

○ THE STATUS AND FUTURE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR REMOTE INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

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This article analyses the status and future of bilingual education programs using Indigenous languages and English in remote Northern Territory schools. It explains why this educational approach is so contested at present, resulting in an unresolved situation which can best be regarded as an uneasy compromise on the ground and a stalemate at higher levels of political decision making. If the bilingual education approach was better understood by the current NT Government, there would be a strong impetus now to refine and effectively implement a model of schooling that is appropriate for students in remote areas. Instead, current politicians debunk the bilingual approach, thereby robbing schools and literacy plans of any momentum and distracting attention away from the work that needs to be done. Meanwhile, student attendance rates have fallen away to worryingly low levels (Dickson, 2010). The current regime may well resolve the impasse, but in the absence of any meaningful, open negotiation the future looks uncertain. It is too soon to judge the cost of this uncertainty, but it may well result in further alienation and the emergence of non-government alternatives.

INTRODUCTION¹

“The government must promote Bilingual schools, and recognise the value of Indigenous languages” (Egan, 1999).

In early 2008 a Northern Territory (NT) Government website explained that the *Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006-2009*

commits the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) to “strengthen the bilingual program and improve its effectiveness and sustainability to deliver outcomes.” (Priority 1: Literacy and Numeracy Programs) (NT DEET, 2008).

Using the definition in that same strategic plan the bilingual education approach was explained as:

a formal model of dual language use where students' first language is used as a language for learning across the curriculum, while at the same time they are learning to use English as a second language for learning across the curriculum. (NT DEET, 2008).

According to that definition, only eight NT schools in 2008 offered bilingual programs. Somewhat ambitiously these were referred to then as 'Indigenous Language Maintenance' programs. These were known as Model 1 programs in the 1970s and would later be referred to as examples of 'step' or 'staircase' model bilingual education. 'Language Revitalisation', on the other hand, was the term used for the Wubuy program at Numbulwar as this language was only used by older generations of speakers not by the children.

As NT DEET explained on its website:

Language Maintenance programs aim to extend and develop learners' first language skills in listening and speaking, reading and writing. Students learn initial literacy through their first language and use literacy as a tool for their first language study throughout their schooling. The knowledge and skills that students learn in their first language assists in their learning of, in and through English (NT DEET, 2008).

In early 2008 the eight NT DET schools with bilingual (LM) programs, alongside the one school that had a Language Revitalisation program, were listed on the government's website as follows:

School	Languages	Program Type
Areyonga School	Pitjantjatjara, English	LM
Lajamanu School	Warlpiri, English	LM
Maningrida CEC	Burarra, Ndjébbana, English	LM
Milingimbi CEC	Yolngu Matha, English	LM
Shepherdson College,	Yolngu Matha, English	LM
Willowra School	Warlpiri, English	LM
Yirrkala CEC	Yolngu Matha, English	LM
Yuendumu CEC	Warlpiri, English	LM
Numbulwar	Wubuy (Nunggubuyu)	LR

Source: NT DEET, 2008

By 2008 a number of factors were constraining the successful operation of all remote schools, including the eight with bilingual programs. Unsatisfactory student attendance rates were an obvious worry, but another unpublicised factor affecting the operation of the bilingual schools in particular was the diminishing supply of trained Aboriginal teachers graduating from the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. In 2006, for example, there were five graduates; only four graduated in 2007 and by 2008 the number graduating from that institution had fallen to two. Concern about this worrying trend has been expressed by the Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity (RNLD), which recently advised Julia Gillard that

BIITE has trained most of the Indigenous teachers working in remote communities in the NT. It is a tragedy that over the last few years the pressure for BITE to be financially viable has led to a decrease in numbers of young Indigenous people from remote communities undertaking teacher training at BIITE. This has had, and is having, calamitous effects on the education of children in remote communities (RNLD, 2010).

Had the NT Government openly explained that an inadequate supply of teachers was forcing a rethink of their approach to LM bilingual education and leading them to consider some alternative type of program, they would have been given a more sympathetic hearing, given that fewer graduates would make it all that much harder to realise the goal “That the Aboriginal base of Bilingual Education staff be constantly broadened” (Hale, 1999, p. 48).

