when it is no longer the mother tongue of everyday thought and communication, to revive language, if not to a state of full fluency then at least to a reasonably functional state of oral proficiency. Purdie et al. distinguish revitalisation from renewal on the basis that revitalisation pertains more to those of our cultural nationhood’s who have actual, though usually elderly, speakers whereas renewal relates to when “language is no longer actively spoken ‘right through’ or in its full form, but there are Indigenous people who actively identify with the language.”296 In either case mother tongue is no longer the everyday language of community, so to my mind revitalisation stands as the most descriptively useful term.

In knowing that there are language knowledge holders within New South Wales it is tempting to think that the process of revitalising our languages would be less difficult. I’ve certainly heard idealistic phrases like ‘awakening a sleeping language’ used in reference to this. Linguistics Professor Emeritus, Leanne Hinton, certainly relied upon this form of phrase in one of her chapters in the influential and widely referenced volume “The Green

295 N Purdie et al, op.cit., p.xi.
296 ibid.
Book of Language Revitalisation in Practice” which she co-edited. In this volume Hinton indicates her preference for sleeping as analogous with something that has gone ‘silent’. These terms ‘silent’ and ‘sleeping’ are to her less final than ‘moribund’, ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’. What I found somewhat disturbing though is Hinton’s claim that “communities in the grip of language shift are often unaware that it is taking place, or are unconcerned about it, or for various reasons are unable to do anything about it, until the shift is complete”.

In Australia, working off my own day to day contact with not only my peoples and communities, but our academic literature, I can see that we are all too aware of language shift, and we have always tried to arrest this, by keeping words within families, speaking away from the ear of ‘protectors’, missionaries and the like. So in one sense ‘sleeping’ sounds about right, but my sense of ‘sleeping’ really is that it simply sounds nicer, and perhaps more palatable, because it gives off a sense that language is just lying dormant ready to be taken up again. This may well be the case where enough knowledge still abounds that re-acquisition and re-uptake of language is completely possible, but it is perhaps somewhat misleading in cases where this is not possible. It seems to me that sometimes it is thought that all you have to do is go to our knowledge holders, get the words from them and begin teaching. No doubt getting words is a good place to start, but as I’ve already emphasised Indigenous language revival and maintenance is complex, culturally convoluted and painstaking work.

Purdie et al. actually listed an intriguing eight stage model for language revitalisation that was proposed by Fishman, who suggested this model as a way for moving revitalisation forward from re-acquisition to re-uptake of language, in order to reverse language shift. The first stage in the process is to educate adults into speaking language so that they can then educate the young. The next step centres on creating an “integrated population of speakers” with the idea of moving to the next step of establishing language usage as part of everyday communication. Following on from this is recognition of the need to have language use move beyond orality, and only after this, at stage five, does Fishman think that education systems can become involved. From there he suggests that language usage be spread to

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298 ibid., p.413.
299 ibid., p.413.
300 JA Fishman as cited in Purdie et al. op.cit., p.21-22.
301 ibid.,p.22.
the workplace, local government and media, and then finally at stage eight into higher education and wider levels of government.\textsuperscript{302}

Whilst the Fishman model is holistic in terms of bringing speech and written language back into being with the revitalisation of our Indigenous languages we need to keep in mind that language is not merely speech communication or written communication. My overriding impression from the literature, however, is that there is a great deal of interest in revitalising speech and written language from a linguistic perspective over and above a cultural/spiritual perspective, yet as I’ve already highlighted in our Indigenous context when we undertake business centred on language we understand that we are working with a spiritual platform that is one with country. The business of revitalisation for us is not merely linguistic in nature; it is also \textit{spiritual} in nature. So we need to consider what revitalisation for us is really all about; is it merely bringing our speech languages back, or is it far more?

Walsh helpfully recognised that revitalisation involves more than just speech language alone, noting that “numerous language revitalisation programs have stressed that language is just one part of the process and that other cultural activities need to be integrated into that process”.\textsuperscript{303} Walsh is not explicit about what ‘other cultural activities’ might be, but clearly we have to face the reality that the degree to which a language is revived will have an immediate informing influence on the degree to which cultural praxis is capable of being revived and indeed the nature of that cultural praxis. If language re-acquisition takes place on a more academic rather than cultural footing I can see that sometimes the gap between loss of cultural praxis and attempts to revive cultural praxis through language may be too great to rekindle the deeper layers of spiritual routine.

In actuality because so much language and cultural decimation has taken place here in New South Wales many of us are still fighting to improve highly diminished word lexicons let alone anything beyond that, so the idea of revitalisation for greater cultural fluency, or even moderate levels of oral speech proficiency, sometimes feels more like a lofty ambition to us than a tangible goal. On this basis the standard key motivational goal behind Aboriginal language revitalisation appears, on the basis of academic literature at least, to be general speech proficiency over and above all else. This then brings me to the matter of what fluency actually signifies, and this in turn stimulates consideration of whether or not there is a difference

\textsuperscript{302} ibid.
\textsuperscript{303} M Walsh, ‘Why language revitalisation sometimes works’ in J Hobson et al, op.cit, p.28.
between being fluent and being proficient in terms of language usage and cultural praxis.

The matter of fluency was recently addressed by Hobson in ‘Re-Awakening languages’. I found Hobson’s consideration quite informative because he discussed the very significant distinction that exists between what can be known as proficiency and what can be known as fluency. In terms of this Hobson reported that when linguists look specifically to hone in on speech they have a preference for using the term oral proficiency. Oral proficiency, however, falls short of fluency because as Hobson pointed out “a person’s language abilities consist of more than just oral proficiency”, in that they also embody the “macro-skills of speaking, listening (understanding), writing and reading”. Proficiency thus can be seen as one aspect of fluency, whereas fluency itself can be seen as a more holistic entity, enveloping a far wider range of communication and cognitive skills; though I would add to this skill akin with spiritual perception.

Walsh in considering the dynamics of teaching Aboriginal languages here in New South Wales similarly reflected upon fluency. Walsh drew upon the work of Daniel S. Rubin, a Canadian educator involved in the school implementation of Sm’algyax language, a language of the Tsimshian Nation of British Columbia, Canada. Rubin recognised five levels of fluency, ranging from “passive”, which centres on basic understanding of “common words and phrases” through to “creative”, which equates with a high degree of full fluency. In reading through these gradations of fluency, I can see that whilst the ‘creative’ and ‘fluent’ categories stand as ultimate goals, realistically for us here in New South Wales we may find ourselves not moving far beyond “passive” fluency or what Rubin terms “symbolic”, which refers to the ability to “...use common phrases and sentences in formal settings, as symbols of language participation and cultural ownership” and “functional”, which refers to the ability to “speak the language, with basic understanding of its syntax, grammar, and rules of usage and a minimal vocabulary”.

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305 Ibid., p.270.
309 Ibid.
Walsh’s understanding of these categories of fluency reflects Rubin’s who highlighted that degrees of fluency impact what goals can be set within education programming and indeed what is achievable.310 In returning back to Hobson’s consideration of fluency Hobson in drawing upon Fishman argues that “if the ability to speak a language is irrelevant, we are not discussing revitalisation so much as awareness”.311 In this regard Hobson is pondering the goal of fluency in language revitalisation, claiming that “…unless people are actually developing greater fluency, it seems to me that revitalisation is not really happening”.312 Our Indigenous perspective is somewhat different to this in that we consider fluency not so much in terms of how many words we can use, or how many phrases we can string together; it is how we spiritually engage with what is left.

I think though that sometimes we can come across as either overly optimistic about regaining fluency, or apparently lacking in aspiration to regain fluency. Either way, there are clearly degrees to which this is achievable from high levels of speech proficiency through to limited levels of word use. Can we conclude though that limited word use is merely awareness at play? For me at a personal level I have to say that fluency is a hard and emotional matter, especially when I reflect upon the importance of Stephen Greymorning’s words:

...language instructors should be steadfast in their commitment toward the language program and the all-important goal of producing genuinely fluent speakers. In the case of language learning, this means to always move toward increasing the language speaking ability of each group that follows until the goal of language fluency has been achieved and maintained throughout successive generations.313

I wonder about achieving fluency, not just in terms of what is obtainable in the line of speech proficiency, but also in terms of what our languages represent as banks of knowledge. As discussed in Chapter 2 it is clear that our languages are heavily comprised of ecological data more relevant to our foundational life ways of spiritual living on country. This complicates revitalisation, particularly for those of us living in contexts where day-to-day spiritual living on country is conditioned by the realities of dominator society. In her study of Aboriginal language in respect to off reserve First Nations peoples in Canada Dr Evelyne Bougie observed that “Aboriginal languages are more likely to be used in the context of traditional Aboriginal activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping or camping”.314 Bougie’s

310 M Walsh, Teaching NSW’s Indigenous languages..., op.cit. & DS Rubin, op.cit.
312 ibid., p.270.
313 S Greymorning, op.cit., p.9.
observation is entirely relevant because the lexical context of a language does impact how and where a language is best utilised.

What is also interesting in terms of this is that the close association between our ecological knowledge and our language is such that it can impact the methodological processes of revitalisation on the basis that it is often the case that language memory and cultural cognition are only triggered, or triggered more effectively, when ontologically situated. In reflecting upon my own language knowledge I find that if I am asked outright what the Dhungutti word or Dharawal word is for something I often have to think a while, and sometimes don’t recall, or recall hours later. Yet when I’m on country words come to me with ease. I reason that this happens because I feel myself more at one with the spirit of country which is the life place of language, so my cognitive processes become culturally contextualised. Clearly when it comes to language revitalisation we are dealing with more than word memory development, we are dealing with cognition.

A while ago I read a short local newspaper article about Stephen Greymorning’s engagement with the Muurrbay Language and Culture Cooperative, which is located on the mid North Coast of New South Wales. In this article Stephen’s language revitalisation methodology is referred to as being “...based on engaging the brain, using problem solving, rather than simply committing words to memory to learn a language”.315 This is very interesting, especially for me and especially since it pertains to work being undertaken by Muurrbay because one of the languages they focus on is my own language ‘Dhungutti’ and another is ‘Gumbaynggirr’ which was the language of one my closest cultural mentors Uncle Len Silva. That Muurrbay are working beyond word memory is promising in terms of re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongue.

Within New South Wales the example and successes of Muurrbay in terms of language revitalisation and maintenance cannot be understated or ignored, in fact I would go so far as to say that they have set a standard for the rest of us to at least attempt to follow. A quick peruse of the Muurrbay website will reveal that they have been operational since 1986, and that they work in unison with the Many Rivers Aboriginal Language Co-operative.316 In terms of achievements to date they advertise some fourteen separate language publications ranging from dictionaries through to teaching resources. They are involved in the revitalisation of over six regional

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languages, and they have direct input into ten different schools within their region. Further they now have forged links with the University of Sydney’s Indigenous Languages Summer School programme.

In thinking about the success of Muurrbay I was prompted to ponder Walsh’s discussion centred on us under-reporting our knowledge of language in that when we are asked about language we may well say that we know very little or that our language knowledge holders are deceased. Walsh concluded that this is part of an entrenched pessimism that we hold about the state of our languages; a pessimism that can be reversed through the example of successful language revitalisation programmes such as Muurrbay’s. This could be entirely true, but it may also be that we do not always respond that well to ‘outsider’ inquiries that seek to find out what we do and do not know in terms of our cultural knowledges. If you reflect back on what I wrote about Indigenous perspective on knowledge and research in Chapter 1 you will realise that we still have a certain reluctance to become involved in research that takes us as ‘subject’ or ‘object’.

As I noted previously there is a socio-political context to all of this, just as there is a cultural context. Walsh noted that he heard someone speak ‘lingo’ to someone else after reporting not being able to speak in language. In our Aboriginal English ‘lingo’ refers to words of mother tongue, which are blended in with English to form a distinct cultural dialect. Walsh’s observation didn’t in the least surprise me because like being on country, yarning in ‘lingo’ between ourselves means communicating within a cultural context. It isn’t so much that we are being deliberate in not coming forth with what we know, though indeed we might, it may also be that we are not in the right context to cognise in ‘lingo’. These sorts of issues though are embroiled in matters of Indigenous control. Often we feel that our languages are being ‘taken over’ by linguists.

Matters to do with our control even scope matters of fluency, especially with regard to the formal measurement and assessment of fluency. Hobson concluded in his consideration of fluency that “Indigenous communities can pursue their current activity in revitalisation without regard to fluency or seek to exercise control. If they don’t it is probable that governments, particularly through education and teacher training, will increasingly do

317 ibid.
318 ibid.
320 ibid., p.114.
so”. Hobson’s statement flags significant tensions between how we Aboriginal peoples conceptualise the growth, use and direction of our own language and culture revitalisation projects and ambitions, and how academic and government institutions may seek to define or otherwise compartmentalise the teaching and learning of our Indigenous languages and cultures for revitalisation.

Intentioned or otherwise statements such as these are provocative because they reveal to us that we may find ourselves at various moments in the revitalisation process at an impasse between our right to determine for ourselves what we want to do in the name of language and culture revitalisation and what Western academia and educational interests prescribe for us, or condition for us. In respect to this the matter of language engineering is particularly pertinent. In her consideration of language revitalisation in context to Canada Professor Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird listed four major strategies in respect to Indigenous language revitalisation: documentation, “language engineering” which she noted “includes the development or expansion of written systems for existing languages as well as the modernization of Indigenous languages”, education and policy.322

I’ve already signalled the importance of documentation, addressed policy and will scrutinise education in the next chapter, but the ideas associated with ‘language engineering’ are quite specific and in my estimation hold significant implications in terms of the difference between achieving language revitalisation or language reclamation for awareness. Walsh looked at this matter in terms of the grammatical ‘gaps’ that cannot be filled through existing language knowledge or research, and “neologisms”; the jargon of Western living which has no equivalency within our languages.323 Again how our languages are re-constructed is dependent upon us and what we see as appropriate to our contemporary ways of thinking, knowing, doing and being. One thing I would stress in reference to this is, as I’ve highlighted in Chapter 2, and as Kay-Raining Bird pointed out “culture is not a static phenomenon. Rather, it evolves over time as it is impacted by external and internal beliefs, pressures, needs and goals”.324

In his personal reflection, based on years of personal knowledge and experience with Pintupi peoples, Ralph Folds noted that the “…ability of,

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323 M Walsh, ‘Raising Babel...’ op, cit., p.115.
324 E Kay-Raining Bird, op.cit, p.115.
and need for, languages to evolve to remain viable, is often deplored as undermining, or corrupting, living indigenous languages”. He further noted that “young speakers of them are even sometimes described as having a deficient language...merely because it is not the same as that of their ancestors”. In thinking about this we need to be realistic about how revitalisation will compliment our contemporary everyday context. Folds said that:

Whilst there is a place for the preservation of old forms of languages and the cultural knowledge they express, the expectation that they will then be resurrected as the standard for contemporary speakers is unrealistic...Outsiders are indeed implacably rigorous when applying their ideals of cultural authenticity to indigenous people, whom they vigorously attempt to educate away from innovation.

Maybe we Aboriginal peoples in New South Wales should be thinking about how we can fuse language revitalisation, reclamation and even awareness as a more holistic cultural endeavour that can feed into our already strong use of our cultural dialect ‘Aboriginal English’.

Thinking about the utility of ‘Aboriginal English’ brings me to the matter of language reclamation and language awareness. The reclamation of Indigenous languages is in many ways altogether different from the revitalisation and renewal of Indigenous languages. This is because reclamation is predicated entirely on research, which is necessary because existing language situations are so critical that there are no fluent or even partially fluent speakers remaining, and existent levels of knowledge about language are so negligible that individual words and phrases have to be retrieved from historical resources. As with revitalisation and renewal there are degrees of achievability with language reclamation. The most dire degree is awareness, where only a very limited number words can be found and subsequently taught.

In the case of language reclamation the possibility for regaining speech proficiency exists though more often than not it is not expansive. With language awareness there is no prospect of achieving any degree of foundational speech proficiency. This can be a very daunting prospect indeed. As a community Indigenous person, who has over the years seen firsthand language revitalisation and reclamation effort, I must say that I tend to read sentiment in existing non-Indigenous literature, and Indigenous demand, when it comes to reclamation which appears hopeful, yet somewhat overly optimistic. This is where the ‘sleeping’ concept is perhaps at it most misleading, because we can be easily misguided into thinking that

326 ibid.
327 ibid.
there are vast tracks of language data just sitting on library shelves waiting to be returned to us, and once again revived into everyday speech use.

Like any other Aboriginal person I find myself having to be pragmatic about the distance between what we should have in terms of our languages and cultures and what we perhaps we will have. Walsh indicated some hope for us in saying that “a number of NSW languages have a sufficiently rich descriptive base to make language reclamation a viable option”.328 To tap into this ‘rich descriptive base’ Hinton affirmed that:

To begin the process of reclaiming an unspoken language, the first step is to find and acquire copies of whatever documentation of the language exists. Besides publications, there may be a rich store of unpublished documentation, such as linguistic field notes, field recordings, old manuscripts.329

Added to this are sources such as personal diaries, correspondence and the like, often found in archives. At a personal level I can certainly attest to the fact that there is a surprising range in data available upon our languages.

