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5/12/2022

National Teacher Workforce Action Plan Working Group
Department of Education
Australian Government

Draft National Teacher Workforce Action Plan Submission

I make this submission as a Senior Yolŋu leader of the Liya Dhalinyimirr clan of the Djambarrpuyŋu people from North East Arnhem Land and as the elected member for the electorate of Mulka in the Northern Territory Parliament.

This submission addresses two of the Draft Actions: Improving Teacher Supply and Strengthening Initial Teacher Education. Point 12 in the Draft Action Plan outlines co-designing actions to attract and retain more First Nations teachers. It also notes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) which ran for five years from 2011. Educators from Galiwin'ku took part in this research and hoped for change in the Northern Territory as a result. Below is a quote from the key messages of the MATSITI research which is as pertinent and even more urgent in 2022.

Supporting Yolŋu Teachers to teach on country is everybody's business. How and in what ways Yolŋu move towards ITE pathways and teacher registration status will be shaped by personal and family circumstances, the capacity of ITE programs to respond to the intellectual and contextual requirements for teaching (on and off country), and the capacity of the cultural authority structures within communities to support Yolŋu in their endeavours.

In this project Yolŋu reminded educators, administrators and researchers, once again that their goal in becoming teachers was not to become fit and proper teachers like Balanda. Language, land, knowledge practices, cultural authority structures and family connections were not up for negotiation as part of the study pathway. Any pathways for Yolŋu must include and work with these issues. If this does not happen there is a danger not only that the program will fail Yolŋu but by default, Yolŋu will be blamed for that perceived failure.

It is time to listen properly and act accordingly to meet the challenge Yolŋu Teachers have presented. (MATSITI 2011).

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In line with this I would like to offer another category for the Draft Action Plan, one that specifically addresses the needs of local Aboriginal teachers in Northern Territory communities.

Initial Teacher Education would be strengthened for our people through the development of a specific teaching degree which addresses the needs of emergent bilingual students in NT Aboriginal community schools. This degree would be an Indigenous Community Based Teacher Education which starts with respect for the first languages of our teachers and students. It would incorporate holistic approaches to learning, and the active participation of community elders.

An Initial Bilingual and Bicultural Teacher Education degree would:

- Be delivered face-to-face in communities, in intensive workshops on campus and electronically through distance education methods,
- Include primary education courses prescribed by ACARA national standards, also providing a balance of time for research into the development of local curriculum underpinned by Indigenous Knowledge systems and Indigenous languages study,
- Have education credits supplemented with discipline-centred courses in Mathematics, Science, English as an Additional Language, Aboriginal Studies and Child Development courses relevant to Northern Territory community contexts,
- Include courses that cater to the needs of bilingual students through Aboriginal languages with a focus on the development of children's first and second languages or dialects that prepare a strong framework for students to easily understand and learn English literacy at a later stage.

A Bilingual and Bicultural Teacher Education degree would place Aboriginal language and cultural knowledge studies as a key part of the curriculum by providing a focus on the development for students of their first thinking and learning language.

This also reflects the way in which Yolŋu elders teach their children. Family begin by speaking to the child in the child's clan language, and as the child gets older and understands their clan language, the mother's clan language is introduced and then the grandparents languages are introduced and so on.

In this way Yolŋu students already come to school with highly developed language skills and a study of linguistics that begins at birth. The role of these languages, the child's language and other dialects is a strong part of a child's identity and formulating their understanding of the world around them. Without recognising students' first language, teaching is disabled; it cannot draw on and develop students' understandings to the same extent as when the child's first language is used.

This idea of Education training that is specific to our unique context is not new. From 1975 until 1997 Batchelor College in the Northern Territory implemented the Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE)

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program which achieved many local Indigenous teacher graduates in that time despite a significant time gap between community-based delivery: Stage one (1976), Stage 2 (1988) and Stage 3 (1990). These graduates went on to teach in their communities for over thirty years.

At the time of writing almost all these graduates have either passed away, retired, or are at the final stage in their teaching career. There is an urgent need for a long-term perspective in planning the development of an increasingly well-qualified force of local Aboriginal teachers for Northern Territory remote schools.

A renewed program like the RATE program would need to provide realistic terminal points for people who do not have the desire or ability to proceed to the final nationally accredited award. It should be:

- available in various modes with realistic terminal points,
- able to overcome fragmentation, duplication and disconnectedness which are characteristics of a discrete-unit approach.

For many Yolŋu teachers, their desire is to grow their capacity to become a strong bilingual teacher working alongside a balanda teacher in a two-ways classroom. Our educators know that team teaching in a bilingual, bicultural school is going to give our children the best opportunities in education.

I note that there is currently a RATE program running in the Northern Territory that was reintroduced in 2021, but I do not believe that this new version is about creating bilingual and bicultural teachers for our unique settings. For the survival of our people and culture, it is critical that our teachers are trained for our communities. Previous education courses that have tried to push our educators through mainstream courses designed for urban classrooms have failed. It is very clear that the creation of a new qualification is required to achieve successful educational outcomes in our schools.

I respectfully submit this document in the hope that the work done in 2011 through MATSITI will bear fruit and the needs of Aboriginal students and teachers in the Northern Territory will be taken seriously in good faith and as a matter of urgency.

Yours Sincerely,

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