Instead, in a textbook example of how not to manage change, the Government acted dramatically. It sacked the chief executive of NT DET, denied it had done so (Langford, 2008), suddenly curtailed LM bilingual programs by means of a press release, then sought to justify this precipitous action by making incorrect claims in parliament and elsewhere about how the academic performance and attendance of students in those LM programs had compared unfavourably with supposedly ‘like’ schools on 19 tests. It is this combination of deceit and naivety, but above all the “confusion and misinformation associated with the debate” (Simpson, Caffery & McConvell, 2009), that has hampered progress in improving remote school education across the board in the Northern Territory.

In the second half of 2008 four related events occurred: A summary of the NAPLAN national literacy and numeracy test results was published for the first time in September. What this set of scores showed was that Northern Territory students, especially those in remote area schools, were not doing as well as their counterparts in other State or Territory jurisdictions. This was the trigger for the three events that followed. In the first week of October 2008 the Chief Executive of NT DET was sacked. On October 14, as a direct consequence of the NAPLAN results that had been released, and “the intense media glare” that followed (Waller,

2011), the former Northern Territory Minister for Education announced a new requirement, that ‘...the first four hours of education in all Northern Territory schools [would] be conducted in English.’ The eight remote Indigenous Schools which had until then offered bilingual (LM) programs were now required to abandon what they had been doing, even if their programs had been running fairly successfully with strong community support. The specific aim of the Minister’s new measure was ‘to improve attendance rates and lift the literacy and numeracy results’ in those schools (NTG, 2008). The final event in this sequence was that on November 26 the Minister tabled evidence in parliament to justify the policy shift (NT DET, 2008a). The following day she summarised in her own words what that evidence supposedly proved. It was alleged that on the 20 national tests conducted in 2008, bilingual schools had done comparatively worse than a group of similar non-bilingual schools, on all but one test: Year 9 numeracy. That was said to be the only result that did not fit into the general pattern of comparative failure. Devlin (2009) has since demonstrated that the evidence tabled by the Minister was incomplete and invalid. Using official NAPLAN data that the Federal Government had made available through the MySchool website, he has shown that Year 3 students in the Government’s ‘bilingual school’ sample performed better than the comparison group on *four* out of five tests; namely, (1) Reading, (2) Spelling, (3) Grammar and Punctuation, and (4) Numeracy; only in Writing did they lag behind (cf. Wigglesworth, Simpson & Loakes, this issue).

This article reports on the current status and likely future of bilingual education programs in Indigenous languages and English at remote Northern Territory schools since the announcement of the government’s policy change on October 14, 2008. For our purposes it will be sufficient to lead in with the simple timeline below. Further historical details can be gleaned from Collins and Lea (1999, pp. 121–125), Harris and Devlin (1999), Hoogenraad (2001), Simpson, Caffery and McConvell (2009, in press), Devlin (2009, 2010), and the Bilingual Education Policy timeline at the Four Corners website (Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC], 2009).

- 1973 Pilot bilingual programs were initiated by the Federal Government in what was judged to be “one of the most exciting educational events in the modern world” (Hale, 1999, p. 43). More programs were added in subsequent years. Model 1 programs incorporated reading and writing in Aboriginal languages; Model 2 programs did not.
- 1978 The NT obtained self-government.
- 1980 The accreditation of bilingual programs began.

- 1983 The official aims of bilingual education were clarified. These prioritised English language and numeracy skills and teaching vernacular literacy.
- 1986 The expansion of bilingual programs was capped.
- 1998 Bilingual education programs were phased out (December 1).
- 1999 'Two-way learning' was subsequently endorsed as "a more accurate and appropriate alternative" to bilingual education (Collins & Lea, 1999, p.25). Some programs were closed.
- 2005 Bilingual education was put back on the agenda by Education Minister Syd Stirling (August 24).
- 2008 After national literacy and numeracy test results had been released (September 12), Education Minister Marion Scrymgour mandated English as the language of instruction in all Northern Territory schools during the first four hours of each school day (October 14). DET's draft *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy exempted some preschoolers from the four hours of English requirement (November 3). A *Data on bilingual schools* document was tabled in parliament (November 26) to justify the Government's abrupt policy change (Scrymgour, 2008).
- 2009 The *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy was introduced (NT DET, 2008c). No exemptions were included.
- 2010 The *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy was replaced (December 27).
- 2011 The replacement policy (*Literacy for Both Worlds*) was withdrawn (January 13). The *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy was reinstated, unchanged (January 14).
- 2011 Education and Training Minister Chris Burns released a draft Literacy Framework for Students learning English as an Additional Language on August 31.