One initiative that will surely reveal this is currently underway in New South Wales. This initiative, which is centred within the business of reclamation, is the State Library of New South Wales sponsored language “rescue” venture: “Rediscovering Indigenous Languages”.330 The objective behind the project is to “identify as many word lists as possible in the State Library’s collections, and make them available to their relevant Indigenous communities in culturally appropriate ways”.331 It has been noted that “fragments of these [our] languages can be found among the letters, diaries and journals of British naval officers, surveyors and missionaries held, in the State Library’s unrivalled collections.”332 This is without doubt an extremely worthwhile project, but it does demonstrate in a very practical way the lengths to which we must go in order to reclaim our languages.

Sometimes the question isn’t so much how much data is available; it is more how much is culturally intelligible and accurate? There are hard cold realities with reclamation, the most difficult of which is dispute centred on the cultural origins of words, the pronunciation of words, and who has ownership and authority over these words once reclaimed from Western historical records. Whilst there is little public discussion of this within academic and general literature, as an Indigenous community person with considerable knowledge of cultural dispute I can certainly confirm that these

328 M Walsh, Raising Babel..., op.cit, p.115.
329 L Hinton, op.cit., p.413.
331 ibid.
332 ibid.
forms of dispute are ongoing and intense. Stephen Greymorning gave some indication of this when he was reported saying “in most indigenous language centres, arguing over correct pronunciation or word usage was the greatest factor slowing down the preservation process”.\textsuperscript{333} He certainly observed that we “spend more time arguing about the right and wrong way to speak the language, instead of getting out to newer speakers”.\textsuperscript{334}

Added to this, McConvell et al. found in their study of the Indigenous South Australian experience that:

Indigenous groups sometimes argue about the identity of languages, whether one type of speech is a dialect of another language, and whether one type of speech has one particular name or another. These arguments can become particularly severe when they are mixed up with Native Title and other disputes between groups.\textsuperscript{335}

They also lamented in reference to dispute over three specific and severely endangered Indigenous languages that “one of the sad consequences of such arguments is that they obstruct work on language and language maintenance”.\textsuperscript{336} Whilst these disputes clearly revolve around languages not yet at a reclamation stage, they are indicative of the types of dispute that arise in the reclamation situation. In the case of reclamation these sorts of disputes are similarly centred on language/tribal boundaries, and as is the case with the South Australian experience the passing of words across boundaries over time.

There are no ‘easy fix’ solutions for managing Indigenous cultural dispute. The Native Title Tribunal certainly handles dispute regularly through its process of mediation. These forms of processes bring parties together with an impartial mediator with the idea of being able to find common ground so that agreement can be reached.\textsuperscript{337} In terms of language reclamation, and indeed revitalisation, being able to defer to a neutral culturally expert body for advice and direction on language matters, from origin and ownership of words through to pronunciation, is something not to currently available, and I suspect will remain so as long as no formal legal status is afforded our languages and cultures. I can of course here the question – but what would such a mechanism look like? My immediate reply to this is that it would be something that needs to be debated within Indigenous circles first, but I do offer some advise in Chapter 5 related to the working parameters of localised language/culture centres.

\textsuperscript{333} S Greymorning cited in ‘Native American shows…”, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{334} ibid.
\textsuperscript{335} P McConvell et al., op.cit, p.47.
\textsuperscript{336} ibid, p.48.
Whatever the outcome of such debate the cultural sovereignty imperative to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures suggests that we need to be self-determining about the future of our languages and cultures. As it stands what we tend to do is defer to the authority of Western linguistic and educational experts, but as Walsh points out that too presents difficulty, especially in terms of the transmission of languages and cultural knowledges, linguistic interpretation of languages and so on. The fact that reclamation is particularly convoluted by a lack of existing cultural speaker authority can only add to the drama over words and place. Making it all the more so is the worry that many Western linguists subscribe to the structural principles of language universality, which means that their influence may well ‘de-culture’ and ‘de-spiritualise’ the essence of country within word.

In knowing that dispute of this nature takes place it would be easy to say that reclamation is probably in the ‘too hard basket’, but the example of the Kaurna language proves otherwise. The reclamation of Kaurna has been widely discussed within the literature on Indigenous language reclamation, and is regularly heralded as a success story. Indigenous Narungga Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, whose Grandmother’s language was Kaurna, wrote about how the study of linguist Dr Rob Emery led to the reclamation of Kaurna “...from the pages of history books...” into “...the vocal chords of my people”.

Rigney noted that “Kaurna still has a long way to go to recovering fully our language. However, as a result of hard work from several committed people, Kaurna language is now taught at an institution at every level of education from primary school to university”.

Another rather similar success story likewise comes from South Australia in respect to the Ngarrindjeri language. According to a report provided on the Federal Government’s Indigenous website this language was reported to have lost its last fluent speaker in the 1960’s. Some 20 years later, in the 1980’s, work began on reclaiming the language back. The original efforts that were made yielded a collection of some 250 words. Since then this collection has expanded significantly into a dictionary listing almost 4,000 words. Through this effort Ngarrindjeri has become “…the second most widely taught Aboriginal language in South Australian schools”.

An Elder Eileen McHughes involved in reclaiming her Ngarrindjeri language expressed

338 M Walsh, Raising Babel ..., op.cit., p.116.
340 ibid.
how knowing her language “...lets me know who I am, who I’m related to and it makes me proud to be an Aboriginal”.342

It is generally thought though, that if reclamation is to be successful in moving a language through to a state of maintenance then some form of language engineering is almost always inevitable. Hinton noted that “sometimes documentation itself is inadequate, and “reconstitution” is necessary if a community wishes for language revitalization”,343 meaning moving forward from reclaiming a language out of the pages of history and revitalising it back into actual use. Language reconstitution can be thought of as a variation on the theme of language engineering, but as Hinton defines it, it centres more on extrapolating into research “...whatever information exists to guess what the language might have been like”, and also the use of related languages.344 Hinton says that language change is inevitable and “...holds true for the awakening of sleeping languages as much as for the languages that are recovering from a less severe state of decline”.345

In the literature there is much to be found in the way of instruction when it comes to ‘discovering lost languages’, ‘awakening sleeping languages’ and ‘bringing dead languages back to life’. But what happens when language engineering and language reconstitution, or whatever other terminology you prefer to apply, cannot move a language any further than a few miscellaneous words. This happens when the most arduous research can only produce speech lexicons of 10, 20 or 50 odd words. These highly diminished lexicons fall into the category of language awareness because they cannot be added to sufficiently in order to create anything like a language as we know language, so we come up against a linguistic inertness wherein all we can hope to do is memorise and repeat these last few words. What happens then, do we just keep these words as an artefact of what once was, or do we do something more productive?

There is a fairly good chance that words in a language awareness scenario are going to be place names, names of flora and fauna species or geographical descriptors. One way of moving forward in a practical sense with limited language data is to invest in dual naming, a process that is already underway in many parts of Australia, and here in New South Wales. Dual naming gets our words out into the broader community so that they become part of our national cultural landscape. Notwithstanding the

342 ibid.
343 L Hinton, op.cit., p.414.
344 ibid.
345 ibid.
benefits of this, in terms of the health of our cultural identity we need to think about how these diminished word lexicons can be constructively managed in a way that brings them into some form of conversational or environmental science usage. As Bell said, and as my mother said, even getting one word back, if not into our conversation, then at least into our knowledge ways can make a difference in reinforcing who we are as First Peoples.

Professor Ghil’ad Zuckermann together with Walsh looked into Hebrew language reclamation as an example relative to our Indigenous language experience. In their article there is one brief line - “we predict that any attempt to revive an Aboriginal language will result in a hybrid, combining components from Australian English, Aboriginal English, Kriol, other Aboriginal languages and the target Aboriginal tongue” that hints at language engineering/language reconstitution without being more detailed. If this sentence were to be read as a suggestion for a hybrid national Indigenous language which would sweep all these elements together, then I would say that it is largely unrealistic because of the complexities surrounding the cultural politics of language, country and identity. If, however, this sentence is read as a suggestion for regional ontologically affiliated cultures, which I read it to be, then potential does exist.

Where smaller diminished lexicons are reclaimed and where Indigenous persons are found to have cultural relationship with the reclaimed words, our peoples would have to look themselves at what they may wish to do, and whether or not they wish to negotiate language with neighbouring ontologically affiliated cultures so that what they have left of foundational language can be culturally supported and possibly moved beyond awareness. It may be helpful in this regard to draw upon Uncle Stan Grant and Dr John Rudder who in reference to the Wiradjuri language of New South Wales emphasised that Wiradjuri can take “...words from other languages and turn those words into its own way of thinking and its own sound patterns. Like all other languages it can also build new words for new things using Wiradjuri ways of thinking and Wiradjuri sounds”.

In thinking about the matter of a language having its own sound ways, and in thinking about my own Dhungutti mother tongue I find that what Uncle Stan says is correct. For instance we say in Dhungutti ‘goff-ee’ for coffee,

347 ibid., p.121.
348 S Grant & J Rudder, loc.cit.
'djook-ar' for sugar, ‘gow-an’ for dress, ‘bumma-kin’ for pumpkin and ‘bull-ung’ for cow. These are just examples of how our language has absorbed and created new words, more like a Creole in many ways. If the spelling is not uniform with other representations of Dhungutti I’d ask you to remember two things – i. our language was always oral in nature and ii. the way I have represented these words is to illustrate my own pronunciation based on what my family Elders taught me. Knowing that we have actively done this, and knowing too that we have also woven much of this in with Aboriginal English is of practical importance especially with regard to language reclamation and awareness.

I understand though that when language awareness is centred on such little language knowledge and data that this form of language change and expansion may not be as possible. Grant and Rudder interestingly also put forward the idea that “a good speaker of Wiradjuri can actually use English words and still speak Wiradjuri. This is because what makes a language different from another is not so much the words, but the way of thinking that is used”. Perhaps this more philosophical approach may have some relevance here, certainly it is reminiscent of Williams’ observations regarding Welsh mother tongue, which I discussed earlier on. If we look at the case of Aboriginal English, of which I am a very strong speaker, our ‘lingo’ works English in together with our own cultural words, and our own cultural interpretations of English words, which has in effect created the type of hybrid language Zuckermann and Walsh are signalling.

One of the greatest advantages of hybrid language is its ability to move across borders; Aboriginal English is no exception to this. Regionally we each have our own specific forms of Aboriginal English lingo, but we understand one another just the same. That is because we use the power of our ‘lingo’ as the linguistic face of our collective cultural identity as Aboriginal peoples, beyond the borders of our own language boundaries. Individual words from our unique speech lexicons can move more fluidly across country in this way. Creoles, such as the Kriol lingo’s of the Northern Territory are similar in that they bring multiple languages together, sometimes two or more specific languages with English. These forms of language are brilliant for facilitating and affirming wider collective cultural identity, though in the case of Kriol in particular they are not without criticism.

I think though that the value of Aboriginal English to language reclamation and awareness bears closer scrutiny. What I have found is that Aboriginal

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349 ibid.
English tends to be understood more readily from a speech perspective and whilst our different words and phrases are recognised, I am yet to come across much in the way of discussion about the non-audible aspects of our lingo, signing being a prime example. Nor do I find that much centred on ‘gapping’, the longer silent pauses we fuse into our lingo. These rather subtle aspects of our communication are very strongly centred within the ways of our foundational languages and it is these very subtle differences that often don’t gain anywhere near the attention they require when language reclamation is being considered. Yet these significantly cultural features of Aboriginal English afford reclamation and awareness a viable avenue for cultural contextualisation otherwise not available.

Language engineering and reconstitution, in terms of foundational languages being fused into creoles or ‘dialects’, does raise some concern. Bell for instance pointed out that “Creoles and Aboriginal dialects of English are an issue in areas where you have strong Indigenous languages and you want to maintain them. As with English, pidgins and Creoles can have an overwhelming effect on Indigenous languages”.350 This would indicate that there is a difference in how the role of Kriol for instance is seen where language maintenance and revitalisation is possible and Aboriginal English where language maintenance and awareness are more probable. Fold’s arguments are somewhat oppositional to Bell’s because he sees languages like Kriol more as part of the natural movements of language by speakers themselves. I see it all as incredibly complex because of the spirit of country, but where foundational language is all but gone Aboriginal English lingo’s are perhaps not a bad compromise.

There are no doubt endless debates to be had here about language engineering, language reconstitution, hybrid language, Aboriginal English and indeed the Kriol tongues that bring languages together, often with only very minimal influence from English. These debates will always be had in relation to language revitalisation, particularly with Kriol as arguments wage back and forth over the natural movements of language and authenticity of language, but also in relation to reclamation, especially because of the nature of what reclamation is, having no existing speakers to guide pronunciation and the like. What I find personally remarkable about our Indigenous language revitalisation and reclamation alike is the apparent endlessness of the literature about us, and the amount of linguistic and anthropological interest in us, yet there remains a stark imbalance between this and the sound of our own voice, and the stamp of our own direction.

350 J Bell, op.cit., p.166.
What I have written thus far imparts to you what I feel is an indispensable introduction into the realities of Indigenous language revival, especially in respect to language revitalisation and reclamation. In almost all of the literature behind revitalisation and reclamation education comes to the fore over and over again as the most recognisable avenue for facilitating the reversal of the damage wrought through coloniser hegemony, and for rekindling our active interrelationship between ourselves, our languages and our cultural praxis commensurate with our knowledge ways. Education stands out in this regard as the way forward. There is continual strong commentary within national and international literature that flags education systems as a primary avenue for us to nurture the cultural education of our upcoming generations, and thereby protect, revitalise and reclaim our cultural continuance.
Chapter 4 - Educational Engagement

4.1 Positioning Indigenous Languages and Cultures within Education

The Hon. Shayne Neumann, MP, in speaking publicly about the current House of Representatives Standing Committee inquiry into Indigenous languages said, “We are walking the path to reconciliation by giving attention and proper recognition to Indigenous languages and cultures”.\(^{351}\) He also said, “There seems to be a belief in Australia that we are a monolingual nation and that only Standard Australian English can benefit a person, both educationally and vocationally”.\(^{352}\) These two statements align with the imperative to protect our Indigenous languages and cultures, and fundamentally set a strong socio-political tone for understanding Indigenous educational engagement. Firstly, because without the benefit of the core principles of reconciliation there would be no prospect of equal linguistic and cultural representation within State mainstream education systems for us Indigenous peoples, and secondly because the idea that the continent of Australia has or has ever had one single language is so utterly erroneous as to be absurd.

Indigenous educational engagement is theorised by many to be proportionate to the degree of cultural representation found within educational services and programmes, thus bespeaking the importance of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures. As an Indigenous academic I have often added my own voice to this school of thought. Notwithstanding the veracity or otherwise of this line of reasoning, how you come to perceive the importance of bringing our Indigenous languages and cultures into State mainstream education programmes very much hinges upon how you engage with the spirit of reconciliation. It hinges too upon whether or not you value the probity of our Indigenous cultural rights and educational rights as fundamental human rights and how sincerely you accept the imperative to protect our languages and cultures from further decimation. It may be though that you feel that the importance of having our languages and cultures within mainstream education should be contingent upon the beneficial role it may have in promoting our scholastic endeavour.

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\(^{352}\) ibid.
Whatever the case may be, if we reflect back upon the content and context of Chapters 2 and 3 it will become apparent that the measure of the importance of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems rests on how the following fundamental yet challenging questions might be answered:

1. Should Indigenous languages and cultures be taught within State mainstream education systems as a matter of reconciliation?
2. Should Indigenous languages and cultures be taught within State mainstream education systems in response to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?
3. Should State mainstream education systems undertake a key role in partnering us to protect and maintain our mother tongues and mother cultures?
4. Should State mainstream education systems undertake a key role in partnering us to revive our languages and cultures through revitalisation and reclamation programmes?
5. Should State mainstream education systems look to support Indigenous language and culture learning only if it proves to be a useful conduit for our learning success within the Western domain?

What needs to be said at the outset is that there is no getting around the inherently political nature of education for us Indigenous peoples. That is because our stance on education as the process of cultural production and reproduction is directly proportionate to our stance on the survival and revival of our languages and cultures. It is safe to say that it is now universally acknowledged that we do not surrender our right to maintain and sustain our languages and cultures through the processes of education, though it is also equally safe to say that in many instances Nation States still do not accept this. Here in Australia, with the repeal of assimilation policy in 1960’s, the emergence of Indigenous education policy and the rise of the reconciliation movement our right to maintain and sustain our languages and cultures through education now has weight.

There is, however a division to be seen between cultural education, which I have long termed Indigenous education, and education typically offered through the States mainstream education system, which I have also long referred to as being related to the provision of education for Indigenous peoples. This split may well seem pedantic, but it actually highlights quite well current discourse centred on the interplay between us, our languages and cultures and the processes of education. In an interesting article analysing Indigenous language education policy Haley De Korne made a very brief, but nonetheless poignant, reference to the issue of whether a language is to be the “medium” of education or an “object” of education.\(^\text{353}\) Whilst De Korne unfortunately doesn’t go on to discuss what each of these terms mean in detail, it is clear that this division harks at the difference between a

culturally embedded mode of education, and an anthropologically toned mode of education.

