



Indigenous languages & education: Do we have the right agenda?

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Abstract

The language and cultural priorities in Australian Indigenous education have been priority areas since the inaugural national Indigenous education policy was launched in 1989. For over thirty years, these priorities have sat awkwardly in the largely non-Indigenous teaching profession and classroom teachers continue to struggle with how to embed these priorities into the education process, despite the efforts of Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and their elaborations for application at curriculum and practice levels. In this article, I suggest that these language and cultural priorities are at cross-purposes with education priorities, and neither have helped to curb the demise of our Indigenous languages nor improved Indigenous students' educational outcomes.

Keywords Indigenous languages · Indigenous education

Introduction

For many years, the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues lobbied the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution (A/RES/71/178) to proclaim 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. For Indigenous people, Indigenous language rights are not divisible in any essential way from rights associated with Indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions, traditional territories, and education. This is evident in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Articles 13 and 14, which refer to rights to languages and education.

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Article 13

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, 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

1. Indigenous peoples have the 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.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

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.

The 2007 Declaration was the culmination of decades of Indigenous advocacy and UN work in all areas associated with the rights of Indigenous peoples. However, the Declaration is non-binding on States. Even in the agenda of UN's Decade of International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2023), Indigenous language rights continue to be viewed in many States around the world, including Australia, as an aspirational goal. The Australian government, for example, adapted UNESCO's Action Plan for the Year of Indigenous Languages to highlight its support (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). The Action Plan represented the existing national policy position in relation to Indigenous language revitalisation and maintenance, with the addition of a commitment to awareness-raising initiatives throughout the celebratory year. While it can be argued that there is value in raising awareness, much more substantial support is required to respond to threatened Indigenous languages. The decline of Indigenous languages around the world continues despite some success stories in some places. The global language situation tells us that approximately seven and a half billion people live on this planet and speak approximately 6,700 languages. The world's Indigenous populations are estimated to total 350 million. 50% of the world's population speaks 1 of only 24 of these languages and 0.1% of the world's population speaks about 3500 of the world's languages (Loh & Harmon, 2014; Wilder et al., 2016a). We also know that almost half of the world's 6,700 languages, that is around 3,000 languages, are at risk of extinction and that these are mostly Indigenous languages. It has been estimated that on average one language goes extinct every 3.5 months (Rogers & Campbell, 2015; Wilder et al., 2016b).

Traditional knowledge

For Indigenous peoples, our traditional Indigenous knowledges are grounded in our ancestral lands, waters, and skies, and are given their fullest expression through our languages and our cultural practices (Nakata, 2002). Indigenous languages and Indigenous knowledges are mutually constituted. When Indigenous knowledges are lost so is the language that gives expression to our knowledges. And as Indigenous languages

are lost, so are Indigenous knowledges, including their epistemologies and ontologies that give meaning to all that we know and believe. These ontologies and epistemologies order our systems of thought, not just what we know but how we think, and how we come to know or believe our knowledge of the world to be valid or true. Without our languages, Indigenous knowledges cannot be expressed in their fullest terms or transmitted to convey their deepest and most intricate meanings. This means that as Indigenous languages are lost, so is diverse and valuable knowledge associated with the health and survival of the planet. The global sum of Indigenous peoples' knowledge represents and is connected to a large proportion of the biological diversity of the planet, a planet which is under continued threat from the exploitation of its resources, destruction of its ecosystems, and climate change. Scientists have reported that globally, the extinction of species can be correlated with the extinction of languages (Wilder et al., 2016b). Also accompanying Indigenous language loss is the erosion of knowledge practices that ground the values and laws that guide the economic and social functioning of Indigenous communities and families all over the globe. As Mr Lance Box from the Yipirinya School Council in Central Australia eloquently describes it in relation to his people:

In the Warlpiri, we have a word called *ngurra-kurlu*, which is a term that speaks of the interrelatedness of five essential elements: land, law, language, kinship and ceremony. You cannot isolate any of these elements. All of those elements hang together. If you take people away from country, they cannot conduct ceremony, and if they do not conduct ceremony, they cannot teach strong language. Ceremony is the cradle to grave, a delivery place for education for Indigenous people. If you do not have ceremony and you do not have language, then your kinship breaks down. Then law breaks down and the whole thing falls apart (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2012, pp. 10–11).

