

Wrong way, go back

The dismantling of bilingual education in remote schools goes against the national commitment to Indigenous people and language.

by **Krista Mogensen**

Indigenous leaders are describing the decision to scrap bilingual education in remote schools serving Indigenous communities as ‘hypocritical’ and ‘inept’.

Critics say it is a kneejerk reaction to poor national testing results and a superficial move by politicians who repeat that ‘English is the language of work, the language of economic involvement’ and refuse to consult with the communities involved. Educators say it is obvious that English literacy and numeracy are essential. It is the means of getting there that is in dispute.

In October 2008, the Northern Territory government directed that English was to be taught for the first four hours of the school day. ‘Cultural studies’—including the use of home language—was relegated to the last hour of the day, or after school sessions, set for 6 to 9 pm.

“It is hypocritical when politicians say they believe that Aboriginal children should be proficient in English, but refuse to support bilingual education,” wrote law professor Larissa Behrendt, in an opinion column in the *National Indigenous Times* last year. This reflects



Campaign: Indigenous rights

Join the AEU in calling for the Australian Government, as a recent signatory to the World Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and a long-time signatory to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, to ensure the rights of Indigenous children to learn and speak their languages.

Join the AEU campaign to reinstate bilingual education in remote Indigenous communities. www.aeufederal.org.au

a complete ignorance of what bilingual education is, says Behrendt, and that the children who attend the schools have English as a second language.

“In failing to support the bilingual education model, politicians and policy makers are turning their backs on a proven, effective way to improve literacy and numeracy in Aboriginal communities.”

Blaming bilingual

The Northern Territory’s poor national test results in literacy and numeracy have been blamed for bilingual education’s demise. Yet bilingual

programs scored marginally better than English-only programs, says Professor Peter Buckskin, dean of the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research at the University of South Australia. “They’re not up near the benchmark, we acknowledge that. But that’s about investment and resources.”

Buckskin reviewed Indigenous literacy last year for the council of national education ministers, MCEEDCYA, and found no evidence to support the Northern Territory’s stance. “It is a retrograde step,” he says. “It is educationally inept.”

Teachers believe the nature of bilingual education is poorly understood. “The biggest problem is explaining to the government that bilingual actually means two languages,” says Grace Hooper, teacher and AEU NT executive member. “Bilingual education isn’t about sacrificing learning English for an Indigenous language.”

The bilingual program typically transitions into English over several years, with the early primary years using the children’s first language to develop a bridge to English.

Educators in remote communities—where English is a second language—firmly believe that bilingual education, properly resourced and supported, is the right way to build English literacy and numeracy. Its bicultural approach, using examples from the cultural lives of the children, also lifts student attendance and builds community engagement with the school.

A nation’s pledge

In his Closing the Gap report to Parliament in February 2010 on the anniversary of the Apology to the Stolen Generations, the Prime Minister

Kevin Rudd confirmed that the nation would commit to preserving and reviving Indigenous languages. He also spoke of the nation's commitment to developing 'respect and understanding', and affirming the aspirations of all Indigenous peoples.

Your say ...

Cassandra Brown

Teacher, Yirrkala CEC
Arnhem Land, NT



“It's near impossible to instruct for the first four hours in English as kids do not understand English. Indigenous language is core—it is what keeps everyone together. Here in Yirrkala, it is still very strong.

The idea of language not being in the school would be like not being able to breathe.

Elsewhere our people have lost culture through losing their language. This is why we don't want it. At school, my mother—who is from Yarrabah, Queensland—was told you can't use your language. So now we can't speak our language.

Last year, Australia endorsed the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which pledges to uphold the human rights of Indigenous peoples. In its latest report, Australia's Human Rights Commission describes the state of Indigenous languages in Australia as 'perilous'.

“With the Northern Territory being a part of the COAG agenda on 'Closing the Gap' and the announcement last year of the national approach to preserving Indigenous languages, you would think the government would ensure that a strong bilingual approach is maintained,” says Buckskin.

“Here we have these rich cultural languages in these communities that are generationally spoken—by grandmothers, mothers and children. You wouldn't want to erode that—you'd want to build on that and strengthen that in a way that is preserved forever.”

Buckskin recently visited language immersion schools in Hawaii and was impressed by the competence of the bilingual children he met who are fluent in English but also going on to complete tertiary studies in native Hawaiian language. It's taken 25 years of investment to get there. “Why aren't we strengthening the investment in training and development of the curriculum here to see a similar revival of language?”

“Yolgnu language is our Power, our Foundation, our Root and everything that holds us together,” wrote Yirrkala teacher Yalmay Yunupingu (to Marion Scrymgour, then Northern Territory education minister) when the changes were first announced.

“Please don't steal that away from us.” ●

Krista Mogensen is a commissioning editor of *Australian Educator* and a freelance writer.



Resources

- www.mceecdy.edu.au
 - www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/chap3.html
 - <http://groups.google.com/group/foblmail/web?hl=en>
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Your say ...

Robyn Reynolds

Indigenous Coordination Centre
Perth, WA



“It's not 'closing the gap', it's making it wider. It's being told to go into a room and speak a foreign language for the next four hours—it would make you anxious. You wouldn't want to be there. What concerns me is that education departments aren't prepared to make the curriculum culturally appropriate or use the languages that the kids are familiar with—their home language. It's a lack of respect. And it is a breach of the international declaration—the rights of Indigenous people to their culture and their language and the rights of children to a quality education.