You may well wonder what I mean by this. Basically the term ‘medium’ refers to the language and culture in which the teaching and learning interchange takes place. In New Zealand this form of terminology has had currency for a while now. Indigenous Māori academic Dr Colleen McMurchy-Pilkington explained the concept of medium in relation to “Kura Kaupapa Māori” which is an educational stage principled on “…teaching and learning occurring within a Māori framework, [wherein] spiritual dimensions of the learners are given important consideration, and Māori is the medium of instruction”.354 Along a similar vein Indigenous Diné/Lakota academic Dr Tiffany S Lee wrote that “Navajo people and educators of Navajo children concerned with maintaining Navajo language have created schools that use Navajo as the medium of instruction in an effort to help Navajo children become literate in Navajo language”.355 The same terminology is used here in Australia, for instance Simpson, Caffery and McConvell tell us:

In the Northern Territory, the terms ‘bilingual education’ or ‘Two-Way’ learning are used for ‘mother tongue medium’ programs, that is, programs where children are taught for the first few years of school by teachers, or teams of teachers, who use the children’s home language to teach them, along with explicit teaching of oral SAE.356

The converse of ‘medium’ is ‘object’ wherein our languages and cultures become subsumed into Western curriculum frameworks as units of study. Under this concept our languages and cultures become disembodied from the spirit realm of their epistemology and become ‘anthropologically’ endowed as subjects. Lee illustrates this point well in her observation that “Navajo language is compartmentalized as a separate topic of study, removed from other academic content areas. Compartmentalizing Navajo language is the most common approach for teaching Navajo language in schools today”.357 This observation speaks directly to the significant difference between how we conceptualise education and how Western frameworks of education are composed. Lee summed this up rather succinctly in referring to the words of a Navajo educator:

Fred E. Jones, a Navajo educator, explained the contradiction between Western schools and the purpose of Navajo education. He stated that, in traditional Navajo beliefs, education is the means to mastering life, not bodies or subjects of knowledge as in Western educational methods.358

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355 TS Lee, “If they want Navajo to be learned, then they should require it in all schools”: Navajo teenagers experiences, choices and demands regarding Navajo language”, Wicazo SA Review, vol.22, no.1, 2007, p.8.
358 ibid., p.12.
The immediate conclusion that may be drawn here is that State mainstream education systems may be no place for Indigenous languages and cultures, but this would perhaps be a premature conclusion. Under the principles of reconciliation there should be no reason why Indigenous-medium education cannot find time and space within a Nation States system of education instead of having our languages and cultures compartmentalised into subjects. There is in actuality quite a division of thought regarding this within Indigenous academic and community discourse. This division is important because it reveals the undertone behind why dialogue on the importance of teaching Indigenous languages and cultures splits as soon as State mainstream education is brought into the equation. You see, at one end of the spectrum many of us maintain that State mainstream education is vital, but our usual caveat on this is that it should not be an exclusive mono-cultural non-Indigenous domain.

At the other end of the spectrum many of us say that State mainstream education should not envelop our languages and cultures; that our cultural education is solely our business. The tenor of this opposition can be found in the words of Pearson, who Purdie et al. quoted as saying categorically that:

Schools are not the places for cultural and linguistic transmission, and we must stop looking to schools to save our languages. This is because the primary purpose of schools is for our children to obtain a mainstream, Western education, including full fluency in English.\(^{359}\)

Pearson is by no means alone in thinking this. Purdie et al. in reflecting on the 2000 Katu Kalpa report on bilingual education in Australia also observed that “the report gathered evidence from some Aboriginal communities that felt that the school was not the place for languages, which were better taught in the family and community context”.\(^{360}\)

The same standpoint has been found in international Indigenous community dialogue as well. In a study conducted in a ‘remote’ Canadian First Nations community of Ojibwe speakers located in the Sioux Lookout district some Indigenous Elders were found to be strongly opposed to their language being taught in State government school.\(^{361}\) The researcher, Dr Seth A. Agbo, reported that one informant said, “Parents speak the language to the students at home and I don’t think it’s important that the school wastes time on teaching First Nations language. The kids need to know how to speak and write English” whilst another said, “Learning the Indian Language is not important. It is important for them to spend more time on

\(^{359}\) N Pearson as cited in N Purdie et al., op.cit., p.191.
\(^{360}\) ibid., p.33
English”. These views were tempered within this study with opinion to the contrary, but I did begin to wonder whether it is the case that where Indigenous languages are more likely to be strong State schools are not always seen as important sites for teaching our languages and cultures.

In his research study undertaken with Indigenous American First Nations teachers, which I first referenced in Chapter 2, Begaye pointed out that “teachers clearly noted that religious aspects, ceremonies and sacred things do not belong in schools...”. Begaye did however point out that these same teachers were not exactly clear “...where they drew the lines between what should be taught in the classroom and what should be left to certain members of the community”. These points constructively illustrate Indigenous concern about the scope of cultural education offered within State mainstream education programmes, particularly as an academic subject of curricula. Some Indigenous peoples feel so strongly about these spiritual matters that they would rather not see our languages and cultures taught at all in non-Indigenous school frameworks, whilst other Indigenous peoples see that Indigenous-medium education has the capacity to work around this.

If you reflect back upon what I have explained about the spiritual nature of our languages, and the spiritual ontology from which our languages derive, you may well appreciate that we would hold reluctance over these aspects of our culture being fused into an essentially non-Indigenous learning environment. The difficulty is that many of us see that language as the spiritual face of country cannot be cauterised from culture for academic study in a Western sense. Walsh certainly found that the cultural politics of education here in New South Wales is similarly involved wherein some of us will say “...that only Aboriginal students should be allowed to learn an Aboriginal language” and some of us will say “...it must be taught by an Aboriginal person...”. These debates are ongoing within Indigenous communities, and sway back and forth between wanting to share culture under the banner of reconciliation and wanting to protect culture from misunderstanding, misinterpretation and decontextualisation.

I was impressed, however, with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s [VCAA] acceptance that some of us, whilst not opposing outright the teaching of our languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems, nonetheless hold significant reservations about who gets

362 ibid., p.13 & 14.
363 T Begaye, op.cit., p.50.
364 ibid.
365 M Walsh, Raising Babel..., op.cit, p.115 & 116.
to learn it. They realise that “many Aboriginal people feel strongly that their children must have the right to learn their own Language before other children”.366 Whilst the VCAA certainly see a role for State education in teaching Indigenous languages and cultures they appear to understand well that it is a complex matter, especially when “Aboriginal children may feel shamed at their lack of knowledge of Language and risk falling behind if other children find themselves able to learn their Language more rapidly”.367

It has to be said that shame underscores one of the greatest fears we have with regard to allowing our languages and cultures to be taught publicly in State mainstream education systems. Walsh, I think rather succinctly hit the nail on the head in realising that:

In NSW schools programmes in Aboriginal Studies have been in place for about 11 years and Aboriginal parents have looked askance as non-Aboriginal students have performed 'better' than their Aboriginal fellow students. The result has been embarrassment and shame as Aboriginal students feel that outsiders know more about Aboriginal society and culture than they do. Parents therefore are wary of having the same thing happen when Aboriginal language learning programmes are introduced.368

The issue of shame has a deep psychology to it, illustrating just how emotional our opposition to the teaching of our Indigenous languages and cultures within State education systems can become, but it also supports the concept of Indigenous specific Indigenous-medium education, which despite cries of separatism may well present a way of addressing this.

Walsh moved on to also point out that “...some Aboriginal parents feel that mixed classes are better because it will lead to better mutual understanding between Aboriginal people and others”.369 I made mention of this line of reasoning in Chapter 3 when I quoted both Pearson and Christie espousing the value of all Australians learning an Indigenous language. The VCAA appears well aware that many of us have reluctance about the teaching of our Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems, but they also recognise that “many Aboriginal people are also aware that for non-Aboriginal children to learn about their Language and culture is potentially a very significant tool for raising cultural awareness and reducing racism in the broader community”.370 But reconciliation isn’t just about sharing culture it is also about us accessing culture. The Board of Studies New South Wales, like the VCAA, has a strong sense of this.

In the current ‘Aboriginal Studies K-10 syllabus’ the Board of Studies New South Wales made it clear that “...languages are integral to the sense of

366 VCAA, op.cit, p.11.
367 ibid., p.12
368 M Walsh, Raising Babe..., op.cit., p.115.
369 ibid.
370 VCAA, op.cit., p.12.
identity of all Aboriginal people and that meaningful reconciliation must address those issues to do with the maintenance of language and culture”, 371 but they also recognise that “providing all students with access to learning about Aboriginal languages also assists in the processes of reconciliation by increasing cross-cultural understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians”. 372 There is certainly a tangible admission to be read here that State mainstream education in New South Wales accepts the challenge represented in the ‘maintenance of language and culture’. The question for us will almost always come back to how this can be done effectively, especially if our languages remain academic ‘subjects’ conducted in a way that more readily sponsors language awareness than language re-acquisition for re-uptake of mother tongue.

For many of us the teaching of Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems remains tangled up in a delicate balancing act between the need to ensure that we have access to culturally apposite education, that we are not ‘shamed’ out of our cultural education and our need to ensure that we are adequately provided with the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge relevant to the broader dominant frameworks of society. There are always going to be struggles within this balancing act which oscillate between our concern that State mainstream education systems present as essentially assimilative in nature and non-Indigenous concerns centred on the ‘over-doing’ of culture, a problem I’ve encountered more than once. I can certainly attest personally to the fact that we have been discussing how to achieve this balance for years; in Australia we seem to have been having this very conversation since the 70’s.

All these years later we are still looking to work out how this can be done. For those of us who are in favour of continuing to negotiate space within State mainstream education systems reconciliation has become an important avenue of agitation, as have the values enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which we see as creating a mandate for State recognition of the importance of teaching Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems, in accordance with our own educational aspirations. In line with this the United Nation’s International Expert Group on Indigenous Languages made the recommendation that Nation States “guarantee the right to mother tongue education for indigenous children, regardless of the

371 Board of Studies New South Wales, Aboriginal Languages K-10 Syllabus, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, 2003, p.5.
372 ibid., p.10.
number of its speakers and ensure the teaching of those languages to indigenous children who do not know them”.373

This recommendation synchronises well with the words of Calma, who in his role as our Social Justice Commissioner poignantly asserted that “while we must give Indigenous students access to the Western world, to higher education and Western employment, it should not be at the expense of traditional knowledges – we must not lock Indigenous students out of traditional learning”.374 Somewhat differently to this Indigenous Chippewa Professor Duane Champagne contended that “traditional education alone does not sufficiently prepare students for participation and competition within the national and global economy”.375 Neither Calma nor Champagne are talking about an ‘either/or’ situation, they are drawing attention to the reality that the teaching of our Indigenous languages and cultures has to sit alongside teaching in the Western domain so that we can gain skills and knowledge to enable us to function productively in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts alike.376

In the widely valued ‘National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005’ it was observed that:

   English is promoted as ‘the power language’ which opens doors to education and employment. While this is undoubtedly true, too often proponents of this view ignore or undermine the important role of the Indigenous languages, and advance the misconception that it is a matter of one or the other.377

This report went to great lengths to explain how this viewpoint is now considered regressive, and that there are significant cognitive merits to becoming bilingual. In fact they made it plain that “academic growth in a student’s first language is linked to second-language academic success”.378 So, far from being an impediment to the acquisition of Standard Australian English, Indigenous languages may well function to advantage this. Of course, there is a difference here between those of us who already have mother tongue, and those of us who are seeking to revive mother tongue. Under this second scenario State mainstream education systems are especially looked to for help.

It is, of course, all well and good to look to State mainstream education systems as a way forward for facilitating Indigenous language revival, but we have to be matter-of-fact too and acknowledge that whilst we may look to

376 ibid.
378 ibid., p.36.

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mainstream education with hope and aspiration, we often do so with a certain measure of caution and anxiety; caution and anxiety provoked through memory of past experiences that have been psychologically scarring for us as individuals and us as whole communities. Professor Jon Reyhner, in referring to America’s First Nations peoples, made it clear that:

Any effort at revitalizing indigenous languages in schools will have to overcome the deep suspicion that some Indigenous people harbor towards schooling. American Indians and other Indigenous peoples distrust schools because historically they have been colonial instruments designed to eradicate Native languages and to assimilate Indians into the white, Euro-American, and Christian culture.379

One way of dealing with this is to take a leaf out of the reconciliation book and just take the time to acknowledge the past. One of the first recognitions Bougie made in her study for instance was that the 1996 Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples admitted that “…the passing down of Aboriginal languages across the generations was disrupted by residential schools in Canada, where the use of Aboriginal languages was prohibited”.380 The prohibition of the use of our languages and the praxis of our cultures within State mainstream education systems has been well documented and demonstrates beyond all measure of doubt the extent of the damage that we have experienced through non-Indigenous education. McCarty certainly made it clear that it is “…important to highlight the singular role of compulsory English-only schooling in promoting language loss. For more than two centuries, schools were the only institutions both to demand exclusive use of English and prohibit use of the mother tongue”.381

In Australia, our experience was no different. “Decades of Australian government policies and practices have banned and discouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from speaking our languages...These policies and practices lasted in Australia right up to the 1970s”.382 In more recent debates over the dismantling of bilingual education in the Northern Territory the use of our languages within State mainstream education systems has once again come under fire causing us to wonder just how much has really changed. Calma, in taking up the issue of government opposition to bilingual education, compellingly asked “Are we certain that education is about creating a mono-cultural, mono-lingual world with homogenous knowledge systems and values? Are we certain that Western knowledge is always superior to Indigenous knowledge?”.383 These questions

380 E Bougie, op.cit., p.73.
381 TL McCarty, op.cit.p.148.
382 Australian Human Rights Commission, op.cit., p.58.
383 T Calma, op.cit., p.20.
challenge State mainstream education systems to reconsider what their
cultural priorities are? Is State education all about Standard Australian
English and Westcentric Australian culture, or is it about the whole
linguistic and cultural landscape of this continent?

There is, within the State mainstream education systems of Australia,
strong evidence that work is well underway in answering the demands of
reconciliation and Indigenous cultural rights through recognition of the
importance of teaching Indigenous languages and cultures, and more
particularly the role that State mainstream education systems have already
undertaken in partnering us to maintain and revive our languages. The
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] for instance has
made it clear in its P-10 standards and protocols for Victorian schools
involved in Aboriginal language and culture reclamation that:

Aboriginal people are still working towards control over their own cultures,
Languages, lands and community life. In addition, both Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal people are gradually seeing increased efforts to share the burden of
this goal. The accreditation of a program for Aboriginal Language learning in
Victorian schools supports this reclamation of self-determination through
reclamation and revival of Language and culture.\textsuperscript{384}

The acceptance of our entitlement to self-determination is extremely
significant here as an unambiguous affirmation of our right to have a
greater measure of control in facilitating our cultural education through our
nation’s education systems.

The VCAA recognised that they do have an active role to play in partnering
us in the revitalisation and reclamation of our languages and cultures.
“Schools should see themselves as implementing the work that communities
are doing, providing a means to pass on the reclamation of Language to
students in a more focused way than is possible with community-internal
resources alone”.\textsuperscript{385} This is by no means a new realisation for Australia’s
State mainstream education system. In New South Wales, in 2000, 3 years
before the 2003 Aboriginal Languages K-10 syllabus came into being, the
Board of Studies New South Wales carried out an interesting series of case
studies into existing Aboriginal language programmes. At that time they
recognised that whilst:

NSW communities and schools are a long way from offering first language
speaker programs...more and more communities and schools are looking at the
establishment of Aboriginal language programs as an avenue for the revival of
Aboriginal languages within NSW and as a way of promoting reconciliation.\textsuperscript{386}

\textsuperscript{384} VCAA, op.cit., p.5
\textsuperscript{385} ibid., p.7.
\textsuperscript{386} Board of Studies New South Wales, \textit{Teaching Aboriginal Languages: Case Studies}, Board of Studies
NSW, Sydney, 2000, p.9.
McCarty in considering the question can schools save Indigenous languages? replied no “but”, and followed with the observation that “…there are few instances of successful revitalization in which schools have not played a crucial role”.387 The word ‘schools’ here is a general term because some schools will be crucial, whilst others will be obstructive. It all comes down to the cultural environment of a school and how Principals and school Executives themselves seek to answer policy. In Australia, the role of State education providers in supporting our languages was made clear in the first national Indigenous education policy, the 1989 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy [NATSIEP], which was introduced after many years of hard work and protracted negotiation some 22 years ago.388 In their Executive Summary Purdie et al. acknowledge that one of the key goals behind NATSIEP was “...to develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages”389.

If language maintenance, at least, has been on the national agenda for this long I am caused to wonder - why in 2011 are we still in conversation about the importance of teaching and learning our languages and cultures, especially within State mainstream education, when clearly its importance has been established well before now. We perhaps have to consider just how seriously this goal was taken, and how well it was actually implemented across the variant State and Territory education structures if we are still pontificating over this. Purdie et al. did however note that the inaugurating of a national curriculum within Australia presents “...a timely forum for considering the place of Indigenous languages in school curricula...”.390 I can only hope that it does. Whilst there are most assuredly success stories to report, we are yet to see Indigenous language education wholesale across the nation’s school days.