Language Dynamics and Change in contemporary situations

This inter-connectedness between different elements and the importance of belonging to and knowing a particular place in a very intricate way, poses great challenges for the survival of the Indigenous languages and the Indigenous knowledges that give us distinct cultures, practices and identities. Historical and continuing changes in the world around us have brought disruption to what once were traditional certainties (McKay, 2006). Disruptions inevitably produce discontinuities with former traditions. Indigenous peoples' adaptations to altered circumstances and/or environments, lead to altered language and cultural practices.

However, Indigenous peoples' adaptations to older practices have always attempted to carry through important traditional values and relationships into altered circumstances, often with considerable success, or else by now nothing would be left of Indigenous traditions at all, in many parts of the world. So amidst all the discontinuities caused by disruptions into our worlds, many Indigenous peoples have been able to maintain continuities with older knowledge and traditions, by drawing through old threads and weaving them into the altered fabric and the altered languages of our lives. The change around us, however, has never ended. Change is a constant.

Although the historical and ongoing changes that have disrupted the lives of Indigenous peoples all around the world give us a shared experience and a shared interest in Indigenous language and knowledge maintenance today, these changes have also impacted Indigenous peoples in different ways, at different places, in different circumstances, and across different times. This means that one Indigenous groups' experience is never exactly the same as another, even for different Indigenous groups within a single nation-state. It means, as well, that each group's past and current circumstances, as well as their future goals, condition the possibilities for addressing the challenges in protecting, preserving, and maintaining the use of Indigenous traditional languages.

So the important question on how to restore, preserve, reclaim, and continue to use Indigenous languages is a difficult and complex issue for all groups and has been for decades or centuries. Internationally, across a range of Indigenous language situations, a large effort has gone into restoration and preservation through retrieving accounts and examples of extinct languages from archives and through building dictionaries and grammars, as well as through the recording of surviving languages or language speakers. This is valuable and necessary work but not sufficient to arrest the decline in traditional language usage, as renowned Cheyenne Elder from the US and language educator, Richard Littlebear (Littlebear, 2007) has pointed out: Dictionaries and databases' capture of Indigenous languages often fail to capture what he calls "the spice words" of a dynamic oral language. These are words that do not stand on their own, which act as semantic or grammatical links to what is being discussed, and which nuance and contextualise the meaning being expressed. Littlebear's experience is that these words tend not to be documented and as a result the documented language becomes more formal and stilted and less expressive of the intricate knowledge relations contained within it (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Nevertheless, the retrieval and documentation of all Indigenous languages is an important guard against total or future loss.

An even more difficult question has centred on how to maintain the usage of Indigenous languages because without everyday speakers in homes and in communities, languages are less likely to be transmitted to younger generations and more likely to decline and disappear. We know that the fullest meanings conveyed by oral Indigenous languages are best given their expression and are best learnt in situ, under the skies, on the land or waters, or in family and kin networks, in which the language connections to Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices reside. To increase both usage and deeper understanding, attempts have been made to emphasise the use of Indigenous languages within the child socialisation process in families, in early childhood programs, and as much as possible in situ on the lands or waters to which our languages belong.

Language teaching

Traditional language teaching through formal language programs in communities, schools or further education institutions, has been perhaps the most common and popular approach to address Indigenous language continuity in a range of different situations. At one end of the spectrum, for example, immersion and/or bilingual education programs in schools for Indigenous children who are speaking their traditional languages as an everyday part of their life, work from the premise that

children learn best in their own language before transitioning to the national language and do better in the core curriculum through that method. In some situations where there are large numbers of speakers of a traditional language or where there is only one Indigenous language in a national context, immersion, bilingual and bicultural approaches are able to continue through education in separate institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, where the language is no longer used in daily life and/or where students undertake the national curriculum, Indigenous students are instructed in the national language. In between are variations that are a matter of the degree of emphasis placed in schools on the teaching of cultural knowledge, the teaching of Indigenous languages orally or through written literacy, and the emphasis given to these in relation to the teaching of the national core curriculum. These responses are determined by specific histories, current circumstances, varying contextual and practical constraints, and the goals and purposes Indigenous people have for the education of their children. In these situations, these formal programs are sometimes supplemented by excursions onto traditional lands to promote deeper understandings of the conditions of Indigenous knowledge. However, these practices fall far short of traditional transmission practices that reveal deep knowledge.

