

## Discussion Paper:

“Finding new words to talk about ourselves”

Exploring the relationship between self-concept clarity and language.

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### **Introduction**

Policies of criminalisation, land removal, child removal and censorship in post-invasion Australia has resulted in a considerable loss of First Nations Australians language records, speakers, custodians and learners (Broome, 2010; AIATSIS 2005 & 2014; Jolly, 1995).

Likewise, fixed social attitudes by the monolingual majority have centred English as the dominant language while simultaneously demoting mother tongue languages as having little perceived economic and social currency (Bourdieu, 1986; Baloy, 2008). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples this process has been institutionalised, systemic, structural and enshrined in law (Broome, 2010).

Pre-invasion Australia hosted around 250 individual languages and it has been estimated that 600 dialects were spoken across 260 to 290 nations (AIATSIS, 2014). With less than 80,000 speakers in total today, 13 languages are classified as strong (5-6a) and 120 spoken partially (threatened moribund 6b-8b) (AIATSIS, 2014; Ting & Ling, 2013). The current rate of intergenerational heritage language loss is around 10%, that is, Australia loses approximately 30 languages every 30 years, or a language group a year (Buckskin et al., 2009). Of the population of ‘strong’ speakers, only 1.9% are from Greater Capital City Areas (AIATSIS, 2014).

Many contemporary educational reforms have prevented the use and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in communities,

schools and mainstream Australia. This reflects a tendency for politicians and some key figures to dismiss the utility of First Nations languages in schools. These policies include the 'Four Hours a Day Program' (Frigo et al., 2008), Noel Pearson's controversial 'Good to Great Schools' (Dickson, 2012), the widespread removal of bilingual and multilingual education (Caffery, McConvell, & Simpson, 2009; Egan, 1999), and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (Thomas, 2017).

Despite these reforms there is a growing movement from within mainstream Australia to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language learning. This is evidenced in educational policies for example, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA's) adoption of a Language Learning and Revitalisation Syllabus (2015), Indigenous Language Way Forward program (DET, 2008), and broader developments such as the Australian Human Rights Commission's Preserving Indigenous Languages research (2009), NSW Government's commitment to funding for community language programs (2016) and the recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (2012) as well as the National Aboriginal and Islander Observance Day Committee (NAIDOC) theme for 2018 being Our Languages Matter.

Currently, only 2% of Australia's teaching staff identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Burrige, Edwards & Yerbury, 2013; Shay & Wickes, 2017). Given the growing demand for language learning in schools there must be an increase in teachers who identify and who hold language (Amery & Buckskin, 2012). Unfortunately, current teaching demographics cannot meet the demand for either (Varcoe, 1994).

In addressing this discrepancy, numerous reports have called for schemes and programs outside of schools to provide First Languages tuition (Buckskin et al., 2009; Jolly, 1995). The Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 Recommendation 8 endorses “all school sectors” to make budgetary room “for the delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language” and “consider how out-of-school schemes might operate” (Buckskin et al., 2009, p.55). It could be deduced that work with First Nations languages cannot be significant unless it is undertaken in collaboration with community (Harris, 1994; Bamblett, 2006). Previous work teaching language in schools prior to the Australian Curriculums adoption of the 'Aboriginal Languages' Syllabus proved

“slow, inefficient and alienating” to community leaders, elders and custodians who felt neglected from the development and maintenance of the programs sharing their knowledges (Jolly, 1995).

Poetry in First Language is one such scheme that addresses both the need for First Nations educators and First Nations language tuition within a scheme that is external to mainstream institutions. It is in this fault line that Red Room Poetry has found a critical role.

### **Background**

There is a salient connection between ‘self-concept clarity’ and wellbeing for First Nations peoples internationally (Bamblett, 2006; Usborne, & Taylor, 2010). For example, Michael Chandler, Darcy Hallet and Christopher Lalonde (2007) found that speaking and maintaining a heritage language allowed for the expansion of ‘self-concept’ and the development of cultural continuity. These factors, Chandler et al., (2007) found linked to protective measures against youth suicide and other “trauma associated with historical loss” (p. 391). In the local context, research reviewed by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that maintaining heritage languages promoted resilience, improved health, increased employment options, improved cognitive function, and contained intrinsic value (AHRC, 2009). Additionally, First Nations Australians who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language are more likely to be mentally and physically healthy, less likely to abuse alcohol and less likely to have criminal charges (Dockery, 2011; ACOFA, 2018).