As for New South Wales, in 2007 a phone survey conducted by Dr Mari Rhydwen together with Enri Parolin, Dr Jennifer Munro and Susan Poetsch under the auspice of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and the Board of Studies New South Wales reviewed the state of existing Aboriginal language programmes in New South Wales.391 The survey

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388 ST Williams. op.cit.
389 N Purdie et al., op.cit., p.viii.
390 ibid., p.ix.
confirmed that 46 schools were known to have a functional Aboriginal language programme within New South Wales covering approximately 10 languages. Of these 46 schools, 41 were State based, 4 were in the Catholic system with 1 independent. Broken down further these programmes amounted to 25 at the primary level, 9 at the secondary level, 3 central schools, whilst 4 were still initiating programmes at the time and 5 were unable to respond.\(^3\) The study also revealed that there were a further 25 schools that either lapsed their programmes, merely expressed interest undertaking a language programme, or had run a “one-off” project.\(^4\)

**At the time Rhydwen et al. reported that:**

School activity varied from one half hour per fortnight to four periods per week in schools running the 100-hour mandatory language study programs. There were four schools running the 100-hour program. However, the great majority of schools held classes once a week. Two schools were running pilot programs: one primary and the other a high school. A few schools withdraw students for the class but generally all the students in a class study the language in primary school, usually meeting HSIE outcomes. Many high schools are moving towards running 100-hour mandatory programs.\(^5\)

Those running the 100 hour/4 periods per week programme have a far greater chance of moving language forward under the banner of revitalisation. I am, however, somewhat curious about what ‘many’ constitutes in terms of the number of school intending to move towards this in the future. As for the majority running the 1 class a week timetable it is quite unlikely that these programmes would advance language knowledge beyond awareness. As to the success of the 100 hour programmes there is little in the way of conclusive documentation to give a clear picture as to what the outcomes of these programmes might be. Despite personal request for further information, I was unable at the time of writing to reveal any additional significant data.

Now it has to be said that perhaps these programmes would be more widespread with more ‘on the ground’ support. Rhydwen et al. did flag issues with Aboriginal language programming, for instance “several schools spoke of difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, lack of resources and remoteness from access to support”.\(^6\) I will actually be addressing these matters shortly. Here I want to make the observation that as you will have read the ‘paper work’ has in place for these programmes for a while now with the current syllabus document and policy at both the State and National level – at the National level since 1989. So, why aren’t these programmes better resourced for success? Why aren’t Aboriginal language

\(^3\) ibid., p.2-3.  
\(^4\) ibid.  
\(^5\) ibid., p.3.  
\(^6\) ibid., p.5.
and culture programmes more widespread than they currently are? I am given to wonder whether the obvious chasm between theory and practice has a lot to do with how seriously our language and cultural education is really taken.

Purdie et al. addressed the question – why should Indigenous languages be taught in school? in their discussion and recommendations section subtitled ‘Purpose of teaching Indigenous language in Australian schools’. In doing so they determined that our Indigenous languages should be taught within State mainstream education systems for two fundamental reasons, i. “the responsibility of schools to recognise and promote the place of Indigenous Australians as the nations’ first people who have enriched modern Australian culture with their cultures and languages”, and ii. the “cognitive and academic” benefits of undertaking learning in a language other than English. Interestingly, what is perhaps not said explicitly enough for me is the plain right of our children to be educated in mother tongue and mother culture as well as that of the dominant society.

Thus far I have concentrated on considering the importance of teaching Indigenous languages and cultures, we now need to focus on the importance of learning Indigenous language and cultures. In this regard my core focus is naturally our Indigenous students, especially with regard to the support and growth of their cultural selfhood. Of course the project brief underpinning this research study is quite explicit in requesting an examination of the correlation between an Indigenous student learning language and culture and measurements of scholastic outcome. I’ll be addressing this in detail, but I want to begin by reiterating that my position is that cultural proficiency is its own educational reward, and as a matter of human right should not be conditioned on the basis of whether or not an Indigenous student’s Western scholastic adeptness is increased or otherwise as a result of learning mother tongue and mother culture.

This position is not dissimilar to that espoused by the Hawaiian Nāwahīokalani’ ōpu Laboratory school, which is a school annexed to a Hawaiian university. According to McCarty this school runs “a full-immersion, early childhood through high school affiliation of programs...” with an embedded “…explicit understanding that use of the Hawaiian language has priority over English”. McCarty very interestingly noted that “…the school reflects the Aha Punana Leo philosophy that school

397 ibid., p.190
398 ibid., p.192.
399 TL McCarty, ‘Schools as strategic tools...’ op.cit., p.167.
achievement is secondary to linguistic and cultural survival”. 400 This view runs counter to many Indigenous and non-Indigenous claims regarding education, yet this programme has yielded extraordinary scholastic outcomes for its Indigenous population. McCarty reported that “on English standardized tests, Nawahi students’ score as well as or better than their non-immersion peers”. 401 McCarty also affirmed that “the school has a 100 per cent high school graduation rate and a college attendance rate of approximately 80 percent”. 402

What struck me most by McCarty’s commentary on this particular Hawaiian language and culture programme is the quote she recorded from personal conversation with Professor William H. Wilson, who is well known for his leadership in Hawaiian immersion education. Wilson said, “We have succeeded because we have rejected the measure of success used by the dominant society – speaking English and academic achievement – even though our children all can do that...” instead the school is judged “...on Hawaiian language and culture achievement and holding Hawaiian language and culture high”. 403 This strong valuing of our languages and cultures enmeshes with the underpinning context of Purdie’s assertion that “for many students who speak an Indigenous language, the language used in school plays a role in their educational outcomes”. 404 I would move that further and say that for all Indigenous students this may well be the case, regardless of whether or not we have proficiency in our mother tongues.

There is a strong message to be sensed here that suggests that our learning of mother tongue and mother culture may be a strong indicator in the current drive to ‘close the gap’ between our educational outcomes and those of non-Indigenous Australia. This ‘gap’ has long been a concern both internationally and here in Australia. In their snapshot resource sheet on ‘closing the gap’ Sue Helme and Professor Stephen Lamb listed four key barriers to our success at school – physical, cultural, economic and informational. 405 It is interesting that ‘cultural’ appears as one of these four, though it is also interesting that it is mentioned as relating to discrimination. Notwithstanding this Helme and Lamb have importantly highlighted that in our ‘remote’ communities one major factor for our non-attendance at school is “…a lack of recognition by schools of Indigenous

400 ibid.
401 ibid., p.168.
402 ibid.
403 HW Wilson cited in TL McCarty, ibid.
What surprised me most about this discussion on closing the gap is that whilst the ‘culture of school’ was most definitely addressed, the primacy of our Indigenous languages especially for our ‘remote’ communities was given in my view scant attention.

In reading Helme and Lamb’s discussion on the culture of school I was reminded of a claim that Champagne had made that worried me greatly - “speaking an indigenous or non-official language is a clear marker of disadvantage in terms of schooling”. I can see how a statement such as this could be ‘jumped’ on and decontextualised in-order to substantiate not teaching our Indigenous languages and cultures within State mainstream education systems, yet as Champagne is at pains to point out “indigenous communities often resist state-provided education that does not show respect for...[our] traditional knowledge, values and livelihoods”. Champagne’s greatest concern is Indigenous access to dominant Western social and economic frameworks, but I can see what he means about the disadvantage of having mother tongue as first and only tongue. The learning needed for this access is provided in State school systems, but we are impeded in acquiring this learning through these schools if instruction within our mother tongues is not provided, or if our mother tongues and mother cultures are not valued as integral to the education process.

I have given a great deal of attention to our fundamental human right to receive educational instruction in our own languages and cultures, but this right alone as you will have read may not be enough to justify doing so from a Western standpoint. If, however, the importance of teaching within and about or Indigenous languages and cultures can be substantiated on the basis of ‘closing the gap’ this impasse may turn around. Purdie recognised that “addressing the state of Indigenous languages in schools may go some way towards addressing the gap in educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students” though I rather suspect that ‘some way’ would be conditional upon the degree to which our Indigenous languages and cultures are prioritised and afforded time and space. That said, Purdie does point out that:

Most teachers of Indigenous languages in schools believe that, in addition to building Indigenous students’ cultural identity and self-esteem, the positive experience of learning about their traditional language and culture flows through into students overall learning.

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406 ibid., p.4.
408 ibid., p.139.
409 N Purdie, loc.cit.
410 ibid., p.3.
The hypothesis that Indigenous students will learn more effectively when their mother tongues and mother cultures are afforded respect within educational programming has been suggested within the literature in statements such as “the literature shows evidence that indicates that exposure to Aboriginal cultures and language within schools can be associated with increased self-esteem and positive learning outcomes among Aboriginal children”\textsuperscript{411} and “bilingual education programs have been attributed with improving relations between schools and Indigenous communities, improving self-confidence among Indigenous children, and improving learning outcomes”.\textsuperscript{412} There are also pockets of research which focus on specific aspects of Indigenous learning, for example Associate Professor Yatta Kanu’s study of incorporating Indigenous perspective into social studies curricula in which she concluded that:

...it appears that the integration of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and perspectives in student learning outcomes, instructional methods and resources, assessment, and as part of the philosophical underpinning of the curriculum, results in positive outcomes. These positive outcomes included higher test scores, better conceptual understanding, higher level thinking, and improved self-confidence.\textsuperscript{413}

These forms of statement and research speak to the general thesis that has long stood within academia that cultural perspective is a significant informant for scholastic outcomes of Indigenous students. However, as Kanu was quick to point out there are macro socio-economic issues at play which make the identification of a ‘quick fix’ solution to Indigenous educational disparity unlikely. Even so, this thesis has been accepted as legitimate. The Victorian State education system certainly acknowledged that “…for Aboriginal children, a school environment which positively reflects the cultural values learned at home is closely related to attendance and achievement”.\textsuperscript{414} Along a similar vein the New South Wales Department of Education and Training recently recognised that the learning of Aboriginal languages can “enhance the capacity for Aboriginal students to build on their knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, strengthen their identity, self-esteem and cultural pride”.\textsuperscript{415} This last observation is particularly encouraging because it focuses more on our cultural needs than merely academic success.

\textsuperscript{412} N Purdie, P Tripcony, G Boulton-Lewis, J Fanshawe & A Gunstone, \textit{Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and its Relationship to School Outcomes}, A project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, ACT, 2000, p.16.
\textsuperscript{414} VCAA, op.cit., p.7
Overarchingly though, it appears from a Western point-of-view that the biggest concern regarding the importance of us undertaking learning in our own Indigenous languages and cultures is whether or not our English literacy and numeracy development is enhanced, suggesting that if it is not the importance of us learning in our languages and cultures may be diminished. The importance of the transmission of our languages and cultures from one generation to the next seems not to be valued as highly. Fortunately for us, Purdie et al., in concert with the National Indigenous Languages Survey 2005, found through their consultation of literature that “research suggests that if literacy is established in a child’s first language, it is easier to switch to another language”.416 They also found that “research also suggests that childhood bilingualism enhances cognitive ability by promoting classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills, and creativity gains”.417

This form of evidence inevitably makes the importance of Indigenous students undertaking learning in mother tongue and mother culture through State mainstream education systems more agreeable. But how much hard research evidence is there really to support this thesis? On the basis of my own survey of the literature I came to the conclusion that whilst statements are to be found that indicate ‘the research says’, ‘the literature says’, there is not actually a significant body of research evidence on the interconnectivity between our learning of and in mother tongue and mother culture and our educational attainment in terms of Western measurements of scholastic success. The most compelling evidence I did uncover centred on international experience of Indigenous-medium, often language revitalisation, programming, wherein mother tongue and mother culture are the core medium across the curriculum.

It is interesting that Professor Stephen May and Dr Richard Hill drew the same conclusion as myself about the paucity of research data, though they were referencing Māori-medium education specifically, and in doing so noted that “there remains an ongoing dearth of information on the factors that contribute specifically to the educational effectiveness of particular Māori-medium programs, and the related academic outcomes of their students”.418 In contrast to this, however, Sámi linguistics Professor Vuokko Hirvonen in analysing the Sámi experience pointed to recommendations put forward by

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416 N Purdie et al., Indigenous Language Programmes..., p.19.
417 ibid.
well known Sámi expert and leader Indigenous Sámi Professor Ole Henrik Magga and his colleagues, who Hirvonen quoted as confirming:

All education programmes for Indigenous children and youth...based on insights from solid research over many years...[show]...that mainly mother tongue medium bilingual education...is superior to all other forms of education practices in order to achieve literacy and generally effective, including ‘the development of the child’s personality talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’.

Not dissimilarly to Hirvonen McCarty likewise confirmed that “longitudinal data show that by the fourth grade, immersion students, not surprisingly, outperformed comparable non-immersion students on assessments of oral and written Navajo”.

Although this evidence pertains more to the effectiveness of Indigenous-medium education reaching Indigenous cultural goals it nonetheless speaks to the successes of learning within mother tongue and mother culture. McCarty also revealed in context to Navajo immersion that:

By the fourth grade, immersion students performed as well on local tests of oral English as comparable non-immersion students; immersion students performed better on local assessments of English writing, and were ‘way ahead’ on standardized test of mathematics.

Navajo students “...were acquiring Navajo as a second, heritage language ‘without cost’ to their English-language development or academic achievement”.

McCarty has, very significantly, brought attention to an outstanding longitudinal study undertaken in Canada between 1982 and 1996, which looked at “…700,000 students representing 15 languages in five participating school systems...”.

The authors of this study, Thomas and Collier reported that “the most powerful predictor of academic success”,

was immersion in educational programming “…for at least four to seven years in the native/heritage language”.

McCarty similarly cited another study centred on Spanish speaking children who performed significantly better in English and Maths when the children concerned were exposed to “…their native language for five years before being transitioned to all-English classes...”.

These studies can be considered proof positive that learning in an Indigenous language medium is far from an impediment to learning Western literacy and numeracy.

[110]
Here in New South Wales research of this magnitude and calibre simply appears unavailable. There are some studies though, that provide some evidence concerning the learning of Aboriginal mother tongue and Aboriginal scholastic success. Purdie et al. for instance made a case study of a New South Wales Catholic school involved in teaching Gumbaynggirr in partnership with Muurrbay, the Aboriginal language organisation I first introduced you to in Chapter 3.\textsuperscript{427} The example of St Mary’s is noteworthy because of the positive feedback that Purdie et al. report from parents/carers about the schools support of our languages and cultures. It has to be said though that this school had a 96% Aboriginal student population, which amounted to 49 students, indicating that the school was predominantly Aboriginal and small.\textsuperscript{428} Given this, it is not surprising that the school stood out as being more amenable to the teaching and learning of Gumbaynggirr language and culture.

In this situation the parents/carers and community are overwhelmingly Aboriginal so any aspirations they hold regarding cultural education are far more likely to receive full hearing. Further, there is less chance of opposition from non-Aboriginal persons not welcoming of our languages and cultures. When a school is overwhelmingly Indigenous it seems clear that the chances of having our languages and cultures enter the school curriculum are meaningfully increased, though we only have to look at the Northern Territory experience, as discussed in the preceding chapter, to understand that having an overwhelming majority in the school does not automatically mean that we will be heard. Simpson, Caffery and McConvell certainly inform us that:

\begin{quote}
If community members want mother tongue instruction for their children, or want their children’s mother tongue to be strengthened at school, acceding to their request will probably create a better functioning school. When the mother tongue is seen to be valued at school, children and their parents are more likely to feel positive about learning the dominant language. Experience suggests that decisions on education which do not involve the communities concerned are likely to lead to long term failure. The importance of this has been recognised for many years in Australia.\textsuperscript{429}
\end{quote}

Another study pertinent to New South Wales was undertaken by Professor Paul Chandler, in collaboration with Caroline Haid, Caroline Jones, Kevin Lowe and Jennifer Munro, who sought to look into the question of whether or not research would ‘back up’ the long claimed assertion that cultural relevancy in curriculum enhances Indigenous student academic

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[427]{\textsuperscript{1} N Purdie et al., \textit{Indigenous Languages Programmes...}, op.cit., pp.167–176.}
\footnotetext[428]{ibid., p.167.}
\footnotetext[429]{J Simpson, J Caffery & P McConvell, op.cit., p.13.}
\end{footnotes}
performance. These authors began their paper by importantly acknowledging that:

While there are anecdotal accounts of improved attendance, participation and performance of Aboriginal students as a result of studying Aboriginal languages, no quantitative research to test such claims nor research into potential benefits to all students has been carried out. Without high-quality published research, these claims remain unsubstantiated.

As to the actual purpose of their study they hypothesised that the learning of an Aboriginal language, which they recognised as involving the acquisition of new knowledges of ‘sound’, ‘a new spelling system’ and ‘word awareness’, “...is likely to promote decoding skills in English.”

To that end Chandler et al. say that their research was premised on testing “...the idea that students who were learning an Aboriginal language would have stronger skills in word awareness and decoding than students who were not learning an Aboriginal language”. In conducting this research Chandler et al. visited a total of four schools, two of whom had an Aboriginal language programme and two who did not. One hundred and fourteen students from years 1 and 2 participated in the research, ninety of whom were not Aboriginal, eighteen who were and six not culturally identified. Given the size of this research study the conclusion reached that “students did just as well at word awareness whether or not they were learning an Aboriginal language” was to my mind startlingly ineffectual. Whilst I understand from this paper that this research constitutes a pilot, the research itself at it was presented was neither helpful nor instructive as to whether or not Indigenous students do scholastically advance when learning mother tongue and/or mother culture.