Despite many attempts over decades to revive or revitalise language vocabularies, grammars, and meanings of severely threatened or endangered languages, and to strengthen traditional language usage of all generations in the everyday lives of Indigenous communities, where languages are still in daily use, Indigenous languages and Indigenous language usage continue to decline. Whatever the efforts that are being made and even where there are good news stories of language revival and increased usage, Indigenous languages remain at risk of extinction or are gravely threatened. Despite this being known by governments, there continues to be many limitations placed around Indigenous communities' efforts to restore, maintain and increase the usage of their languages, not the least of which is the provision of sufficient or sustained funding. The odds for traditional language restoration and maintenance are therefore stacked against us, not just because of our colonial histories and minority status within national borders but because the world we all live in is a rapidly changing world, over which we have little control. In the global era, the diverse cultures, languages and knowledge of the worlds' entire population, not just the Indigenous population, are rapidly disappearing into a much smaller number of homogenised cultures, languages, and knowledge systems.

The Indigenous language experience in Australia

One of the challenges in Australia is the diversity of languages that exists within Indigenous Australia. The Australian Indigenous population is increasing and is now approximately 984,000 people or about 3.8% of the total Australian population of approximately 24 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Nationally, in 2016, 37% of Indigenous Australians lived in major Australian cities, 23.7% lived in inner regional areas, 20.3% lived in outer regional areas, 6.7% lived in remotes areas and 11.9 percent lived in very remote regions of Australia (Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2019). Many Indigenous people are living away from their ancestral lands,

whether they are now living in urban, regional or remote areas. There are two main peoples: Aboriginal Australians, who were the sole occupants of the continent for 50,000+ years prior to colonisation; and Torres Strait Islanders, who are of Melanesian origin, and who for at least 12,000 years have occupied the islands and waters of what is now called the Torres Strait. The Torres Strait lies between the northern tip of Eastern Australia and Papua New Guinea. The Strait is crossed by an international border and an international shipping lane, meaning it is strategic to Australia's national interests. About 5000 Torres Strait Islanders live in the Torres Strait islands today and about 45,000 Torres Strait Islanders live on the mainland for employment, education, or family reasons. Torres Strait Islanders are therefore a very tiny minority within another very tiny minority, and many Australians do not know where the Torres Strait islands are.

The diversity within the Australian Indigenous population is highlighted when we speak of Indigenous languages because language is the primary identifier of Indigenous groups. In Australia, prior to colonisation, there were an estimated 250–300 distinct Indigenous languages and over 800 dialects of those languages (Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2019). The existence of many small language groups fostered a multilingualism among related groups but not any large-scale lingua franca. Instead, Indigenous Australians' familiarity with multiple languages fostered a traditional practice of 'trans-linguaging'. This refers to the ability of a speaker to draw on a number of languages in a single conversation to aid communication when interacting with others beyond the speakers' first language (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). The presence of so many traditional languages with small numbers of speakers complicates the task of language restoration and maintenance through their daily use.

In Australia, the collection of statistics through language surveys and the national population census is mostly self-reporting or estimations done by key community people or researchers, so they are estimates only and sometimes vary considerably. But generally, all surveys indicate similar trends. In the first national survey of Australian Indigenous languages in 2005, it was reported that about 145 of the original 250+ traditional languages were still spoken but about 110 of these languages were severely or critically endangered. For example, 45 languages had between 10 and 50 speakers only, and 67 languages had less than 10 speakers. Only 18 languages were still strong, meaning that they were spoken always or often by all generations. By 2014, when the Second National Indigenous languages survey issued its report, these numbers had declined, with only 120 languages still being spoken and with 100 of those considered severely or critically endangered. Only 13 languages were still considered strong and the remaining 7 were classified as moderately endangered. However, the survey was able to report an increase in usage of about 30 languages as a result of community efforts to increase usage via language activities and programs. This increase in usage does not necessarily refer to an increase in fluent everyday speakers but may refer mainly to part-speakers, less frequent levels of usage, or those who speak only words and phrases of revitalised languages. The third National Indigenous Languages Survey, conducted in 2019, reported that all Indigenous languages are under threat, with 123 languages in use or being revitalised and less than 10% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people speaking an Indigenous language at

home. Only twelve traditional languages are considered relatively strong. Two new languages are reported to be strong and growing in use (Shnukal, 1988).