While culture is universal, the homogeneity of said cultures are limited. The same is true within First Nations states. Despite the diversity in the expressions of culture, wellbeing and academic success have been linked to students understanding their cultural background and the affirmation of that culture in the classroom or school (MCEECDYA, 2010). This process can be defined as ‘enculturation’ (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). I would argue that the current syllabuses vague influences of the ‘cross curriculum priorities’ is stratified to maintain acculturation, this is something expressed resolutely by participants. Furthermore, evidence indicates that those who must straddle and ‘code-switch’ between multiple cultural groups may struggle with identity formation (Erikson, 1994), especially during adolescence (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). For First Nations people this involves negotiating between often

competing and conflicting principles, the effect of which can be described as “bewildering” (Usborne & Taylor, 2010, p.885).

In the wake of recent support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language revitalization, research needs to be undertaken to reveal the progress of the ACARA language syllabus and grassroots language programs. The experiences of those participating in these programs should be voiced as funding continues to grow. While there is substantial literature on the effects of language and self-concept in North America, Australia is limited in studies that directly link language learning to wellbeing (Guevremont, & Kohen, 2012; McCarthy, 2003). Furthermore, most contemporary research on the condition and use of First Nations languages focuses on remote communities where heritage languages are active and fluency is the goal (Jolly, 1995). Research in Australian urban settings still remain limited with few exceptions (see Amery, & Buckskin, 2012). I seek to address some of these gaps in the literature.

## **Research**

The primary data gathered for this thesis comes out of work undertaken with First Nations Australians involved in Red Room Poetry’s Poetry in First Languages (PIFL) programs from January 2018 through to the end of August 2019. Following Eva Dakich, Tony Watt, and Neil Hooley’s (2016) ‘community narrative paradigm’ approach, I interviewed three main groups; A. program facilitators B. teacher’s/community members, and C. students. The interviews took place between January and August 2019. Each interview ran between 60 to 90 minutes and over one or two sittings. The main topic for the interviews was in relation to “self-concept clarity” and language.

Using a phenomenological approach, I was able to interpret the data using themes that were not restricted by quantitative rigor. Instead, I allowed myself to respond and reflect on the experience of the project and the interviews freely. Nakata (2007) describes this as discursively [un]construct the “reflection of experience” with the aims being “not to produce the ‘truth’ of the Indigenous position” or “[re]construct the dominant paradigms, but to create a framework for expression that is authentic to the participant[s]” (p. 10–12). I consider that the use of thematic analysis and arousal scales would best reflect this intention. The arousal scales were compiled from observation and a manual semantic analysis of responses.

## Results

The results display several key findings, which includes:

- a) the success of language as a tool to build self-concept clarity
- b) the presence of discrimination and racism faced by Koori students
- c) the limitations of ACARA's 'cross curriculum priorities' and language syllabus

### *Language and self-concept clarity*

The initial research question, "the link between self-concept clarity and language", sought to investigate the relationship between wellbeing and language. The findings that have emerged from this project illustrate that positive experiences are correlated with the engagement of language. The positive experiences occurred despite the differing opinions between participants on what constitutes 'language'. The effect of 'language' on self-concept clarity from participants ranged from increased confidence in their identity as a First Nations person to 'language' learning radically altering their world view and sense of self. The data clearly indicates that language positively influences self-concept. Furthermore, it appears that the self-concept gained from engaging with 'language' had unexpected benefits for example, increased self-efficacy and/or genuine self-actualization. Students reported that their academic confidence and willingness to engage with academic pursuits (like writing poetry) increased as a result of learning Gundungurra language.

While all participants viewed 'language' as a tool for manifesting and securing self-concept the students considered that language was not a necessary condition for identity formation and validation. It appears that students most closely align themselves with 'anti-essentialist' conceptions of 'language', which indicates a potential generational divide.

### *Racism in schools and the school curriculum*

In spite of its deviation from the initial research question, the overwhelming expression of outer group racism emerged as a primary area of concern in the data. It appears that the obtuse and complacent ways in which teachers address the 'cross-curriculum' priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories Cultures and Perspectives [CCP] has resulted in the discrimination, frustration and even re-traumatization of students.

However, this thesis has been successful in supporting studies in confirming that community, peer and family support serve as protective factors against the

negative impacts of racism (Priest, Paradies & Stewart, 2011). Given the small sample size it is difficult to determine if the experiences of Group C speak to broader student experiences.

### *Community programming*

The students' understandings and experiences of 'community' facilitated language programs were nuanced. While community, especially First Nations 'role models', were shown to benefit self-concept and adjacent outcomes, the students reported that moderate amounts of discomfort occurred for them when involved in community. The data embodies the diversity of opinion that exists between participants on how best to build 'language' into schools following the introduction of the ACARA Language Revitalization Syllabus (2015). All respondents agreed that community input into syllabus and policy drafting as well as lesson development and instruction should be increased. This also reflects the demands of a large body of First Nations scholars (Gooda, 2014; Buckskin et al., 2009; Bamblett, 2006).