What I find most interesting about the New South Wales context is that the teaching of Aboriginal languages has actually been well underway for decades now. In a table published in Purdie et al. it can be seen that Aboriginal languages have been taught in the State’s mainstream education system since the 1970’s when Bundjalung-Githabal was introduced at Woodenbong. There are also records of Aboriginal language education being instituted in the 1980’s at Bowraville (Gumbaynggir), the Red Hill Environment Education Centre (Wiradjuri) and at Toomelah (Gamilaraay).
Given that these programmes have been in operation since the 1970’s it surprises me greatly that more thorough longitudinal research isn’t available analysing these programmes effectiveness. In particular, I would have thought that the matter of how important language and culture learning is for our Aboriginal students would have been of more intensely investigated than it has.

For all the commentary and the research stating or otherwise proving the benefits of our children learning their own languages and cultures, and indeed learning within their own language and cultures, the following statement stood out for me in a way that no other did:

In Yolŋu epistemology, it is wrong to assume that children are empty vessels. As such, a Western education for Yolŋu children who are not already confident and self-assured in their own language and cultural traditions is neither effective nor ethical.438

I don’t think matters could be expressed any plainer than this. The ethics of the importance of us being able to learn in our Indigenous languages and cultures should be beyond question, and should never be held up to account through any form of Western measurement that pits the importance of our languages and cultures against those of the dominant society. The question for State mainstream education systems should not be ‘should we teach Indigenous languages and cultures?’, though to make that claim based on the evidence shown above would be sound, rather it should be how can we teach Indigenous languages and cultures?’.  

4.2 Advancing Indigenous Languages and Cultures through Education

Having discussed the importance of teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures the next most logical step is to investigate how best to go about formally schooling Indigenous languages and cultures for the advancement of Indigenous learning. In this regard a phrase that is often used in respect to education is ‘best practice model’. It is an interesting phrase that focuses on locating the single best way to do something, in this case educate for the stimulation of cultural learning. The application of this idea is regularly criticised, and rightly so, because the ‘one size fits’ all approach is transparently narrow in assuming that all forms of teaching are the same and that all learners are the same. If we take Australia as our example it is patently obvious that there are multiple Indigenous cultural nationhood’s within our country that speak mother tongues and practice mother culture as first language and culture, and multiple Indigenous cultural nationhood’s that are either less able or unable to do so.

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In thinking about educational programming in general, and the design of curricula and application of pedagogy in particular, when it comes to the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures an existing fluency or proficiency situation will more than likely demand a different “best practice” educational paradigm to a non-fluent/non-proficient situation. In the case where the medium of language and culture teaching cannot initially be mother tongue and mother culture, because the teaching-learning interchange is necessarily purposed toward re-acquisition of mother tongue and mother culture, then as Hinton noted “language revitalisation usually must include as its largest task the teaching and learning of the endangered language as a second language”. In advising that this is the case Hinton cautioned that “teaching endangered languages has important differences from teaching foreign languages or ESL, and someone who is going to teach an endangered language must keep those differences in mind...”.

One such difference, and perhaps the most outstanding difference, is the spiritual connectivity between language, culture and country. This alone tells us that ‘best practice’ in advancing our Indigenous languages and cultures through education is going to require rather specific, culturally adept pedagogies. In Chapter 3, in quoting Bougie, I highlighted that one of the complexities of Indigenous language revitalisation was the ecological knowledge predisposition of our languages which align more readily with our foundational life way contexts. These complexities hold true not just for revitalisation, they hold true as well for education, particularly in terms of pedagogy. On this basis we can definitively say that if ever there is going to be a ‘best practice’ model that bridges the entire spectrum of fluency/proficiency through to non-fluency/non-proficiency in terms of a ‘one size fits all’ pedagogy for teaching our Indigenous languages and cultures it is going to be ‘teaching and learning on country’.

On this basis Bougie drew the conclusion that our foundational life way situations are most promising for enabling “...young First Nations children to hear, learn, and use their ancestral language”. Hirvonen provided commentary to the same effect in reflecting upon the testimony of a teacher of Sámi, who described her pedagogy as one that “…motivates pupils to use the language actively in order to enhance their knowledge while simultaneously strengthening their self confidence”. This teacher

440 ibid.
441 E. Bougie, op.cit., p.80.
442 V Hirvonen, op.cit, p.34.
explained that “my students say that they feel like Sámi when they are out on the fells so I spend a lot of time outside with them”.\textsuperscript{443} This teacher and her students “...spend very little time in the classroom” and through this “they have this Sámi feeling when they are on the fells and outside in nature, and they like to use the language there”.\textsuperscript{444}

Of course, even though the theoretical accuracy of teaching and learning on country is to my mind beyond question, there are basic practicalities that hinder the viability of transitioning this pedagogical theory into practice. Weather is a case in point, but also in the instance of formal education structures such as State mainstream education systems the single most challenging factor that makes the implementation of teaching and learning on country complicated is the encasement of instruction within the physical confines of a classroom. At first the idea of teaching and learning on country may seem all too much, outside an occasional excursion, but there is a very interesting model that has been implemented at Charles Darwin University that may remove the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of bringing learning into line with country in a formal education context.

Professor Michael Christie recently reported on a very impressive Yolŋu Studies programme currently on offer through Charles Darwin University.\textsuperscript{445} One of the challenges that Christie discussed with regard to this programme was how to effectively facilitate the teaching of Yolŋu ways of knowing, doing and being, bearing in mind that the foremost teachers of these programmes are always going to be Yolŋu cultural knowledge holders themselves. In that regard two key problems arose.\textsuperscript{446} The first was literally the distance between Darwin and Arnhem Land, which was considerable, making it difficult for Yolŋu lecturers to go back and forth, or to be off country for extended periods of time. The second difficulty was teaching within lecture theatres away from country.\textsuperscript{447} To overcome this Charles Darwin University instigated a teaching \textit{from} country initiative using digital media technologies.\textsuperscript{448}

The profound importance of teaching \textit{from} country can be best understood through the words of Yolŋu Liya-Dhālinymirr Djambarrpuynu Elder Yinjīya Guyula, who is a lecturer in this programme:

\begin{quote}
Teaching from Country is: different to the education you get in the classrooms because the classrooms don’t talk to you. We’re learning out there under a tree, we’re learning out there in the bush walking around, the trees are always
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{443} ibid.
\textsuperscript{444} ibid.
\textsuperscript{445} M Christie, Y Guyula, K Gotha & D Gurruwiwi, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{446} ibid.
\textsuperscript{447} ibid.
\textsuperscript{448} ibid.
communicating with you. The hills, the land, the air are always communicating, teaching you, and understand every need that Yolŋu children have to go through.449

In reading Yiniya Guyula’s words the full meaning of what I tried to explain in Chapter 2, about the way we conceptualise language as simultaneously spirit and country, comes alive for me. Indigenous language learning, if it is to be properly culturally contextualised, is something that is so tightly entwined within the spiritual rhythm of country that unless you are in country, or brought to country in some other way, you can never feel the spiritual reciprocity of country communicating back to you and educating you. This is what I mean when I talk about spiritual cognition; country enables you to think in the spirit being of word.

The cultural digital teaching programmes of Charles Darwin University to my mind show innovative leadership in bringing country into the classroom. Learners from Charles Darwin University, who experienced cultural interchange through digital media, have made comments such as:

‘Teaching from Country changed the way I learned a Yolŋu language. It brought the walls of the classroom down’

‘It was like we were brought more into the Yolŋu world than they were brought into ours’

‘Not only did this feel like we were learning cultural content, but also cultural learning processes and structures’.450

I can only say that Professor Michael Christie together with the Yolŋu Elders Yiniya Guyula, Kathy (Guthadjaka) Gotha and Dhâŋgal Gurruwiwi have provided us with an outstanding example of a worthwhile way to proceed with working to secure the foundational Indigenous pedagogy of teaching and learning on country within language and culture learning that would otherwise be completely culturally decontextualised into a Western epistemological framework.

Outside the pedagogy of teaching and learning on country the teaching of our Indigenous languages and cultures in pre-existing speech proficiency situations often falls within the provenance of bilingual education. Here in Australia we are most familiar with this now contentious education paradigm. In the Northern Territory a “staircase model” is used which is premised upon exponentially increasing learning within the medium of Standard Australian English whilst simultaneously reducing learning within an Indigenous medium.451 In the preschool year learning in mother tongue extends to all but .5 of an hour in the school day. This is then progressively widens so that by year 4 learning in mother tongue parallels with learning in Standard Australian English at 2.5 hours. Thereafter teaching winds down

449 Yolŋu Elder Yiniya Guyula cited in M Christie et al., ibid., p.71.
450 Students quoted in M Christie et al., ibid., p.77.
in mother tongue until the senior years of schooling are reached, wherein 4 hours a day are dedicated to learning in Standard Australian English with only 1 hour in Indigenous medium education.\footnote{ibid.}

Whilst the time allotted to learning within both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous medium under the Northern Territory bilingual model is theoretically equal over the entire schooling spectrum, because of its increase/decrease equation I can see why bilingual education is essentially considered an English transfer model. Within the international literature, however, bilingual education is often discussed with reference to immersion education. In New Zealand for instance levels of immersion are applied, ranging from 81-100% level 1 immersion through to 12-30% level 4 immersion in order to distinguish between what can be considered an immersion programme and what can be considered a bilingual programme.\footnote{S May & R Hill, op.cit., p.66.} Only the level 1 category is considered immersion, all the rest are considered bilingual. That is because immersion, as the name suggests, is premised on immersing the learner wholly within the epistemological domain of their mother tongue and mother culture.\footnote{ibid.}

Under New Zealand’s conceptualisation the difference between bilingual and immersion education basically comes down to a matter of time; that is how much time is spent learning within an Indigenous-medium as opposed to an English language medium. In this regard New Zealand’s immersion programmes are those programmes “most often identified directly with the separate, whole-school programmes that have come to represent the Māori-medium movement”.\footnote{ibid.} On this basis we can see that immersion education in New Zealand at least is more readily associated with Indigenous independent, usually community based, education as opposed to State provided education. Interestingly Champagne, expressed firm disagreement with this by noting that “the recent move towards community-based education and local control has not, and probably will not close the gap with the non-Indigenous population in terms of access to education and educational performance in the foreseeable future”.\footnote{ibid.}

I remained somewhat unconvinced regarding the veracity of Champagne’s contention based on the evidence I will shortly present. I will say here that it can of course be argued that each educational situation is unique. A school in a ‘remote’ community within Australia is hardly likely to not be

\footnote{United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, \textit{State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples}, op.cit., p.149.}
considered community based, even if it is State run. Champagne moved on to conclude that “community-based education and language programs need adequate funding and support from states”. This is certainly hard to refute, and his assertion that “…indigenous education will require partnership between indigenous communities and state education structures and policymakers” whether or not education is community owned and controlled remains a reasonable proposition.\(^{457}\) That said, the New Zealand concept of immersion is unique. Most other conceptualisations of difference between bilingual and immersion education centre on educational purpose.

This is where matters can become highly confusing because in other conceptualisations bilingual education and immersion education seem to go hand in hand as bilingual-immersion education, which can be structured in all manner of ratios: 90/10, 80/20, 70/30, 60/40 and so on downwards. What essentially happens is that a set period of time is allotted for immersion, which means that during this set time teaching and learning cannot take place in English, it can only take place within mother tongue and in accordance with the epistemological philosophies of mother culture. The purpose behind this is to more effectively enable the re-uptake or uptake of mother tongue. Immersion under this way of thinking is premised on the teaching and learning of mother tongue, whereas according to Hinton “…the main thrust of bilingual education from its inception was the teaching of classroom subjects in children’s native language, not the teaching of language itself”.\(^{458}\)

Unlike bilingual education, fuller immersion based education involves ‘intensive’ oral and written language instruction as well as instruction in other areas of knowledge. Lower ratio bilingual-immersion programmes tend to be exclusively premised on language learning, in a manner not too distant from turning a language into a subject. These lower ratio programmes are generally not considered meaningful immersion. In New South Wales only the 100/4 hour per week model comes close to working beyond this. It is within the higher ratios of bilingual-immersion that language learning and learning in other curriculum areas is possible. High ratio bilingual programmes are particularly important where mother tongue is first and only tongue, because learners with only mother tongue thrust into English only education can suffer significantly through premature immersion into what is a foreign language and culture. Within Australia this point remains highly under-accepted yet it is salient all the same.

\(^{457}\) ibid.

It has to be said though that a transition from a non-speech proficient situation to a speech-proficient situation means that immersion is necessarily a gradual process. I want to emphasise that the more exposure a learner has to mother tongue, the more likely it is that learning of mother tongue will move forward from the development of language memory into language cognition and real language usage. Therefore, we can appreciate that the more a mother tongue is used the more it is sustained, but I have to say that can only happen if fluent teachers are available to guide this. Immersion, when speech proficiency is reached, becomes a maintenance programme. The major determining factor in all of this becomes time. Full immersion remains the most effective means of ensuring that mother tongue is brought back to full day-to-day life within mother culture.

Whilst we can appreciate that bilingual education may not have the same intensive oral language instruction as bilingual immersion does, it will often involve written language instruction. No matter what form of programme is utilised, it is clear that education within our Indigenous mother tongues necessarily involves language engineering as a key part of the education process. This is because foundationally all Indigenous languages were contained within communication and knowledge lexicons that were not of a ‘written’ form as it is known in the Western sense. Hinton pointed out that:

> Teaching school subjects in the language necessitated language engineering: many indigenous languages had no writing systems, so orthographies, literature, and curriculum materials, as well as new vocabulary and genres of writing such as essay and poetry, had to be developed.\(^{459}\)

The reason for this is the pervading dominance of the importance of the Western ‘written’ medium, which we have embraced and indeed enveloped into our otherwise already wide body of language mediums. Whilst the ‘written’ medium is less relevant to our foundational cultural praxis and pedagogies, it has become essential to us in shaping education that works with both our knowledge ways and Western knowledge ways.

As for bilingual education, Purdie reported that “...there appears to be a consensus among those actively working in the area that bilingual education can assist in providing a sense of identity to speakers of Indigenous languages and their descendants”.\(^{460}\) I am somewhat bemused by ‘can assist’ when I reflect upon what I have written thus far about the importance of learning Indigenous languages and cultures, because for me there is very little doubt that when we learn our languages and cultures our cultural identity is productively and positively enhanced. For me the best testimony to substantiate this will always come from our Indigenous

\(^{460}\) N Purdie, op.cit., p.3.
experience. In working through literature pertinent to the teaching and learning of our Indigenous languages and cultures I am always drawn to those unique papers that are penned by us. One such paper was published last year by Yalmay Yunupingu, a bilingual teacher “Guňitjpirr miyalk” with an impressive 32 year history of community teaching experience.461

This experience speaks more loudly in my mind than any academic study could ever do. In her article Yalmay Yunupingu tells us that she is a speaker of multiple Yolŋu matha languages as well as being fluent in English.462 Yalmay describes the day to day routine of her bilingual teaching practice, and how Yolŋu matha is embedded within this. Yalmay discusses how Yolŋu matha is used as the first medium of literacy learning, especially with very young learners, in order to develop knowledge and understanding of non-oral literacy concepts, and how after this they move forward with English as second language learning. In discussing the teaching of maths Yalmay says that “our language is a good language to use with the children because they think in Yolŋu matha and they respond to us very quickly because they can understand what I’m saying...as they get older they use more and more English in their learning.”463

What Yalmay has also said is that, “We have now been told we are not to use our students’ first language, only English”.464 To say that I am appalled by this probably doesn’t do justice to the intensity of my cultural anguish as an Indigenous academic and educator. We are talking here about peoples who are fortunate enough to still have mother tongues as first tongues. Yalmay poignantly affirmed “I already know that the children won’t understand what I’m saying, they will laugh at me, and they may even misbehave because they’ll be bored and won’t know what the lessons are about”.465 Not only does this demand to teach in English work directly against the rhetoric of the ‘National Approach’, it strikes at the very heart of any claim to educational reconciliation, and actively works against the protection of Indigenous languages and cultures. Further, it actively obstructs closing the gap by disenfranchising young Yolŋu children from education.

To me Yalmay’s article brings all the academic postulation about Indigenous language and culture education into stark perspective. Yalmay says:

> Our Vision Statement for Yambirrpa Schools has a clear bothways approach, where two languages, Yolŋu matha and English, and two cultural views are in a careful balance. If either one overpowers the other, the educational system will fail, and cause our children to grow up unbalanced and unable to function well in the world.

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462 ibid, p. 24.
463 ibid., p.25.
464 ibid.
465 Ibid.
The decision to make English the only important language in our schools will only make the situation for our young people worse as they struggle to be proud Yolŋu in a world that is making them feel that their culture is bad, unimportant and irrelevant in the contemporary world. Clearly bilingual education is all about achieving balance, about answering our right to be educated within our own languages and cultures, whilst at the same time ensuring that we also gain an education that does not exclude Standard Australian English acquisition or the other benefits of Western knowing.

Yalmay refutes the contention that bilingual education does not lead to the development of adequate literacy skills, citing the example of her own six daughters all of whom can read and write in two languages and have graduated successfully. When I think about this I am reminded of the Hon. Shayne Neumann’s observation that “the benefits of being able to speak multiple languages are tangible, particularly in Europe”. As Neumann was at pains to point out this should be the same for us, yet it seems to me that bilingualism is valued within mainstream society more if it involves Western languages than if it involves our own languages. That we would read into this a discriminatory double standard should not be surprising. One of the key issues behind the controversy surrounding bilingual education, however, has always been the matter of attendance.