The Australian 2016 Census reported that 10% of the Indigenous population or about 60,000 people speak an Indigenous language at home. Only 1.9% of Indigenous people living in the greater capital city areas spoke an Indigenous language, compared with a 14.3% average for those living outside of state and territory capitals. The greatest proportions of people speaking an Indigenous language were found in 4 remote regions in the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait islands in Queensland. These proportions varied from 91% down to 78% of the local population. Even so the numbers in these groups are relatively small, for example, the largest group is reported to be around 5,000. The 2021 Census has not yet reported on Indigenous language statistics.

Hybrid languages

These reports and surveys do not refer to speakers of traditional languages only. The sleeping giants in the Australian Indigenous language situation, and possibly in other parts of the world is the presence of what are generally known as ‘contact’ languages or ‘new’ Indigenous languages. These are the Creole languages, which in the Australian situation incorporate English lexifiers into the semantics of traditional language, and where over time the new language becomes distinct from both the English language and the traditional language. Historically, these languages were considered bastardised forms of the English language but more recently, they have been recognised as languages in their own right (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013). These languages historically acted as lingua francas to facilitate communication between speakers of different Indigenous languages and English-speakers. There are numerous regionally based forms of Creoles and Kriols in Aboriginal Australia, that have arisen to facilitate communication across languages in a region, or on Missions and Reserves that housed Indigenous people from many different language groups, and who historically also had to interact with white English-speaking employers, mission superintendents, government agents, and educational institutions. Nationally, these fall under a broad category of Aboriginal Englishes and the quite separate Torres Strait Creole or Yumpla Tok. The presence of these languages make the Australian Indigenous language situation even more complex, particularly where it intersects with education systems.

Creoles are dynamic and fluid languages and for a significant proportion of Indigenous Australians are a first language or an often-used language. For example, the Torres Strait Creole is my first language, even though I grew up hearing and understanding my mother’s traditional language Kala Lagau Ya. Throughout my childhood, we lived in the administrative centre for the region, where English was the language of government agencies and education, so Creole was the common language for us in the playground and in the streets. Today, these ‘new’ or ‘contact’ Indigenous languages have the largest numbers of speakers, for example, the 2014 National Indigenous Language Survey reported 19,000 speakers of Torres Strait Creole, which far outnumber our traditional language speakers,

because it is a language common to all Torres Strait Islanders in the Torres Strait and on the Australian mainland and spoken across all current generations. Indeed, I would say those numbers are probably an under-estimation. For younger generations, Indigenous Creole languages around Australia are increasingly embraced as a marker of identity and heritage. For this reason, they are being recognised as languages whose first language status, value, and utility cannot be ignored, especially in education (Meakins & O'Shanessy, 2016). Of course, for a significant proportion of Torres Strait Islanders, the Creole is their second language, with the traditional language remaining a first language.

However, contact or creole languages are by no means static languages. As dynamic and fluid oral languages they operate on a continuum with variable weightings of English and traditional languages and are often the site for ongoing language innovation. For example, in addition to the various regional forms of Aboriginal Kriols in more rural or remote areas, a highly anglicised form of Aboriginal English is widely used in urban areas as an identity marker that supports cultural solidarity amongst large mixed populations of Aboriginal people from different language groups across the country. The Torres Strait Creole provides another example of the degrees of influence of different languages in the various creoles. This language contains all the language influences of our colonial history, including the languages of South Sea Island missionaries and seaman, and Indo-Malay, Filipino, and Japanese people who worked in the *beche de mer* and pearling industries in the Torres Strait during the early colonial periods.

