



**UNIVERSITY of GUYANA**

**Faculty of Education & Humanities**

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**MEMORANDUM**

**From:** The Language Policy and Language Rights Informal Working Group  
**To:** The Honourable Rupert Roopnaraine, Minister of Education  
**Date:** May 10, 2016  
**Subject:** Language Rights, Language Education Policy and Curriculum Reform

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Dear Minister Roopnaraine,

This is a memorandum requesting

- A. immediate action in two major areas of human rights and education policy in Guyana: language rights and language education policy, and
- B. institutional support for the working group to conduct a language attitudes survey and a language competence survey across Guyana
- C. with support from the International Centre for Caribbean Language Research, UWI (ICCLR-UWI) phased implementation of curriculum reform strategies across the education system to allow for access to literacy and education in the two widely used languages of the country, Creolese and English, based on the principle of the maintenance of the home language as one of main languages of education.

**The problem:**

Although English remains the sole official language of Guyana, the vast majority of Guyanese, including our teachers, are learners of English, having Guyanese (Creolese) or an Amerindian language as their first language. While Amerindian languages have long been recognized and accepted as languages in their own right, and Guyana has already begun the process of



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preserving those languages and even to teach literacy in some of them, there is no official policy that recognizes Creolese as the first language of the vast majority of Guyanese.

Creolese is assigned dialectal ‘folk’ value, in written form: It is skillfully used by English speaking creative writers who seek individual recognition of their Caribbean specificity abroad; it appears in print media verbatim reports of interviews with the Guyanese speakers; and it is exploited by the business elite in advertising. Yet, under the current – unwritten – language education policy arrangements, Creolese is assigned inferior value to English in the education system, and English is being taught as a mother tongue, with marginal accommodation to Creolese, which is seen as a ‘dialect’ which ‘interferes’ with the learning of English.

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of this invisible language education policy is that although Creolese appears occasionally in English language textbooks, and although teachers often use it instinctively to facilitate comprehension, it is assigned negative educational value in the assessment of students’ speech and writing. The attached video clip shows a literacy specialist from the National Centre for Education Resource Development (NCERD) interpreting the current language policy at the nursery/primary level for other participants at a workshop for writing Creolese conducted at the University of Guyana by a member of the working group [video clip 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ACOO2EOjEM>]. Furthermore, no primary school timetable in Guyana to date overtly states that English is a subject to be taught. But the language activities identified in the timetable are all assumed to be carried out in English.



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The Ministry of Education Report of 2008 – 2013 re-iterated the ‘strategic challenge’ that the 2003 – 2007 education plan had recognized in relation to the teaching of literacy and numeracy: “In spite of several efforts Guyana is still plagued with poor results in English and Mathematics. The 2007 National assessments for grades 2, 4, 6, and 9 reveal that approximately **70%** of each cohort fails to reach an acceptable standard in language arts (reading and English) (2008-2013: Section 3.3)”

This problem is magnified against the backdrop of scientific evidence over more than 50 years supporting the view that linguistic equality is a pre-requisite for people’s full participation in a democratic polity. Without the ministry’s clear statement of a language policy which recognizes and accepts Creolese as a major language that is common to all Guyanese groups irrespective of race or ethnicity, educational planning and curriculum delivery will continue to marginalize the great majority of students entering the education system, hampering their general education and their early English language acquisition and mastery.

**Recommendations:**

**RIGHTS AND POLICY**

We recommend that the process for recognition of language rights and the implementation of language education policy can be achieved by the convening of a National Commission on Language Policy “to help draft a National Language Policy for Guyana which would, after



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extensive public discussion, be the subject of legislation. The Commission would receive written submissions from interested groups and individuals as well as hear oral submissions in public sessions.” (See proposal to the Minister of Education, Guyana from Professor Hubert Devonish, Sept 13, 2015 and supporting letter from Professor Walter Edwards). The principles guiding the commission would be those outlined in the 2011 *Charter for Language Policy and Language Rights in the Creole Speaking Caribbean*.