What this paper sets out to do to share the author's understanding of the present situation based on a participant-observer perspective gained successively over 32 years in a variety of roles in the NT [1]. The understandings shared in this paper draw on that experience, but they have also been informed by recent meetings with policy makers, debates at public forums (for example, on September 9, 2010) and exchanges with journalists (such as Debbie Whitmont, who conducted interviews for the *Four Corners* program aired in August 2009). The author has also been made privy to some confidential briefings, but these cannot be shared here. On balance, the perspectives offered in this paper are grounded in a multiplicity of data sources. However, they still, inescapably, reflect the author's viewpoint.

STATUS

Since the *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy (NT DET, 2008c) only had a two-year shelf life, it was reviewed, as required, before January 2011. On December 27, 2010 it was temporarily replaced by a new policy, *Literacy for Both Worlds*, which reintroduced some options for schools, including vernacular-English bilingual-biliteracy programs to the end of Year 2. This was an appropriate concession for it formally recognised a private government agreement that had already been reached with at least one school following a human rights complaint.

For two weeks or so from December 27, 2010 the new policy (*Literacy for Both Worlds*) and its accompanying guidelines document were freely available on the Departmental website, but on January 14 2011 a senior departmental adviser e-mailed the author to say that *Literacy for Both Worlds* had actually not been finalised and should not have been put up on the Web in the first place. Accordingly, this replacement policy was removed. The old compulsory four hours of English policy was returned to the Web and remained there until August 31.

What this vacillation suggests is that departmental staff and elected politicians found it difficult to agree on whether, and if so how, the compulsory four hours of English policy should be broadened to include first-language or vernacular literacy as a part of a school program. That has been the sticking point since October 14, 2008, when the former Minister of Education directed a complete change of modus operandi for 'step-model' (LM) bilingual programs, which had taught children to read and write in their own language first before bridging them to English literacy by mid primary.

The perspective of many researchers and teachers who have been long involved in LM programs and NT bilingual education can be summarised more or less as follows: A good education is critical for remote Indigenous students so that they have realistic choices and meaningful opportunities later on. Welfare dependence and unemployment are not desirable options for them in the future. Safety, personal health, food and shelter are of critical importance. Regular school attendance is a must. English needs to be acquired and at a level of understanding that makes future lifelong learning possible and offers choices. In those circumstances where a sufficient body of students speak a common language, and where the parents want them to be able to read and write in their own language as well as English, then there is value in arranging a well-organised, bilingual-biliteracy program, of the kind that operated for many years in schools such as Areyonga, Lajamanu, Milingimbi, Murrupurtiyanuwu, Shepherdson College, Willowra, Yirrkala and Yuendumu, for as long as the available pool of Indigenous teachers and teacher aides make that possible.

Those who advocate looser interpretations of bilingual education agree with all of the foregoing, except for the previous sentence. They agree that students' first language and culture are important, but consider that they are better accommodated outside school or at least outside prime instructional time, since Indigenous languages can only have a subsidiary educational role in school, apart from any interpreting and translating needs that might arise in the morning or any afternoon cultural programs that might be scheduled, if the local community wants them. It is in this light that current NT DET practice and theory need to be understood. The *Compulsory teaching in English* policy was presented by NT DET as "a bilingual/ multilingual education approach" because student's 'home languages' are allowed to be used in the morning to introduce some concepts and scaffold instruction as required, depending on the needs of the students (NT DET, 2008d). The Chief Executive has put forward the same interpretation in media interviews (e.g., with Four Corners; see Doyle, 2009).