Like the Aboriginal Kriols, the Torres Strait Creole languages in the regional centres on the eastern coast of Queensland tend to be more anglicised than the Creole spoken in the administrative centre in the Torres Strait, which in turn is more anglicised than the Creole spoken on the remote outer islands of the Torres Strait region. This reflects to some extent the vitality or degree of use of traditional languages in these different locations and the extent to which English dominates in the business of people's daily lives. Non-Indigenous people who may quite quickly learn to understand the more anglicised creole may have great difficulty understanding creole with less English words and more traditional words and the associated local pronunciations of English phonemes.

For many Torres Strait Islanders, the Creole language is what still connects us to our traditional languages, and therefore is still a useful repository of traditional language meanings associated with our knowledge, albeit in more limited terms. Most Torres Strait Creole speakers still identify strongly with one of the two traditional languages linked to their family heritage, even if they cannot speak the language fluently. I, for example, grew up with a lot of environmental, marine and astronomical knowledge, still attached to traditional words, phrases, concepts and logic of my mother's language but communicated by the older generations through a very fluid movement in and out of the traditional and creole languages, both of which they spoke.

Current Torres Strait Islander sea rangers and other service providers are most likely absorbing and incorporating scientific and bureaucratic language into their creole as a tool for shared communication and understanding. The fluidity of these language practices are useful for Islanders to maintain our interests in interactions with scientific, government, and commercial interests in our region—as long as

Torres Strait knowledge remains strong and the Creole maintains its use of traditional language concepts and meanings, and remains attached to, as much as possible, the more intricate aspects of our traditional knowledge relations. This it appears to do fairly well in relation to environmental knowledge and kinship obligations, but it does not connect us very well to the old traditional law, which was supplanted by Christian morality and practices.

There are also examples from Aboriginal Australia, where traditional multilingual and trans-languaging practices continue on and influence changes and innovations to both the traditional language and English-based Kriol languages (See Karidakis Kelly, 2018). In the Northern Territory, for example, a language called Light Walpiri has emerged that “combines [three languages], the traditional language of the Walpiri people, the English-based Aboriginal Kriol, and English” (See Karidakis Kelly, 2018). Similarly, a language called New Tiwi has emerged in distinction from the original traditional language, which is now referred to as Old Tiwi. As well, Aboriginal Kriols in some places have increased their localisation by increasing integration and innovation of aspects of the local traditional language. The Gurindji Kriol, for example, is distinguished both from the English-based Kriol and the traditional languages of the Gurindji people (Bell, 2013a). In the case of a traditional language revival attempt, the Aboriginal linguist Jeanie Bell developed a program to revive the Badjala language from the regional Hervey Bay area in Queensland. As a linguist, she insisted that the grammar was taught alongside words and phrases. The teacher running the program reported that the students found it too hard and preferred to add the traditional words and phrases they were learning into the Aboriginal English they used in their communications with each other (Bourke & Parkin, 1977; O’Keefe, 2012).

These examples of language innovation all reflect the importance of the perceived utility of a language for its survival and for its continued usage on the part of Indigenous communities. They also reflect the almost universal human tendency towards creative and adaptive solutions to practical and changing needs. But overwhelmingly, these examples reveal the enormous variety and complexity of the Australian Indigenous language situation and the practical challenges involved in trying to save Australian traditional languages, all of which are at risk of extinction, at least in their fullest traditional forms and meanings.

Language priorities and national education agendas

Nowhere does this complex language situation impact more than in the education of Indigenous Australians, where the language of instruction is English. In remote areas, Indigenous students are generally a majority in schools, often 90–100% of the total student population. In urban and regional Australian schools where the largest proportion of Indigenous students are educated, Indigenous students are generally a minority, as high as 30% in places but generally below 10% and sometimes only a handful. In 1977, the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was first reported in a study of 10 and 14-year-old Australian students’ English literacy and numeracy performance (Dreise, 2016). In schools where