## **Implications and Recommendations for Researchers, Practitioners, and Policy Makers**

The data reflects a need for three reviews to occur:

- i. Government review of anti-racism training, commitments and programs
- ii. Review of syllabus
- iii. Red Room Poetry's PIFL program review of targeted populations

### *Government commitment to anti-racism*

One of the most important issues that emerged from the data was the need for anti-racism education at all levels of schooling. It appears that explicit anti-racism instruction still remains limited, if not entirely absent. Racism continues to be an issue for many First Nations people despite the 'support' of inclusive and equitable education in Australia for example, NSW 'Aboriginal Education Policy and Strategy documents (1982; 2009-2012), Melbourne Declaration (2008), Anti-Racism (DoE, 2016) and RacismNoWay (DoE, 2016). It is of concern that the experiences faced by Group A and B decades ago are still being felt by young First Nations students today. The intensity and regularity of the students experience of racism speaks to the need for government to be more proactive in this domain.

### *ACARA and NSW syllabus review*

I had expected to investigate the strengths and challenges of ‘language’ instruction in schools, however Group C reported that they had never had the opportunity to learn about First Nations languages in school. This is of concern given that language familiarization is a part of the NSW syllabus. All respondents had several suggestions for the NSW syllabus and the Australian curriculum more broadly:

- 1) All participants believed that First Nations languages should be a mandatory part of the syllabus. All believed that this curriculum should be in consultation with the community groups associated with the school district
- 2) The cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives, Histories and Cultures is not defined clearly enough. The amount of diversity in how teachers can address the priority demonstrates the lack of clarity directed from the syllabus bodies. More specifically, ACARA needs to mandate that teachers embed this priority in a way that is not:
  - a) Brief and limited to a single unit of study
    - i) group C explained that the CCP was often mentioned alongside a broader unit of study. This is not surprising as the cross-curriculum priority just ‘calls for’ ‘perspectives’, as opposed to deep and extensive conversations or units of study.
  - b) Tokenistic
    - i) the respondents were concerned with the superficial and ‘checkbox’ style of engagement with the CCP. It appears that many teachers have not developed nuanced and meaningful units of work that engaged with these issues.
  - c) Trauma inflicting
    - i) when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives are addressed, it appears that the content is often deficit framed. Too often the teaching of the oppression and genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders take precedence over histories of resistance, celebration and survival. While exposing this part of our Settler Colonial history is essential the revisiting of selected traumatic histories can be triggering for Aboriginal students when not approached through trauma informed practice. This was expressed by Group C, who said that content they would covered in class made them emotional, ashamed and alienated. There is a tendency, as reflected in the literature, to assume disadvantage in the education of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Hogarth, 2018). This can be most explicitly seen in documents like the Melbourne Declaration, in which First Nations Australians are addressed alongside children with a disability (MCEECDYA, 2008).

### *Red Room Poetry's PIFL program expansion*

The benefit of the work undertaken by Red Room Poetry is unquestionable. I recommend that funding bodies move to support Red Room Poetry's Poetry in First Languages program further.

This will allow the project to expand to reach more than just First Nations students (as recommended by Group C). This has also emerged as a necessity since the data revealed that schools are not addressing language outcomes in the English syllabus, let alone language outcomes in the CCP. It was clear to Group A and Group B that the PIFL program had a tangible impact on student wellbeing. Group C also reflected this sentiment in speaking of their relationships with Elders and their increased self-concept clarity after engaging with poetry and the program. As student wellbeing and self-concept clarity can be linked to the reduction of self-harm (Bambllett, 2006), it is imperative that the PIFL program is well resourced. The Red Room Poetry program and language revitalisation projects more generally are giving First Nations students access to knowledge and resources that are not provided by their mainstream education. The students mentioned throughout the discussion their inability to tackle daily questions they face about their identity. Group C recommended that the Red Room Poetry's PIFL program expand to include non-First Nations students so that their peers could witness firsthand the success and celebration of First Nations cultures. Group C believed that community members and Elders would be better equipped at tackling the questions that their peers put to them.

### **Conclusion**

While ACARA and the NSW Department of Education have an Aboriginal Language Syllabus and policies to tackle racism in schools it appears that both of these measures have had little tangible success for the students interviewed. Red Room Poetry's Poetry in First Languages program is clearly meeting the needs of First Nations students they are accessing and should therefore be supported as they attempt to rectify the gaps being left unaddressed by Australia's education system.



For those who seek to ratify the Uluru Statement from the Heart Declaration, for those who seek to be an ally to our young First Nations population, for those who seek to advocate against racism in Australia, I implore you to listen to young people like those interviewed in this project. This is their time to speak and this is our time to listen.

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