Those who have been involved with dual language programs in the NT for a long time point out that 'bilingual education' should mean well-organised programs, strong community involvement and the assistance of specialist staff who are, in turn, well supported by head office (Hale, 1999; NTDE, 1986). In 2008 bilingual school staff positions included Two-Way Learning Executive Teachers at Level 2, Literacy Workers at Administration Officer Level 3 and Literature Production Supervisors (in four Literacy Resource Development Units) at Administration Officer Level 5 as well as additional Assistant Teacher positions (NT DEET, 2008). Since their inception, bilingual programs could involve sequential literacy (Model 1), simultaneous literacy (50:50) or no Indigenous literacy (Model 2), but, regardless of the form they took, they were expected to be well organised. *Simply allowing ad-hoc code-switching, occasional interpretive assistance and a bit of Indigenous culture in the afternoon did not constitute a bilingual program.*

The current position of NT Cabinet is that English has to be used in the mornings while Indigenous languages are reserved for use in the afternoons. This view is supported by influential figures such as Bess Price (Chair of the Northern Territory Indigenous Policy Committee in 2008), the Hon. Marion Scrymgour (MP, former Education Minister and former Deputy Chief Minister), Dr Chris Burns (Minister of Education and Training) and the Hon. Paul Henderson (Chief Minister).

Education Department staff have loyally implemented Cabinet's directive, while at the same time allowing for some local exceptions and providing, at times, more relaxed interpretations of what the policy actually means. Their flexibility has been pragmatic and sensible, but it has sometimes confused people on the ground who discern an apparent split

between official words and actions, and between hard-line government policy and its more liberal interpretations.

When she addressed the Legislative Assembly on November 27, 2008 the former Education Minister, Marion Scrymgour, made it clear that, in the afternoons, “Aboriginal language class work should be structured and rigorous, and it should be focused on reading and writing in the child’s principal Aboriginal language”. If we accept her assurance that the announcement she had made the previous month (on October 14) was not done with “a view to disrupting or undermining the nine so-called bilingual or two-way learning school[s]”, then it has to be said that her intentions may have been misunderstood by some of her parliamentary colleagues and some middle-ranking departmental bureaucrats, who are charged with revising and implementing her policy. Scrymgour’s plan, she later explained, was to shift first-language literacy activities out of prime time, but still to retain them. What she may have been endeavouring to do was to set the scene for a different kind of bilingual education, one based on daily time separation (Baker, 2001), so that English would be used in the mornings and vernacular languages in the afternoon. In the former Minister’s view since such an approach can also be considered to be bilingual education, NT bilingual programs were not actually scrapped by her in October 2008.

In a revealing aside Scrymgour (2011) recently acknowledged that she shares with Bess Price ‘a degree of irritation with the purist “step method” educationalists who have succeeded in promoting their model of early years’ monolingual education as “bilingual”’. This comment reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how the step method has been implemented since its inception.

Table 1: Model 1 (‘step’) bilingual program/

Year	Aboriginal language	English
Year 7	20%	80%
Year 6	20%	80%
Year 5	20%	80%
Year 4	50%	50%
Year 3	60%	40%
Year 2	70%	30%
Year 1	80%	20%
Transition	90%	10%
Preschool	95%	5

Instruction through the Aboriginal language
Instruction through English

At no time has the step model ever advocated monolingual education that excluded English, because oral English has always been used for at least part of the school day, even in preschools (NTDE, 1986). Ken Hale, former Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a key figure in the development of the NT Bilingual program, was always very clear about this:

In relation to English, we recommended that all Aboriginal children be given instruction in *oral* English from the very beginning of their school experience, with the view that, at an appropriate time later, they would be able to transfer to instruction in English literacy with three important kinds of underpinning: (1) they would have experienced the feeling of success in attaining full literacy in the vernacular in a relatively short time; (2) they would have a firm understanding of and feeling for, the alphabetical principle; and (3) their relatively firm control of spoken English would provide the necessary basis for literacy work in English (Hale, 1999).

With respect to how the four hours of English policy might operate the Chief Executive, NT Department of Education and Training, has assisted by presenting a view that is more benign than the wording of the four-hours policy might suggest. In his re-analysis the demarcation of instructional time—English in the mornings, vernacular languages in the afternoons—can be loosely interpreted. For example, when interviewed by Debbie Whitmont in 2009, Gary Barnes told *Four Corners* that

...teaching in the first four hours of English categorically does not mean that the home language of the community won't also be used in that first four hours because good teaching is making sure you build from where the kids are at. Kids have got language and they've got culture. That needs to be a feature of how we go about delivering in those first four hours (Doyle, 2009)

even though the Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day policy is actually much more strictly worded:

Teaching and learning programs in Northern Territory (NT) schools are to be conducted in English for the first four hours of each school day The teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and culture may be scheduled during afternoon sessions (DET, 2008c).