In a recent study undertaken by Greg Dickson, a doctoral student in the field of linguistics, the question of Indigenous school attendance was revisited because it had been cited as a justification for dismantling bilingual programming in the Northern Territory. Dickson hypothesised that “if the Departmental claims of 2008 about the negative effects of bilingual education on enrolment and attendance are correct, then we would expect to see an increase in attendance in the former bilingual schools for the years following its abolition”. In testing this hypothesis Dickson found that in two of the three Warlpiri bilingual schools he focused on, attendance rates decreased after 2008, in one case significantly so. Whilst it was pointed out that it cannot be assumed that the withdrawal of bilingual programming was wholly responsible for these declines, it can be seen that the withdrawal of bilingual programming has not lead to improved attendance.

466 ibid.
467 ibid.
468 ‘Inquiry to focus on language’ op. cit.
470 ibid., p.100.
471 ibid., pp.110-111.
Dickson’s study, although small, nevertheless brings into focus how easily bi-cultural education paradigms such as bilingual education can be unbalanced, or even abolished, on the basis of Western determinations that tip the delicate balance of education over in favour of Western educational goals and outcomes. This is one of the greatest drawbacks to bilingual programming because it is premised on equality of cultural time in the education day, yet in practice if things go awry with attendance and the like Indigenous cultural time is the first to be compromised. Even so Purdie et al. claim that “a growing body of research evidence shows that well-designed bilingual programmes are academically effective and do not hold back students’ acquisition of English”, which from a Western standpoint, seems the most important measure of success for bilingual education.

One thing that did catch my attention in reading about bilingual education was the substance of Indigenous critique from within Australia. Indigenous Professor’s Paul Hughes and Martin Nakata were both cited by Purdie et al. as finding difficulty with bilingual education. Hughes because he felt that there were not enough skilled fluent teachers in both English and Indigenous language nor an appropriate degree of Indigenous language resource material, Nakata because he felt that “...there is no evidence that students have better English skills as a result of bilingual schooling”. It is hard to draw definitive conclusions about this, given the differing analyses within available literature, but Purdie et al. did cite the 2000 Katu Kalpa study into bilingual education as finding examples from Warlpiri bilingual schools of increased Indigenous outcomes in literacy and numeracy. Dickson, however, found that these same schools were not fairing as well, but his analysis focuses on the period after bilingual education was stopped.

I wonder whether or not the political decision to disrupt bilingual education has had a negative psychological effect on the broader community in terms of the value of school and the schooling system. Sámi experience of bilingual and immersion education is relevant here because of the legal protective power behind the 097S Curriculum, which is essentially a distinct autonomous Sámi curriculum founded within Sámi language and culture, but with “...equal status with the national curriculum”. What makes this curriculum unique, and completely different to the Australian experience, is that it is centred within Norwegian law on the basis of the national constitution, “the Sámi Act” of 1987, the Norwegian Education Act’s of 1990

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472 N Purdie et al., op.cit., p.19.
473 ibid., p.33.
474 ibid.
475 V Hirvonen, op.cit.,p.21.
and 1998, and the International Labor Office’s (ILO) Convention no. 169. Together these instruments create a strong legal footing for the Sámi curriculum which underpins Sámi bilingual and immersion education.

In respect to bilingual education Hirvonen noted that a significant goal of the 097S curriculum is “...that as many students as possible should become bilingual at least in Sámi and Norwegian”, no doubt because of the dual status that Sámi has as a national language and culture. Bilingual programming is thus relevant not just to the Indigenous population, but to the Norwegian population overall. Even so, when education programming values Sámi as a medium for all modes of teaching not just language teaching, as in a full immersion programme, Sámi remains strong, but in “Sámi-Norwegian-speaking schools” where it appears that teaching takes place in both mediums, as in a bilingual education programme, Hirvonen suggested that it only takes “…a single Norwegian-speaking student in a class [to]...turn all teaching into Norwegian” even when the majority in the class are Sámi speaking.

I gain from this a real sense that the Sámi bilingual learning environment, even though it is politically set up to be a conduit for equal Indigenous-medium and non-Indigenous medium teaching space, tends to be dominated by non-Indigenous medium teaching. This convinces me that bilingual programming, whilst laudable on paper, is nonetheless fragile in practice. If the set bilingual-immersion structure is unbalanced we may not be able to claim that the principles of bilingualism are working. It seems that bilingual-immersion programmes with Indigenous to non-Indigenous education ratios of less 80/20 in favour of Indigenous learning, as in the New Zealand example, tend to be particularly vulnerable to a collapse of bilingualism. That is perhaps why many of us look upon full Indigenous specific immersion programmes more favourably. Hirvonen certainly posited that “it is obvious that mixed groups lead to teaching through Norwegian rather than Sámi...”.

Hirvonen further noted that a split can happen wherein learning begins to occur in Norwegian even when Sámi remains the day-to-day language of student conversation. All of this is convoluted further by the teachers themselves. As you might expect if a teacher is not fully bilingual in both languages represented in a bilingual learning situation issues inevitably arise with regard to the balance of bilingual representation because

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476 ibid.
477 ibid., p.29.
478 ibid., p.31.
479 ibid.
obviously the teacher will teach in the language medium with which they are most familiar. What I gained from Hirvonen’s consideration of bilingual education is that teaching the language of Sámi as a discrete subject is not enough; all parts of the curriculum have to be delivered in Sámi. How the school balances Sámi with Norwegian has a direct informing impact on how well mother tongue is maintained. Once Norwegian is introduced as the main medium of learning instruction Norwegian language dominance becomes possible.

It seems to me that for education to really impact in terms of our right to maintain our languages and cultures bilingual education has to be modelled very carefully, and I would suggest so that English remains the second or foreign language, not the other way around. This leads me then to consider the practicalities of immersion programming, which to my mind stand as ‘best practice’ if the goal behind education is to specifically promote Indigenous language and culture survival and revival. Hinton, in reflecting upon immersion in school settings poignantly observed:

Many attempts at teaching endangered languages have had disappointing results because of poorly developed methodology. The programs involve overly repetitive review of a small range of vocabulary or spend too much time “explaining” the language in English rather than actually using the language, or depend too much on writing things down rather than aural learning, or never get to point of teaching people how to talk in complete sentences or how to communicate about real things.\(^ {480}\)

In thinking about Hinton’s words I am given cause to wonder how many of the 46 Aboriginal language programmes currently in operation in New South Wales look as Hinton described. There is a real difficulty here because if language learning is premised on word lexicons that best fit within the category ‘language awareness’ then this form of education may be all that is possible, certainly conversational language is not reachable. In this case language inexorably becomes an ‘object’ of ‘subject’. Where conversation may be reachable however, immersion steps out as an ideal education platform. It is so because as Hinton affirmed immersion based learning provides “…sufficient exposure to the language to produce fluent speakers” within “…a venue for using the language in real communication”.\(^ {481}\) Hinton stressed that “in immersion schools, the presence of the target language is so strong that children tend to use it with each other outside the classroom as well as in”.\(^ {482}\)

McCarty has confirmed the value of immersion programming by noting that “language immersion, which provides all or most of children’s instruction in


\(^{481}\) ibid., p.182.

\(^{482}\) ibid.
the target or heritage language, is increasingly the pedagogy of choice among Indigenous communities seeking to produce a new generation of fluent Native language speakers”.483 Huss has also confirmed that there is evidence from the Sámi experience that suggests that for revitalisation to be successful in causing a language shift from dominator tongue back to mother tongue, language revitalisation must be wholly situated within an Indigenous cultural realm.484 In referring to the effect of educational strategies in revitalising use of Sámi languages Huss highlighted that “the only real strong model...appears to be Sámi-medium education in a Sámi-dominant school, where the personnel as well as the pupils have native or otherwise high competence in the language, and where the atmosphere distinctly favours Sámi culture”.485

This form of education, where learning is exclusively undertaken within an Indigenous medium, has been successfully introduced within New Zealand and Hawaii. Both the Maori and Hawaiian experiences are to this day held up within international literature as leading the full immersion movement. In New Zealand this movement began with the introduction of the Te Kōhanga Reo programme, which began essentially as a language ‘nest’ initiative, the ‘nest’ being a community based structure that brings the very young into direct contact with the very old, in this case the young to hear and learn Māori, the old to teach Māori. McMurchy-Pilkington explained that “in Te Kohanga Reo, babies and young children, along with some of their parents, learned Maori through language immersion from elders and those fluent in Maori. Te Kohanga Reo blossomed around the country to well over 500 centres in six years”.486

Because of a concern over lack of continuity with Māori immersion learning the primary level Kura Kaupapa Māori programme was instigated487, but I note from May and Hill that a wharekura secondary level programme was also put in place.488 As I noted earlier on May and Hill made it clear in their evaluation of Māori-medium education that there is insufficient evidence regarding the effectiveness of this form of education, however McCarty in her own analysis stated that “there is ample evidence across a wide international literature that mother-tongue maintenance programs produce the most significant and lasting academic benefits for language-minority students”.489 As for the Hawaiian experience it similarly began out of

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484 L Huss, op.cit., p.127.
485 Ibid.
486 C McMurchy-Pilkington, op.cit., p.619.
487 Ibid.
488 S May & R Hill, op.cit.
489 TL McCarty, ‘Schools as strategic tools...’, op.cit., p167.
community language Pūnana Leo nests which were “...total immersion preschools for children between the ages of two and five years old”\textsuperscript{490} As is the case with New Zealand these early preschool programmes led in time to the development of K-12 immersion programmes.

In both the case of New Zealand and the case of Hawaii establishing full Indigenous immersion education programmes has not been without difficulty, with problems ranging from the need for language engineering, teacher language and culture competencies, inadequate teaching resources through to levels of funding, and of course the all important State based approval. It is worth noting that in Hawaii there is a protracted history of control by the State with regard to immersion programming, which has been tightly administered via State legislation.\textsuperscript{491} Notwithstanding this McCarty concluded in her analysis that despite whatever hurdles have had to be overcome these immersion programmes stand as “...victories of the fundamental right of choice...” that is “...Indigenous self-determinant choice about the content and medium of children’s education”.\textsuperscript{492}

All in all it is the case that the implementation of immersion, as a best practice educational paradigm for the revival of Indigenous languages and cultures, will depend upon how State mainstream education systems negotiate. There are a series of questions that must be addressed here:-

1. Are we Indigenous peoples going to be afforded immersion time and space or are we only going to be allowed time and space as ‘subject’ within the curricula?
2. If we are afforded immersion time, how much time will we get?,
3. Will we be able to have Indigenous specific immersion time and space?
4. Will that immersion time and space be quarantined so that this time and space is owned by mother tongue and mother culture?
5. Will the learning that takes place within immersion time and space be subject to Western measurements of success or Indigenous measurements of success?

I am sure that there are many more such questions that would drive negotiation of this sort; I pose the ones above as merely illustrative of the types of issues that need to be addressed. These questions though do need to be framed under the ultimate question – are we educating for the protection and advancement of Indigenous languages and cultures, or are we merely seeking a ‘best practice’ way for ensuring Indigenous immersion in English language and Western culture?

In thinking about this at a practical level, and knowing that such negotiations are fundamentally difficult on both sides of the equation, one suggestion that did impress me came from the Victorian Curriculum and

\textsuperscript{491} ibid.
\textsuperscript{492} TL McCarty, ‘Schools as strategic tools...’,op.cit., p.174.
Assessment Authority [VCAA], who considered a three stage staggered approach on the basis of their understanding of the juxtaposition between our concern over the public teaching of our languages, and the possible shame that may be caused to our children through this, and our recognition of the reconciliation benefits of public instruction in our languages and cultures. The three stages entail i. teaching our Indigenous languages and cultures to our Indigenous children exclusively, ii. after a period of Indigenous exclusive learning opening language learning up to other children, then iii. widening the language and culture programme into a broader community initiative which welcomes parents and community members into the learning environment.493

The benefits of the Victorian model cannot be overstated here because this model allows for an immersion style programme for Indigenous learners as a kick start to their language and culture learning, which is especially important when it is highly probable that mother tongue is not known at home or particularly well within the community. The learning then opens up so that the children go into a ‘mixed’ learning context with greater levels of linguistic and cultural fluency and confidence. Ultimately it becomes a wider community education ‘nest’ which has enormous benefits for bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities together in the spirit of reconciliation. It could, without doubt, be argued that this falls well short of the ideals of an immersion programme, but it may be that this is a workable compromise, though the time and space given to the continuing mixed programme would need to be significant and immersion based to be effective.

In terms of ‘best practice’ not only can it be seen that ‘teaching and learning on country’ is a clear leader, we can see that full immersion and bilingual-immersion education programmes have a place within the ‘best practice’ concept. That duly noted if we are going to instigate best practice effectively we have to follow one other ‘best practice’ paradigm and that is ‘longitudinal learning’, as was recognised in both the Māori and Hawaiian context. Preschool is particularly important here because as Bougie noted “there is evidence that the preschool years are a time when language skills are emerging”.494 We have to keep in mind though that it is perfectly possible to have a strong successful pre-school programme in place which achieves results in the uptake of mother tongue, only to have these results come asunder because of a lack of continuity once children move on to primary level learning.

493 VCAA, op.cit., p.12.
494 E Bougie, op.cit., p.74.
Of course linking up early childhood education with primary and secondary education must also annex with adult and community education, which I discuss at length in the next chapter. This is often done through the language nest context, but it can also be done through what is known as the ‘master-apprentice’ model, which is often cited as a ‘best practice’ model for teaching and learning Indigenous languages and cultures, particularly in a revitalisation context where older fluent speakers are still present. Hinton explained that the programme itself “…was developed in 1992 by the Native California Network...” and that Hinton herself was one of its principal designers. The programme is a specific intensive formal education initiative, run on immersion principles and specifically aimed at bringing existing speakers together with younger non-speakers so that they might “…develop conversational proficiency...”.

There are significant ‘rules’ to the programme which include “no English allowed”, “learning is always oral, not written” and “learning takes place primarily in real-life situations”. The purpose behind this is to create a more culturally meaningful context for language transmission to take place. Hinton said of the programme that it is “…simple conceptually, but it is difficult to carry out practically…”, one of the reasons being that it can take a great deal of time, running over several years, and based on individual sessions of a number of hours each week. The overarching idea of establishing language apprentice’s does sound appealing, and I can see that in a revitalisation context where there are full speech fluent ‘masters’ willing to undertake the challenge of such a programme that it could work. Hinton does stress though that it can be demanding.

Walsh has indicated that in his opinion “the Master-Apprentice Program is readily applicable to the situation in New South Wales”. I am, however, inclined to disagree somewhat with this claim on the basis that it is so demanding and that it impresses me as the sort of programme that works best when the ‘master’ is indeed fully fluent, and in an Indigenous context that would mean being more than speech proficient. I say this because of the spiritual presence of words that would need to be conveyed alongside the words themselves. That said, in situations where language is complete enough to genuinely bring about re-uptake of mother tongue a master-apprentice style may well appeal, certainly it would work towards the

496 ibid., p.217.
497 ibid., p.218.
498 ibid., p.225.
499 ibid.
programmes goal of creating “young professional-age adults in the language so that they can go on to teach it themselves”.

As I’ve intimated throughout the text of Chapters 3 and 4 there are a myriad of problems which do constitute impediments to any mode of formal Indigenous language and culture education. One of the biggest issues is – who is going to do the teaching? The ideal, of course, is to have a fully qualified teaching professional who is completely fluent in the language and culture that is being taught, but the reality of the Indigenous context is that this ideal is rarely realisable. Even when there are strong culturally fluent Elders available to oversee teaching, the fluency level of an individual teacher still impacts significantly. When a fully fluent teacher can’t be brought into the teaching-learning interchange immersion programming is all but impossible and bilingual programming, as we have found through the Sámi experience, swings radically out of balance.

So, what happens when a teacher is not fluent? What can we expect out of the teaching-learning interchange? Hinton tells us that “it is common when the teacher is not fluent to fall back on teaching vocabulary items alone, so that students learn to name things but not to put those names into sentences”. We can derive from this a real sense of the powerful effect a teacher can have in stagnating a language programme with the potential to revive a language at language awareness. This can happen too when continuity of trained fluent teaching is disrupted. Dr Rob Amery gave an excellent example of this from the South Australian experience:

...the recent relocation of just two teachers from Adelaide to Anangu schools on the Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara (P-Y) lands shows the extreme fragility and vulnerability of these programs. The loss of these two persons has resulted in the cessation of the Pitjantjatjara program at Alberton Primary, Adelaide High and several other schools.

When the teaching is done on a voluntary basis in particular issues consistently arise around the matter of teaching continuity. One way of avoiding this is to instigate a formalised payment structure. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training has a formalised payment structure for the casual employment of Aboriginal language tutors to work in Aboriginal language education programmes. These tutors are employed to “...teach and engage...” Aboriginal students “...learning an Aboriginal language”. Where things can become difficult to say the least is whether

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502 L Hinton, ‘Teaching methods’, op.cit., p.188.
505 ibid., p.2.
or not these Aboriginal tutors are being paid correctly, given that they are likely to take key teaching roles. There may also be issues related to accepted community knowledge holders being engaged at a mere ‘tutor’ role, which can happen.