<https://sta.uwi.edu/fhe/dmll/documents/CARIBBEANLANGUAGECharter.pdf>

(See Appendix 1 for Article 25 to 29 pertaining to education in schools)

**RESEARCH TO SUPPORT THE PROCESS**

The process for the curriculum reform should be supported by research, which we have already begun in the working group. We request institutional support to carry out two country wide surveys on language attitudes and language competence. These surveys will help shape and inform the process and provide a background to allow the success of the initiative to be quantified, monitored and demonstrated through similar surveys in the future. The informal working group has already begun work for the surveys.

**CURRICULUM REFORM**

Curriculum reform can be rolled out in phases:



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Phase 1: Select one primary school each from regions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 10 and, with the support of the ICCLR, UWI, conduct a pilot project in full bilingual education. (See attached report of the BEP, Jamaica <http://www-01.sil.org/silewp/2007/silewp2007-009.pdf>)

The other phases will be determined by the success of Phase 1.

In the Foreword to the Ministry of Education Strategic Plan (2008 – 2013), the Minister identifies a kind of dual goal for education in Guyana to be achieved through ‘priority policies and strategies that Guyana needs to pursue to make the country competitive in the global economy, as well as to realize its national development aspirations.’ The minister’s definition of education suggests that national development aspirations are in some way connected to the empowerment of each person in the nation: ‘It has intrinsic value. It is the main way to help each human being achieve his/her highest potential. It should be able to give the nation’s citizens the necessary knowledge, skills, and values to lead happy and productive lives. . . .’ (page 5). In writing about education in the United States, Danielle Allen points out that “the aspiration to educate for civic participation and not merely work has important distributive implications. The participatory paradigm demands a higher educational standard than the vocational, and meeting that standard requires that more resources be allocated for schools.” <http://bostonreview.net/forum/danielle-allen-what-education>

The current Minister of Education would serve future generations of Guyanese well by embracing the definition of education presented by the former, and by advocating for the



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vital allocation of resources to the task set out in this memorandum. We in the working group submit that we have the professional staff available to organize and lead the commission on language policy, carry out the surveys, and deliver the pilot project.

We strongly recommend and request an opportunity to make an oral submission to support this written one.

Respectfully submitted by the following members of the Informal Working Group for Language Policy and Language Rights

- |                                |                            |                             |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| -----<br>Carole Bishop         | -----<br>Carolyn Cummings  | -----<br>Louisa Dagers      |
| -----<br>Hubert Devonish       | -----<br>Philbert Gajadhar | -----<br>Sinikka Henry      |
| -----<br>Coreen Jacobs-Chester | -----<br>Camanie Khedaroo  | -----<br>Kimani Nehusi      |
| -----<br>Pamela Rose           | -----<br>Henry Singh       | -----<br>Troy Thomas        |
| -----<br>Alissa Trotz          | -----<br>Nigel Westmaas    | -----<br>Charlene Wilkinson |



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APPENDIX 1

ARTICLES 24 to 29 of the Charter for Language Policy and Language Rights  
in the Creole Speaking Caribbean

PART III (a) EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Article 24

1. Education must help to foster the capacity for linguistic and cultural self-expression of the language communities of the territory where it is provided.
2. Education must help to maintain and develop the languages spoken by the language communities of the territory where it is provided.
3. Initial instruction in one's first language is crucial as it enhances conceptual development, language acquisition and development, learning in general, and education of the child.
4. Education must always be at the service of linguistic and cultural diversity and of harmonious relations between different language communities throughout the world.
5. Within the context of the foregoing principles, everyone has the following rights: - to at least initial instruction and literacy in their first language; - to learn the territorial languages of the territory in which he/she resides; - to learn any other language.
6. Education in one's first language should be continued for as long as is practical.

Article 25

All language communities are entitled to have at their disposal all the human and material resources necessary to ensure that their language is present to the extent they desire at all levels of education within their territory.

Article 26



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All language communities are entitled to an education which will enable their members to acquire a full command of their own language, as well as the most extensive possible command of any other language they may wish to know.

Article 27

All language communities are entitled to an education which will enable their members to acquire knowledge of any language(s) related to their own cultural tradition.

Article 28

1. All language communities are entitled to receive an education in any or all the territorial languages of the territory where they reside.
2. This right does not exclude the right to acquire oral and written knowledge of any language which may be of use to them as an instrument of communication with other language communities.

Article 29

The language and culture of all language communities must be the subject of study and research at university level.