Despite the CE's generous assurance that the Department wants to see teachers building from 'where the kids are at', some staff sympathetic to the aims of bilingual education have been moved, careers have been put at risk and there is an abiding fear of speaking out (Waller, 2011), even though teachers have a right, and a responsibility, to engage in the educational

reconstruction of schooling. It remains to be seen whether the attack, initiated by Scrymgeour in October 2008, on the previous LM model of bilingual education will simply allow others to pursue a strongly assimilationist agenda that precludes vernacular literacy and even undermines bilingual education altogether. This is an issue that has proved to be divisive for the Labor Party with Senators Snowden and Crossin unwilling to accept either the change introduced by the Henderson Government or the unsatisfactory rationale that has been provided (ABC, 2008; Crossin, 2009; Nancarrow, 2010).

In an address to the Australian Senate on October 28, 2009 Labor Senator Trish Crossin underlined the importance of initial vernacular literacy as a building block for learning how to read and write in English (Crossin, 2009). In July 2010, in a speech to about 1,000 delegates attending a national Indigenous childcare conference in Alice Springs, she criticised “the Territory Government’s policy of forcing schools to teach English for the first four hours a day” (Nancarrow, 2010).

However, Scrymgeour’s successor (the Education Minister, Dr Chris Burns) has expressed impatience regarding the continuing debate on bilingual education. Presenting himself as a stubborn and vocal opponent of bilingual education, he helped defeat a motion (38-31) to improve the *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy at Labor NT’s annual conference in November 2010. Two months earlier, on September 15, 2010, this Education Minister’s views had been reported in the media as follows:

Dr Burns says there is nothing superior about bilingual education and the debate over its merits is purely academic.

“There’s no startling superiority in terms of bilingual,” he said.

“I know some people have got a long-term attachment to it but really what I’m interested in is really engaging with communities to get kids at the end of the day to be able to participate to get jobs, to be able to contribute back to their community in many different ways.” (ABC, 2010).

Given that the importance of more jobs, better housing, better health and better education is widely understood, this ideological line of attack is regrettable and unproductive. If the Education portfolio were in the hands of a more sympathetic minister there would a strong impetus now to *refine* and effectively implement the change that Scrymgeour decreed and which has been subsequently incorporated into changed departmental policy. That refinement would encompass all of the many tasks now required: assisting staff with dual language program design, clarifying questions regarding complementary language teaching methods, and

resolving any questions arising from the analysis of orthographical, phonemic, morphological, syntactic and discourse-related differences between Aboriginal languages and English. Attention would be focused on ways of improving these language programs while building the community support needed to make them work. Instead, this Minister has used his office to decry the very notion that bilingual education is a better model, thereby distracting attention away from the work that needs to be done. Meanwhile, student attendance rates have fallen away to depressing new lows (Dickson, 2010; Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

The policy-review process in 2011 has been slow because it will take time to build a language-in-education framework that recognises the distinctive requirements of a few remote Indigenous schools while still retaining the Government's accountability imperatives, particularly the need to learn English well enough to participate effectively in Australia's open, complex and evolving society. Progress towards a resolution has been partly hampered by the fact that the work is starting from such a poor base, given that the announcement on October 14, 2008 was a panic response to the national test data that had been released the month before, and that the announcement was neither supported by sound evidence nor informed by appropriate consultation. As the well-respected former chief executive of NT DET, Margaret Banks, observed some time after she had been sacked:

the media was actually the trigger behind all that policy change, to go from bilingual to a four-hour, full-on English experience. It was the national publication of results, the Northern Territory's need to respond, to look like they were handling it. ...There was no well-constructed policy response as far as I could see, and nor has there been. It's just sort of, almost, a knee-jerk response (Banks, quoted in Waller, 2011).