Another impediment that often goes under discussed in my view has to do with the veracity of the language being taught. In language revitalisation and reclamation programmes this is very much an issue. Hinton pointed out that teaching a revitalised endangered language is quite unique because the students being taught are literally going to become the languages only speakers.\(^\text{506}\) Herein lays the difficulty because “...any kind of error in grammar, pronunciation, communicative practices, and so on will actually become part of that language in the future”.\(^\text{507}\) Indigenous peoples are very aware of this, and it is often the case that anxiety over this leads to serious community unrest and dispute. In my own experience as a community person I can say that there is much discussion within families and communities around ‘gammin’ words; that is words that have been contrived when existing words are known.

The burden of this is heavy not just on communities, but also on State mainstream education programmers, curriculum developers and teachers themselves. Hinton has made it known that “there is...a more solemn responsibility for the teachers to teach, and the learners to learn, the language as completely, as competently, and as correctly as is humanly possible”.\(^\text{508}\) Hinton has made this point because she feels that “...it is important not to be complacent about what is being taught”.\(^\text{509}\) Amery in discussing Indigenous language revitalisation pointed out the value of the role of linguists, noting that:

Linguists can assist greatly in developing workable practical orthographies, in documenting languages, in making historical sources accessible, in assisting in the preparation of resources and materials, in developing and modernising the language...and crucially in imparting their skills to local Indigenous peoples and teachers through facilitating workshops and on-the-job training.\(^\text{510}\)

This doesn’t necessarily mean that linguists can always solve issues to do with the veracity of a language that is being reclaimed or revitalised because there are times when the work of linguists causes consternation for Indigenous peoples. Walsh noted as much in his observation that:

Apart from training in language teaching some Aboriginal people have queried the need for expertise in linguistics. People have referred to past occasions

\(^{507}\) ibid.  
\(^{508}\) ibid.  
\(^{509}\) ibid.  
\(^{510}\) R Amery, op.cit., p.9.
when, in their view, they have been ripped off by linguists: their people have freely given up their knowledge and been given nothing in return.\textsuperscript{511}

The reference to ‘ripped off’ here has much to do with the feeling that our languages and cultures come under academic scrutiny and are used by academics to further personal careers and the expense of our Indigenous interests. When this happens a situation of suspicion is created so that when other well meaning linguists try to become involved in language revitalisation and reclamation, and indeed the formulation of material for teaching, they are met with community opposition.

Amery stressed that “finding optimum ways of supporting programs can be a delicate and sensitive matter”. He is certainly right. In fact the example he used to illustrate this was as telling as Walsh’s was:

\begin{quote}
We have often heard the comment made in South Australia that “no whitefella is going to tell me how my language should be” and people might take great offence at any attempt by linguists or others to “correct” grammar or language forms. It is often preferable to discuss similar examples from other language situations rather than attack issues head-on.\textsuperscript{512}
\end{quote}

In discussing community disquiet of this nature Walsh made the suggestion that “it would be useful to devise some kind of strategy to assist such people with intra-community criticism as it arises in language revitalisation efforts in New South Wales - as is sure to happen”.\textsuperscript{513} This suggestion ties directly in with my own comments in Chapter 3, about finding proper community mediation mechanisms to enable resolution of such issues, which as I’ve already emphasised can easily escalate.

Dealing with the issue of who teaches is one thing, dealing with the veracity of teaching content is another, but all of this comes to naught if there are not adequate teaching resources to facilitate the teaching-learning interchange. Outside the most obvious resource ‘country’ there is a need for in-class culturally sound instructional materials in all educational modes from immersion and bilingualism through to the standard Western paradigm. Lowe and Ash noted “the dearth of linguistic resources for most of the languages of NSW severely affects attempts by schools to support a language course”.\textsuperscript{514} This observation was made in 2006, and whilst strong community organisations like Muurrbay are heavily involved in producing resources to answer this void, the literature on Indigenous language and culture teaching nonetheless continues to highlight that this remains an issue across the board.

\textsuperscript{511} M Walsh, ‘Raising Babel…’, op.cit., p.116.
\textsuperscript{512} R Amery, op.cit., p.12.
\textsuperscript{513} M Walsh, ‘Teaching NSW’s Indigenous languages…’, op.cit., p.9.
\textsuperscript{514} K Lowe & A Ash, op.cit., p.12
A further extremely complex issue regarding the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures is another dilemma centred on the polemic of on country versus off country. Walsh noted that for Indigenous peoples such as myself, who have multiple cultural affiliations, or for those of us living off country matters are complex.\textsuperscript{515} He suggested that “for such Aboriginal people the question is which language should they learn: the language of the territory in which they now reside or the language(s) which they regard as their own”.\textsuperscript{516} Walsh further stated that:

Aboriginal opinion is sharply divided on this issue. Some insist that it is simply wrong to teach an Aboriginal language outside its territory: it contravenes traditional law. Others think that any Aboriginal language is better than none – even if its territory is in a distant part of Australia. Still others believe that only a NSW language should be used within NSW for teaching and learning.\textsuperscript{517}

It is no wonder that our opinion is divided. On the one hand we have within us a strong spiritual commitment to honour language as country. On the other hand we face the dilemma of knowing that only a few of our cultural nationhood’s are likely to be able to revitalise language to a degree of proficiency that would enable the development of language sufficiently to enable re-acquisition of language for re-uptake as part of everyday speech.

Lowe and Ash looked at the issue of teaching language off-country, posing the question: “it is possible for an off-country but well documented language to be introduced and taught while linguistic research is undertaken to support the re-establishment of the local on-country language”.\textsuperscript{518} This remains a very important question for us to address, especially here in New South Wales. The law/lore polemics between on country versus off country are profound and not easily addressed, but that does not mean that we should not attempt to tackle this issue. What I found interesting in Lowe and Ash’s article was their reference to the Yolŋu language programme that ran off-county at the Worawa Aboriginal Independent College in Victoria. Low and Ash quote Aboriginal Yorta Yorta teacher Aretha Briggs’s who said,:%

 The teaching of the non-local Indigenous language that is spoken fluently on a daily basis, introduces students to Australian Indigenous language rules and concepts that exist right throughout Australia. Students who have never spoken or heard an Indigenous language spoken become familiar with these rules and concepts and are able to practise using them in their local target language.\textsuperscript{519}

Despite the genuine difficulty of locating appropriate teachers, establishing language veracity, manufacturing appropriate teaching resources and the very complex matter of on country versus off country education we cannot afford to become complacent by not tackling head on these issues. We also

\textsuperscript{515} M Walsh, ‘Raising babel...’, op.cit., pp.114-115.
\textsuperscript{516} ibid., p.114.
\textsuperscript{517} ibid., p.115.
\textsuperscript{518} K Lowe & A Ash, op.cit, p.13.
\textsuperscript{519} A Briggs as cited in K Lowe & A Ash, ibid.
need to look at sustainable funding, the other key issue in all of this. If funding arrangements are short term and based on short term outcomes immersion programmes will not be able to get sufficiently off the ground and they will be designated a failure, even though a lack of supportive funding contributed to their demise. At the end of the day best practice in the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures rests on how serious we really are about teaching language and culture for its own sake, because if we are we need to realise the importance of this to community cultural health and wellbeing and we have to realise that education is a holistic whole of community matter.
Chapter 5 – Cultural Health and Wellbeing

5.1 Language, Culture and Community

Often when we think about health and wellbeing we immediately bring to mind the state of our physical being, and then often in the second instance the state of our psychological being. Outside of our Indigenous world, however, you tend not to hear too often reference to health and wellbeing as spiritually founded. In Chapter 1 I quoted Kipuri who I pointed out had reiterated the words of Dr Shawn Wilson to express what spirituality is for us. Kipuri pointed to a very meaningful passage authored by Wilson in which Wilson observed:

For many indigenous people, having a healthy sense of spirituality is just as important as other aspects of mental, emotional and physical health. It is important to realize that a healthy spirit is essential for indigenous people to live a healthy life. Mainstream society is beginning to realize that spirituality is an element that must be taken into serious consideration when dealing with indigenous communities.\(^\text{520}\)

In fact Wilson, in reflecting upon the backdrop behind Indigenous crime, was explicit in articulating that “spirituality is important in education as a means of rebuilding people’s connections to their environment. It is the spiritual death of many Indigenous people that has lead them to be imprisoned in the first place”.\(^\text{521}\)

Spiritual health and wellbeing underpins cultural health and wellbeing, which in turn impacts directly Indigenous community health and wellbeing. It is interesting though that in the vastness of data reporting upon the dire state of our health, which has been energetically scrutinised by most spheres of academia for many years now, that health professionals still tend to be somewhat aloof to this. Indeed Dr Nerelle Poroch together with Kerry Arabena, Julie Tongs, Steve Larkin, Jodie Fisher and Graham Henderson importantly noted in the very first line of their introduction to their study ‘Spirituality and Aboriginal People’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing’ that:


\(^{521}\) S Wilson, Recognising the Importance..., ibid.
Aboriginal spirituality and social and emotional wellbeing is a relatively undeveloped area of research in Australia. There is much written about Aboriginal physical health but there is a paucity of evidence about the relationship between spirituality and social and emotional wellbeing outcomes within Aboriginal communities.522

Perhaps this is because our spiritual health is something that is challengingly intangible for much of Western science; it can’t be physically ‘operated’ upon or ‘medicated’ with the chemical therapies of Western medical science, and it can’t be scientifically experimented upon in the Western sense to find a cure.

Actually there is a passage in Poroch et al. that I have quoted before now when teaching about Indigenous spiritual health. It reads:

The Anangu people of Central Australia call their healers ngangkari. Ngangkari are from the deep past and are equal with doctors in their effectiveness for Anangu. Writing about ngangkari, Elsie Wanatjura, from the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council Aboriginal Corporation (NPYWCAC 2003:14), says that:

Doctors and nurses might wonder why do Anangu keep asking for ngangkari help when they can access good health clinics these days and they can easily get a quick needle or a tablet? It is because ngangkari get straight to the problem and give immediate healing. Tablets can’t heal the spirit. Ngangkari can. Ngangkari can see right into the spirit and the mind. Ngangkari see right inside the kurun-pa—the spirit—and get straight to the heart of the matter. What is kurun-pa? There is kurun-pa inside you and inside me. It lives inside our bodies giving us life.523

This explanation provided by Elsie Wanatjura is extraordinarily illustrative of the primacy of spirituality literally within us. Now it is not my intention to go into a protracted discussion about the differences between general health and wellbeing and spiritual health and wellbeing other than to say that what is inside us ‘giving us life’ is so deep and profound that it needs to be positively nurtured, and it demands as much attention as physical health.

In the very recent final report of House of Representative Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs investigation into Indigenous youth crime one claim that was made really stood out for me:

Children who have access to a good quality education and who are supported and directed by their parents to attend school are likely to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and social norms for a productive and rewarding adult life.524

I am certain that I have already covered the matter of ‘good quality education’ in Chapter 4, which clearly for Indigenous children means cultural quality in both curricula and pedagogy. The second matter, though,

523 ibid., p.8.
which is our position as parents, is confronting because there is a serious challenge in this one sentence that behoves us to step up as parents and community members to support and nourish our children’s development, and that means that we must work to find ways to support and nurture our spiritual health. We must pay our spirit attention so that we are culturally healthy within ourselves, and so that we can give more meaningfully of our cultural self to our children.

Being culturally healthy for us is directly proportionate with the spiritual integrity of our cultural identity. In turn the spiritual integrity of our cultural identity is categorically dependent upon the vitality of our connectivity to our ontology’s through our values, our philosophies and our psychological praxis of being as one with country. It is at this point that I come full circle in storying our Indigenous ways of knowing language and culture because the extent to which we are embedded within these ways of knowing has a determining influence on our cultural health and wellbeing. Although many of us, particularly here in New South Wales, have been forcibly disconnected from mother tongue and the praxis of mother culture our profound relationship with mother tongue and mother culture together with our profound sense of responsibility for mother tongue and mother culture, as I first discussed in Chapter 2, has not been disconnected, but it has been damaged. Realising cultural health and wellbeing is about seeking to repair this damage.

So, how do we repair spiritual damage so that we have strong cultural health and wellbeing? The answer is both easy and complex. It is easy because all we have to do is become re-immersed within mother culture and mother tongue so that we are thinking once again and communicating once again through the power of our languages; all of them. This then is where matters become highly complex. For a start, as you will have read in Chapter 3, even bringing speech language alone back to a state where re-acquisition and re-uptake is possible for many of us seems almost impossible, so the other deeper spiritual vocabularies we once all had seem painfully gone. In this alone the spiritual grief is weighty. Does this then mean that for those of us who have suffered this loss that it is all insurmountable, that we will never fully realise strong cultural health and wellbeing?

Through all that I have written I have tried to give the sense that yes we can indeed regain our cultural health and wellbeing, but we do need to find the ways and means to strengthen what we have, to expand what we have, and indeed to stop further loss of what we have. Maintaining or reviving mother tongue is all important in this. Even though we know that language is but one aspect of a wider body of culture, we know that it is so important to our
cultural health because the spirit of language is spirit that we need to have stay strong within ourselves. We are talking here about our Indigenous psyche. One single word, one expression from mother tongue, has the unique capacity to give us a deep feeling of psychological resistance to the imposition of dominator culture and society. That was why my mother was so strong about holding onto our words; it gave her this sense of resistance. As she often said whenever she heard just one word in ‘lingo’ - “you see, we still speak our language”; “we still know our language”; “your language and tribe goes together, you can’t separate them”.

This resistance of ours, to try and keep or otherwise regain our cultural health and wellbeing has an astoundingly long and truly remarkable history both internationally and nationally. In Australia perhaps one of the most public affirmations of this resistance in more contemporary times came in the form of the Barunga Statement which was delivered in 1988 to the Australian Prime Minister of the day by Indigenous leaders Mr Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Mr Wenton Rubuntja. In this statement a number of claims were made, but one always stands out, the assertion of our right “to respect for promotion of our Aboriginal identity, including the cultural, linguistic, religious and historical aspects, including the right to be educated in our own languages, and in our own culture and history”. The sheer persistence of us on these matters, over many generations, even in the face of catastrophic loss is surely testimony enough to prove the direct correlation between our languages and cultures and our health and wellbeing.

In looking to the literature to substantiate this correlation for the purposes of this research study I came across an article which I can only say both disturbed me, and highlighted for me the urgency of working toward the re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongue. In a Canadian [British Columbia] research study conducted by Dr Darcy Hallet, Dr Michael J. Chandler and Associate Professor Christopher E. Lalonde the matter of Indigenous youth suicide was examined. Essentially Hallet, Chandler and Lalonde tested the hypothesis that the use of mother tongue at a conversational level is a factor that influences trends in Indigenous youth suicide. As a result of their study these authors reached the conclusion that:...

...at least in the case of BC, those bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than

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526 D Hallet, MJ Chandler & CE Lalonde, op.cit.
half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six
times greater.\textsuperscript{527} As an Indigenous community member, who has witnessed the devastation
that suicide can cause, I was to say the least affected by this finding. Hallet,
Chandler and Lalonde closed their report on their study with the deeply
significant comment that “altogether these results demonstrate that
indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong
predictor of health and wellbeing in Canada’s Aboriginal communities”\textsuperscript{528}
For me this is a strong conclusive statement based on startling data that
found that in respect to the communities they investigated:

\ldots those with lower language knowledge had more than six times the number of
suicides (96.59 per 100,000). These differential rates reflect the fact that,
between 1987 and 1992, only one youth committed suicide from within those 16
bands that had the language factor while, from the remaining 136 bands, 84
youth committed suicide during this same 6-year period.\textsuperscript{529}

What can be said to something like this, except one suicide is one suicide
too many. To think that mother tongue and mother culture have a key role
in reversing this brings all the political postulations about rights, and all the
need for Western scholastic justifications into stark perspective. We are not
just talking about an academic right here; we are talking about the sanctity
of life itself. For me what makes this all the more confronting is the pressure
Bishop et al. reported that is placed upon our youth because of the urgency
to stem further linguistic and cultural loss. Bishop et al. noted that:

\begin{quote}
For Aboriginal people the experience of many years of trauma has forced the
community to quickly educate and pass on the necessary knowledge to its
young people in order to ensure that community remains alive. Of course,
one of the consequences of this has been the considerable burden it has
placed on its young people, who would normally spend a lifetime learning
these aspects of their culture. In many cases this has resulted in burnout
for those young people carrying such knowledge, resulting, in extreme
cases, in suicide.\textsuperscript{530}
\end{quote}

It is abundantly clear that our cultural health and wellbeing rests on the
linkages we have and maintain with mother tongue and mother culture, and
it is abundantly clear that when these linkages are threatened our anguish
over loss causes an intensification of the holistic lifelong learning process
which then cycles round and causes serious ill-health. On this basis alone I
say to myself - do we really need further evidence to demonstrate that there
is a direct causal link between healthy mother tongue and mother culture
and healthy community? If our children are dying through lack of culture or
too much culture all at once, we surely must see that something is
dreadfully wrong. Nation States such as Australia are not free of

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{527} ibid., p.398.
\textsuperscript{528} ibid.
\textsuperscript{529} ibid., p.396.
\textsuperscript{530} Bishop et al. op.cit., p.6.
\end{footnotes}
responsibility in this, especially if they demand that our language usage and cultural praxis be put aside in favour of English language acquisition and usage.