students were predominantly Aboriginal the literacy gap was 57 percentage points. In schools where Aboriginal students were the minority the gap was 18 percentage points. The numeracy gaps were similar. In 2010, some 43 years later, albeit under a different assessment and reporting method, the gap between reading achievement levels of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 3 students who were below the minimum standard was 20 percentage points on a national average of student performance (Australian Government, 2020). To put it another way, even in the lowest band of reading performance, Indigenous students were 20 percentage points behind non-Indigenous underperforming students. However, when analysed according to the proportion of Indigenous students in a school it was found that in schools where 91–100% of students were Indigenous, 40 percent were below the minimum standard—14 times the proportion in schools where no Indigenous students were enrolled. Since then, there have been no significant improvements (Bell, 2013b). As Indigenous students progress through the school years, the achievement gap between them and other Australia students widens, whether in remote, regional or urban areas.

In the interim, we had close to half a century of reform in Indigenous education, including an input of millions of dollars into schools, resources, and programs for Indigenous students. We have had a National Indigenous Education Policy in Australia, constructed with close consultation and advice from Indigenous people for 30 years. The policy, as it should, pursues dual goals—the provision of an education commensurate with that provided for all Australian students, as well as an education that supports the continuation of Indigenous cultures. The policy recognised both the effects of historical disadvantage in education but also the significance of cultural difference and recognised the importance of Indigenous participation in decision-making to support the goal of self-determination. But, in the policy's interpretation into practice, there has been a fundamental assumption that whatever the geo-location of Indigenous students, the attention to Indigenous students' language and cultural differences would be the primary remedy for low achievement levels and for countering the perceived assimilatory impact of standard schooling practices. This agenda is interpreted in terms of cultural inclusion in the standard Australian curriculum—culturally-appropriate practices, culturally relevant or inclusive curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy. Efforts to develop inclusive curriculum are popular, widespread and culturally responsive pedagogy is a current trend. But in practice these efforts tend to be minimal, educationally light, and prone to superficial, generalised, or stereotypical constructions of Indigenous people and cultures. Nevertheless, cultural forms of inclusion are argued to raise the self-esteem and engagement of Indigenous students and the awareness and knowledge levels of other Australian students.

Despite the continuing failure of the cultural agenda to make deep inroads into Indigenous students' achievement levels, quite recently, a call to teach local Indigenous languages in schools has gained impetus. However, the development of programs is not easy, particularly in a situation when a local language needs to be revived first, and it is left up to people on the ground in schools and communities to develop the resources for the program. Nationally, programs are few at this stage but are argued to enable a greater awareness of Indigenous languages and knowledge

on the part of all who take them, if only to gain limited proficiency. It is a trend I support but, in my view, this development won't rescue our languages or help our children to succeed in the formal curriculum areas either. The cultural agenda has been clearly failing to deliver the desired outcomes for Indigenous Australians over the past four decades yet there is still no appetite for a different narrative.

A way forward

Over decades and in my roles in Australian universities, I have been quite pre-occupied with improving the success rates of Indigenous students in Australian universities, which cannot occur without the mastery of the nuances and contexts of English, academic and mathematical language and knowledge. I have argued that deep engagement with the Western disciplines is necessary for Indigenous higher education students to reconsider what these mean for their own practices in Indigenous contexts – contexts where disciplinary knowledge informs practices and leads to misinformed judgements about Indigenous peoples' practices and vice versa. I have argued this is a critical knowledge and skills set for Indigenous people, including Indigenous people in remote areas. Indigenous professionals and leaders in communities have to navigate the conflicts and tensions between Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world and the methods and organisation of the Western disciplines. It is these that hold sway in the professions, governments, and bureaucracies and in the services they deliver and in the policies that affect Indigenous people and communities. Without understanding these tensions, Indigenous students' critical assessments of different knowledge standpoints are more likely to be reactive, confused, over-simplistic, or naïve, rather than cognisant of the complexities involved when different knowledge practices converge at the interface of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems of thought.