Some influential people in this policy arena, such as the former Minister, endeavoured to redefine the scope of bilingual education. Other political figures have simply disparaged the bilingual-biliteracy (LM) programs in English and Indigenous languages, claiming that they are 'ineffective'. On November 17, 2008, for example, *The Age* newspaper quoted the Chief Minister's observation that 'There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that bilingual education in those first four hours of the school day has been of any benefit to those indigenous students' (Australian Associated Press [AAP], 2008). Echoing a similar view some time later, the Chief Executive of NT DET told the media that, 'Certainly, there's no evidence to suggest that the two-way/bilingual step program delivers any better results' (Barnes, as cited in Doyle, 2009). This claim rests on one data document (NT DET, 2008a) which has since been discredited (Devlin, 2009; Silburn, Nutton, McKenzie & Landrigan, 2011).

These publicly stated opinions fail to take account of the Department's own reports (Collins & Lea, 1999; McKay, 2007), the body of local evaluation and research findings (Devlin,

1999) and NT DEET's own 2006-9 strategic plan (see Devlin, 2009) as well as the many favourable international findings concerning the comparative effectiveness of bilingual programs (e.g., Apthorp et al., 2003; Collier & Thomas, 2002; McCarty, 2008; Tong et al., 2008; and Willig, 1985). Those overseas results were complemented by independent research conducted in the NT (e.g., Gale, McClay, Christie & Harris, 1981; Hill, 2008; Murtagh, 1979, 1982); official NT evaluation reports (e.g., Markwick-Smith, 1985; Richards, 1984; Richards & Thornton, 1981; Stuckey & Richards, 1982; see also Devlin, 1995); and an official statistical analysis of NT test results conducted over a four-year period (2001-2004) as part of a departmental review of bilingual education (NT DEET, 2005). The *NT Indigenous Education Strategic Plan* for the 2006-2009 period drew on that analysis and noted that

"The bilingual programs are effective overseas and give an indication of positive results in the Territory. DEET will strengthen the bilingual program and improve its effectiveness and sustainability to deliver outcomes" (NT DEET, 2006, pp. 24-25).

The situation at present then can be regarded as unresolved and unstable. Locally valued programs have been swept aside in the interests of accountability, thereby incurring considerable resentment and despair, giving rise to two human rights cases in the process. The government's sudden policy about-turn in October 2008 ignored one publicly signed, almost legally binding contractual agreement; namely, the one between Yambirrpa Schools Council and Northern Territory of Australia, represented by the Department of Employment, Education and Training. Another human rights complaint was triggered when Areyonga, a school with 90% plus attendance, was forced to discontinue its program. Calma (2009) expressed it bluntly: "Australia is in breach of its international obligations". There are indeed human rights issues at stake here, given that the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, a set of non-negotiable standards and obligations ratified by Australia in 1990, protects a child's right "to use his or her own language" (Article 30). Article 14.3 of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is even more explicit:

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.

Devlin (2009) has explored some of the continuing tensions between the value of dual language education, advocated by many local people, and the primacy accorded English by authorities, reflecting their monolingual bias and the new accountability measures, which have led government to discount heartfelt pleas from remote Indigenous people. That analysis

will not be recapitulated here, but it is relevant to note, in passing, that Rowse (2010) has analysed some of the ways in which the government's new assimilationist ideology is underpinned by evidential frameworks. "Our greater capacity for measuring" has resulted in an impressive statistical apparatus, but not one that measures effective engagement with remote Aboriginal people, the less tangible things that are valued or the way an imposed language of instruction challenges very young children from a marginalised group. As Djiniyini Gondarra once tried to explain: "I knew English could open up a world for me. But for me to understand English, I had to go back to my own language, to really understand the intellectual language." And this, at its heart, is the bilingual argument (Djiniyini Gondarra, quoted in Toohey, 2009).

FUTURE

With respect to the form that the new version of the four-hours policy might take in the NT, decision-making appears to have stalled, resulting in what appears to be a political-bureaucratic stalemate. Complicating the issue is that political intransigence on the part of some elected politicians has hampered efforts to arrive at some appropriate and workable solutions.