If however we do need further corroboration of these linkages we need not look far. In her statistical research on Indigenous Canada Mary Jane Norris reported in her analysis that

...many youth associate Inuktitut with their identity, traditional knowledge, and culture; for some, losing Inuktitut can affect their sense of belonging, leading to feelings of marginalization and exclusion. While youth are making a concerted effort to use Inuktitut in daily activities, they also identify a need for support through family, community and education, with opportunities to learn, hear and use it.531

Norris’s study’s of Indigenous languages make for compelling reading as they reveal in detail the devastation and the pressures that exist in terms of Canadian mother tongues, and the re-uptake of mother tongues as a second language. We can certainly gather from her work a direct sense of how important language and culture is to self-esteem and self-worth, and how important a whole of community approach is to this.

In Australia, the work of Associate Professor Mike (Dr A.M.) Dockery is not too dissimilar to that of Norris, in that Dockery’s focus was also upon national survey data, however Dockery’s specific focus wasn’t language per se, his was more ”...the relationship between culture and subjective wellbeing for Indigenous Australians”.532 As I have done, Dockery highlighted the valuable work of Hallet, Chandler and Lalonde in substantiating causal links between cultural health and suicide, but Dockery does also note that there has been little research done into “...the links between culture and subjective wellbeing”.533 That duly noted Dockery very confusingly pointed to both the association of happiness with strong cultural identity, and strong cultural identity with psychological distress.534 This confusion though appears to signal some difference between those of us living in ‘remote’ communities and those of us living in ‘non-remote’ communities. My impression is that we ‘non-remote’ peoples may well experience more deeply the stress of having to walk in ‘two worlds’. There is also a suggestion that discrimination is a variable here.

533 ibid., p.6
534 ibid., p.13.
Whatever the case maybe Dockery drew the conclusion that if the results he obtained are “...to be accepted, then the policy implications that follow would seem clear. The objective of policy should be to maximise wellbeing”.\textsuperscript{535} To maximise wellbeing in our case is clearly to maximise our maintenance of mother tongues and mother cultures or encouragement of our re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongues and mother cultures. As Dockery found “attachment to traditional culture and a strong sense of self-identity not only increase the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, they are also associated with better ‘mainstream’ socio-economic outcomes”.\textsuperscript{536} Dockery tellingly asserted that this connection is yet to be fully understood by non-Indigenous Australia. Accordingly, Dockery suggested that “in the current pursuit of equity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, increasing non-Indigenous Australians’ knowledge, understanding and respect of Indigenous cultures may well be the most important gap to close”.\textsuperscript{537}

In a recent analysis of racism in respect to Indigenous health, Professor Niyi Awofeso noted that “racism has also created a situation in which there is a diminishing self-esteem and self-confidence among Indigenous people in their culture”.\textsuperscript{538} This observation aligns with those of Professor Meyer which I discussed in Chapter 3. To me this was an interesting observation because it harks to the matter of long-term intergenerational psychological damage that earlier experience of colonisation can inflict upon a community. It pays to keep in mind that for current generations of Indigenous Australians, living without the most overt forms of racial discrimination through government policy and practice is quite new. Grandparents, and parents of my age, can speak to the experience of overt racism very well. Current generations, however, are not necessarily free of racist experience.

A study conducted by Dr Naomi C Priest, Yin C Paradies, Wendy Gunthorpe, Sheree J Cairney and Sue M Sayers into the experiences of Indigenous youth in the Northern Territory suggest that racism is ongoing. These authors found that “...among young Aboriginal people aged 16–20 years living in the Top End of the Northern Territory, the experience of racism was associated with anxiety, depression, suicide risk and overall poor mental health”.\textsuperscript{539} Now whilst it is evident that this research pertains to a specific living circumstance, usually termed ‘remote’, it is nonetheless telling of the correlation between how society reacts to us and how we in turn react. I

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{535} ibid., p.19.
\item \textsuperscript{536} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{537} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{538} N Awofeso, op.cit., p.7
\item \textsuperscript{539} NC Priest, op.cit., p.548.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
found Priest et al.’s claim that “late adolescence and early adulthood has been identified as a time of heightened vulnerability to psychological distress resulting from experiences of racism”\(^{540}\) compelling and very suggestive that this is the time when a stronger sense of cultural self-esteem and self-worth can come into its own as a preventative measure against these forms of psychological distress.

The Australian Federal Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet certainly accepts that closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia directly correlates with cultural health and wellbeing.\(^{541}\) They openly assert that:

Initiatives that strengthen Indigenous culture are...important to the *Closing the Gap* agenda, which is a commitment by all Australian governments to work together to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in particular, to provide a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.\(^{542}\)

Whilst the government accepts that there is a lack of empirical research to support this, they do stress that community voice on this issue is loud, clear, and valid.\(^{543}\) In their ‘Culture and Closing the Gap’ pamphlet they rely upon sources such as Dockery to substantiate this as I have done. We know that spiritual being and cultural being go hand in hand, and we know that cultural being and health and wellbeing go hand in hand, in both an individual context and a community context. The question for us isn’t - is this interconnectivity true?, it is more - how do we repair the damage that has been done to this interconnectivity?

## 5.2 Community and Education

The only sure-fire way of bringing an Indigenous community back to a state of positive cultural health and wellbeing, when it has suffered language and culture dispossession, is through whole of community education. Formal schooling is but one aspect of this, certainly we cannot expect to build culturally healthy communities on the back of school education alone. We need to think about what is happening at the adult level as well. In Chapter 4 I discussed at length immersion as the most viable means for securing revitalisation of our Indigenous languages and cultures because the intensive processes that immersion involves are more likely to stimulate the re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongue and mother culture. Even so, we can immerse our children for as long as we like within mother language.

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\(^{540}\) ibid.


\(^{542}\) ibid., p. 1

\(^{543}\) ibid., p. 2
and mother culture in a school setting and still come to find that the effect of immersion learning is minimal in redressing language and culture shift.

The degree to which an immersion programme is successful isn’t merely dependent upon the amount of time and space afforded within a formal school structure; it is equally dependent upon what goes on around it. Hinton has made it clear that: 

...even the immersion classroom is not sufficient unto itself to turn around language death: it is essential that the families play an active role as well...The successful immersion programs also usually have a family component in which parents are asked to learn the language in night classes, to volunteer in the immersion classroom, and to reinforce at home the lessons the students learn at school.544

There is a great deal to be said about the conduit between home, school and community. As Bougie tellingly noted “the home environment naturally impacts the transmission of an Aboriginal language from parent to child”.545 A child can learn an Indigenous language within school, but if the child cannot communicate in that language with family, what is the point?

We know that everyday contact with language is pivotal to how well it is sustained, and this is not realisable outside of a fluent community without the benefit of education programmes that bring parental and community learning into line with one another, so that children’s learning at school can be supported within the home. Hinton explained that “one reason that Māori and Hawaiian programs have worked so well is that their school programs have developed out of grassroots community movements that include other components of revitalisation”.546 Hinton further meaningfully explained that whilst schools can have a major role in language revitalisation “bringing the language back as the first language of the home is the true heart of language revitalisation”.547 That is why the concept of language ‘nests’ that I first mentioned in Chapter 4 is so important.

I noted in Chapter 4 that language nests are all about bringing the young and the old together. The concept of language nests, as preschool initiatives, is now widely accepted within the literature as best community practice. There are certainly examples to be found within the literature that cite the inspirational influence of Maori language nests and also Hawaiian language nests. A prime example comes from Mexico, where the Spanish language has come to dominate. Using the Maori model as inspiration a series of language nests have been set up. What I found interesting about the Mexican process was that they began by engaging communities “...in a

545 E Bougie, op. cit., p.76.
547 ibid.
process of reflection...about the loss of their languages and culture”.\(^{548}\) This process of reflection is an all important first step because it brings a community into direct contact with its own problems and it facilitates community to go on to find its own solutions.

Another regularly cited example comes from the efforts of Greymorning who worked to secure immersion schooling in Arapaho. He has written about the inspiration he gained when he went to Hawaii and observed firsthand, and filmed, the work of the Punana Leo language nests. He said, “As a result of being able to show the tapes of the Hawaiian immersion preschools, the elementary school principal allowed a half-day kindergarten Arapaho language immersion class to be implemented...”.\(^{549}\) Greymorning discussed at length the struggles that he faced in “running the gauntlet” to secure immersion schooling for his people. What inspired me most about his experience was not just what he did, it was how he felt spiritually; how he came into the realm of the “spirit of the Dog Soldiers”, warrior spirits from his own peoples, and how this underlined for him that the fight he was engaged in to secure immersion programmes for his peoples children was a spiritual fight.\(^{550}\)

The example of Stephen Greymorning’s spiritual experience enmeshes well with the example of the Mexican experience for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, because we as community peoples must find within ourselves as individuals the same spiritual urgency that Stephen found, so that we spiritually resolve to maintain what our Spirit Elders passed down to us, or to bring back into being that which we were given. Secondly, because the process of individual spiritual realisation inevitably involves all of us coming together to understand and grieve so that we might gain the spiritual energy and wisdom to strengthen ourselves to work collectively to bring our Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, being and speaking back into country. Education, premised on our languages and cultures, in the community context is quintessentially embedded as a spiritual journey, and community education initiatives such as language nests must be spirituality motivated to succeed.

The spiritual value of community driven education has gone seriously under-discussed within the literature, but even so the value of community centred initiatives such as language nests has at least been widely accepted as sound practice. In the leading ‘National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005’ the very first recommendation made for “a way forward” was

\(^{548}\) L Meyer & BM Alvarado, op.cit., p.111-112.
\(^{549}\) S Greymorning, op.cit., p.14.
\(^{550}\) ibid., pp.15-16.
that a pilot programme of language nests be established.\textsuperscript{551} This was extrapolated to the second recommendation that centred on the formation of “community language teams”. It was seen that these teams would have a role to play in the instigation of preschool language nests and “other language maintenance activities, including the preparation of learning resources”.\textsuperscript{552} Recommendation three followed up by promoting the value of establishing “regional Indigenous languages Centres”.\textsuperscript{553}

Whilst these recommendations to my mind were framed within the context of supporting language maintenance rather than the revival of language, the concept of extrapolating preschool learning to a wider community initiative is valuable, particularly in terms of regional language centres, because I can see immediately a variety of roles for these types of organisation, including cultural dispute mediation. That said, what I found absolutely missing in the discussion surrounding the idea of establishing language nests, language teams and language centres is the very real and urgent need for expressly targeted adult and community education programmes in Indigenous languages and cultures. Indeed in surveying the literature there is a serious dearth of interest in this rather specific, yet extremely vital area of language and culture survival and revival.

Another case in point is the Australian Human Rights Commission, who discussed at length the merits of “community language resource centres”, noting that they are the “engine room of many Indigenous languages programs”.\textsuperscript{554} Overarching this is FATSIL, the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, which the Commission confirmed has an “advisory role” to government.\textsuperscript{555} The Commission also noted that “for the most part Community Language Resource Centres carry out research work, advocacy, language development programs, archiving of Indigenous language materials and technical assistance to schools and other organisations”.\textsuperscript{556} This is without doubt all extremely important in securing the cultural health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities, but again I was surprised that this report, like the NILS report, fell short of meaningfully addressing the why’s and how’s of Indigenous adult and community education in respect to the re-acquisition and re-uptake of mother tongues and mother cultures.

\textsuperscript{552} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{553} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{554} Australian Human Rights Commission, op.cit., p.96.  
\textsuperscript{555} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{556} ibid., p.97.
For me, it is as though there is this feeling that adult community members are already sufficiently equipped educationally to undertake the work of language revival. Adult and community education when it is discussed in reference to us invariably concentrates on the how’s and why’s of facilitating our learning of Western literacy, numeracy and general socio-economically founded life skills. There is little attention given to adult and community education in respect to us Indigenous peoples learning our own languages and cultures, and indeed the spiritual synergy of this. This is especially surprising in the Australian context given Purdie’s observation that whilst “80 different Indigenous languages are taught in schools...most of these languages are not spoken by students at home”. Clearly there is a great need for more concerted, concentrated effort with regard to changing this.

I found Hinton instructive on the matter of adult and community education, especially in terms of informal education processes, which should not only be in place, they should be recognised as highly valuable to the work of realising Indigenous community health and wellbeing. Hinton noted that “in the effort to maintain and teach a language which is no longer being learned at home, speech communities have often started the process with informal gatherings of speakers and nonspeakers”. Hinton suggested that “these informal language classes are meaningful gatherings, and participants get great pleasure out of them”. The idea of informal language and culture workshops is very appealing. They certainly allow learning to take place in a more relaxed less pressurised atmosphere where ‘shame’ is less likely to take a grip hold on learning and stagnate the process, and they have the potential to productively encourage self-realisation through the enactment of self-determination, especially if teachers and learners are working together with a spiritual sense of equality.

FATSILC, as it has now become known, provides useful guidance under the banner of community development in terms of language and culture learning. They suggest that:

Successful language projects are ones which focus on benefiting the language communities, developing the capacity of communities and empowering community members to develop language resources, to revitalise and maintain their languages themselves.

Language revival as community development, under FATSILC’s advice, should involve “formal and informal training opportunities...for local

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557 N Purdie, op.cit.
558 L Hinton, Teaching methods’, op.cit., p.179.
559 ibid., pp.179-180.
peoples”. Under the community development context learning becomes action oriented. It very much puts me in mind of participatory action research, a mode of research that I am particularly familiar with. In my thesis I quoted Peter Park who affirmed that “participatory research aims to empower people, not only in the sense of being psychologically capacitated but also in the sense of being in-power to effect needed social change”.

Indigenous language and culture revival in particular is all about social change. McCarty quoted Warner as affirming that “…we are not fighting to ‘save’ a disembodied entity called language, but rather to ‘bring about changes in society that [will] lead to true equality, authenticity in the empowerment of a people...and social justice for all”. It is because the fight to both maintain Indigenous languages and cultures and to revive Indigenous languages and cultures is one that is wholly embedded within social justice that enlightened community education praxis is urgently required; an educative praxis that begins with awakening the mind and spirit, that then moves forward to problem recognition and problem investigation. From there it evolves out into the work of solution realisation through action based learning. As a pedagogical praxis participatory action research steps out into its own as it envelops all of these processes, so it is in many ways a ‘best practice’ model for community based education.

Outside of the community context Indigenous language and culture learning at the adult level tends to fall within the provenance of universities and TAFE systems. Dr Mary-Anne Gale, in her study of Indigenous language learning in both the university and TAFE setting began by noting in her introduction that “…university language courses tend to offer the stronger languages to non-Indigenous students, while TAFE courses tend to serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are seeking vocational training in their own languages”. In one sense this is understandable because TAFE systems appear more amenable to working with the core needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities, and learning can be more flexible. It is clear from Gales study, however, that universities naturally veer toward those languages which appear to be more developed and are therefore more available to Western structured learning.

Without going into a protracted conversation about what each university is doing or what each TAFE is doing, it is clear that these courses have a place

561 ibid.
562 P Park as cited in ST Williams, op.cit., p.105.
563 SL No-Eau Warner as cited in TL McCarty, ‘Schools as strategic tools...’, op.cit., p.175.
in the overall expansion of Indigenous language and culture learning, in the university context to non-Indigenous students in particular. These courses, however, are quite vulnerable. Walsh for example drew attention to the collapse of an adult education programme after one Indigenous learner walked out over cultural dispute, causing other learners to follow.565 Along a similar vein Gale discussed a Bundjalung language programme offered through Monash University which eventually came to an end after staff departures.566 The case of tertiary teaching the revived South Australian language Kaurna is particularly interesting because it began at the University of Adelaide under auspice of Amery, but when Amery left the university Kaurna language teaching travelled with him to the University of South Australia, only to return with him upon his return to the University of Adelaide.

Clearly the problems experienced at the school level apply equally to the tertiary and TAFE sectors in terms of teaching staff, stability of subjects and courses, the veracity of language, the cultural and pedagogical polemics of on country versus off country, resources, funding; the list can go on. What has to be said about all of this though is that these modes of education, no matter how good or otherwise they are, are only ever going to serve a select number of Indigenous community people. Only those Indigenous peoples seeking to undertake formal studies at the TAFE or tertiary level will potentially access these courses, and that will depend upon how well they handle the psychological dimensions of possibly having a non-Indigenous person teaching Indigenous language and culture to them. This alone can exacerbate problems centred around shame.

Community and education cannot be solely about the formal processes of schooling, TAFE or tertiary sector learning; it has to be about the grassroots level. No amount of education within school, within a TAFE or a university will bring about the kind of social and cultural change that is needed within our communities in terms of the survival and revival of our languages and cultures. It takes a whole of community approach. It takes solid action on the behalf of governments to accept and promote our efforts at the grassroots level and it requires self-realisation and self-determination through the empowerment of action based learning. In bringing this study to a close I have within my mind the words of Fishman pressing once again upon me - “What are you going to do with the mother tongue before school, in school, out of school, and after school?” because that determines its fate, whether it is going to become self-renewing” 567 because this question at the

565 M Walsh, ‘Raising Babel…’; op.cit., p.115.
end of the day is what it all comes down to – what do we want?, what are we going to do to get what we want?, what is government going to do to support us?
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