I have further argued that while schools should teach all Australian students about the presence of Indigenous people, knowledge, cultures and languages, that schools are not the place to be teaching Indigenous students this. I have argued that for Indigenous students, Indigenous knowledge, language and culture should be learnt in our communities and controlled by Indigenous people who are the guardians of that knowledge. The 2014 Indigenous Languages Survey reported that only 1% of those surveyed thought like me about this issue. The Aboriginal linguist Jeannie Bell suggested that 'some elders will continue to display hardened attitudes towards the 'old ways', and may voice their opinion that traditional language should remain in the past and not be brought into schools' (Nakata, 1991). There are elders however who do not think that knowledge and language should not be brought into schools because it belongs in the past—but because it is best learnt in situ, on country, in the community, in families and neighbourhoods where the connections between language and knowledge can be best expressed. I don't think those involved in Indigenous schooling in Australia have found the courage to say to our communities, it is our responsibility as Indigenous people to teach culture and language and we must find a way to do it outside of schools, where it is merely a patronised add-on to the mainstream curriculum. Nor have we found the courage to say, we must rid

ourselves of our ambivalence to Western schooling and unconditionally support our children's education in schools and believe in their capacity to succeed in learning what all other children are able to learn. It is we, as Indigenous people, who must ensure they keep their connections to their knowledges, cultures and languages, not the schools. Schools cannot take that away if we are playing our part. Schools never took that away from me but they did fail to connect me to the context of Western knowledge so I could understand what it all meant.

I am currently leading a school-based STEM project, where I was stunned to learn that Indigenous students are not required to do homework and that the teachers had no substitute provision for this extra work. As the Math specialist on the project said, no high school student in the nation can pass the Math subjects they require for entry into university without doing regular homework and extended practice. Yet everyone wants Indigenous students to go on to pursue their interests or their community's needs for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander professionals and expects them somehow to make up the gaps in their knowledge when they enter university under special access conditions. But somehow in schools, our students are not expected to do the work that is required to close the gaps between their achievement levels and those of other Australian students. What this feeds is a view that Indigenous students cannot do well at Maths for some unproven cultural or language reason or worse that to insist on homework is to impose on our cultures. The literature says that there are low expectations of our students in schools but there are also high expectations that they can make up ground further on in their education. This is very unrealistic and ultimately unfair treatment of our Indigenous students who have the same capacity to learn as other students but who in subtle ways are messaged they don't have to learn as other students do because they are understood to be culturally different. This low expectation from teachers is not a recipe for successful outcomes in a State-based education agenda.

Concluding remarks

Perhaps in similar ways we expect too much of the various activities that are pursued to maintain and increase usage of our Indigenous languages. Perhaps we need to have our eyes wide open and be quite explicit about the limits of different language restoration and maintenance activities, and the specific purposes and goals that can be achieved by specific activities or projects. We have to be honest in the assessment of each language situation and of the factors that are likely to advance or impede any envisioned language program and set realistic objectives (Loh & Harmon, 2014). But perhaps we also need to seek more creative ways to respond to our situation. Perhaps we need to accept the idea of ensuring there are enough traditional language and knowledge specialists to act as custodians and reference points, while gifting the young the freedom to do what they do best, which is to be creative innovators of languages, knowledge and cultural practices in their everyday worlds.

What we cannot continue to do is to think that schools within the national and state-based education system have the answers. A smattering of traditional language and light culture in schools will not maintain our languages or offset the perceived assimilatory tendencies of the core-curriculum areas. However, explicitness around

the different knowledge systems and their purposes in Indigenous lives can enable students to learn how to understand where they are in the knowledge landscape and traverse in and out of these different contexts of knowledge and practice sets in a more confident manner. Most importantly, explicitness around the connections between language and knowledge and the need to master the language, which expresses the meaning within each, is fundamental to avoid instilling confusion and misinformation in students. Confusion, ambivalence, or pressure can lead some students to disengage with both traditional knowledge and language and the knowledge and language of the standard core curriculum, which they also need. With a clearer view of the relations between language and knowledge, and more mastery of the language and content of both Indigenous and Western core curriculum areas, students can gain a better basis for more creative and more useful innovations of knowledge and language. We need to have a much stronger belief in the capacity of our Indigenous students to manage in these complex situations. But we also need our guardians and custodians of our traditional knowledge and its associated languages. One is up to Indigenous people and communities, the other is up to schools, and this requires a continued Indigenous effort and an alternate narrative for moving forwards.

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