This contemporary counter-assault against bilingual education in the NT is an example of "backlash" ideology (Faludi, 1991; Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos & Gotanda, 2002), which puts forward banal and untrue simplifications as "a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie". Just as Reagan demonised liberalism, so have some political leaders in the NT decried bilingual education, preferring to blame parents and children for underachievement, rather than facing up to chronic, systemic problems linked to poverty and grossly overcrowded housing, and dealing with them. In this way underachievement is maintained and inequalities are preserved through the new assimilationist approach. The new tilt against bilingual education disallows heterogeneous and hybrid methods that suit local circumstances, restricts opportunities to build on local linguistic and cultural resources through first-language literacy and serves as a disincentive to Indigenous staff wishing to draw on their own valued knowledge by arranging appropriate teaching and learning activities for young students during prime teaching time. This backlash ideology is deceptive for it is cloaked in the language of increased opportunities while it seeks to limit the use of the students' own languages in instructional contexts.

It seems ironic that some leading NT politicians remain determined to deny the comparative advantages that were afforded by its bilingual programs, at a time when language revitalisation programs are commencing elsewhere in Australia; for example, the Wiradjuri language at Dubbo College junior campuses. Since 2003 the Community Languages

Assistance Program in NSW has allocated more than \$1 million to such Aboriginal language projects. It is also noteworthy that the NSW government has begun funding a four-year \$2.25 million bilingual program in Asian languages and English at four schools. This is a ‘cruel irony’ as Calma (2009) has eloquently pointed out. The NT’s own distinctive bilingual education approach—which fostered team teaching, some strong school-community partnerships and Indigenous teacher training as well as valuable vernacular art and literature—has been sacrificed on the altar of accountability. That sacrifice seems unnecessary in view of the fact that in late 2008 there were “approximately 8 500 Indigenous students enrolled in ‘very remote’ NT schools? About 1 600 students [were] engaged in bilingual programs which teach students using two languages (Local language and English) in formal instruction” (McMahon, 2008). Eliminating ‘step-model’ bilingual programs was never going to be the solution to the poor comparative results attained by remote NT students on the NAPLAN tests, but it was an effective political distraction.

The Northern Territory Government may well resolve the current impasse, but in the absence of meaningful and open negotiation the future looks uncertain. It is too soon to judge the cost of this uncertainty, but it may well result in further alienation and the emergence of non-government alternatives such new, Indigenous-controlled, private schools.

At the time of writing (April 30, 2011) a review of the *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy was well overdue. My view is that, just as the former Education Minister, the Hon Marion Scrymgour, had been willing to meet with critics of her position on bilingual education, the Government should re-open the dialogue (and to some extent it did so on August 31), rescind the November 26, 2008 document, and start afresh with a much more intelligent and honest approach that allows policy-makers, practitioners and researchers to work together rather than at cross-purposes. Reopening a dialogue about the need for a more generous policy framework—a policy that all contribute to, rather than an inappropriate directive imposed from above—can help to stimulate more robust and appropriate policy decisions, increase the possibility of multi-path language programs, re-activate the interest of Indigenous staff in obtaining an educational qualification and re-stimulate the local involvement of Indigenous painters, writers, musicians and story tellers in bilingual, bicultural, biliteracy school programs.

A review of the *Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day* policy is now well overdue. However, it would not be sufficient to reintroduce any bilingual-bicultural-biliteracy framework in rural schools without a clear game plan and an accompanying commitment to resource it. Rhetorical flourishes are not what is needed right now. The

Language Teaching Policy for Indigenous Catholic Community Schools in the NT (2008-2012) provides one starting point for a fresh start on language policy development (Devlin, 2009).

Yananyumul Mununggurr was a Year 4/5 student in the bilingual program at Yirrkala, when the author started working there as the teacher-linguist in 1979. She was a member of the *Ngurula* ('seabird', 'tern') group in her class, attended school every day and was able to read and write in both languages. Now head of the Laynhapuy Homeland Association, and an articulate spokesperson in Yolngu Matha and English, she is a successful leader and a role model for young people in north-east Arnhem Land. It can only be hoped that one day the NT Government will rediscover ways of encouraging the emergence of more similarly skilled Indigenous individuals in remote areas of the NT.

Scrymgeour (2009, p. 2), reflecting on her actions as Minister the previous year, acknowledged in a press release dated June 26, 2009, that

As regards those areas of the Territory where there are critical mass populations of Aboriginal people all or most of whom speak the same language (including, but probably not restricted to the Yolngu-speaking areas, the "Warlpiri" triangle; the Tiwi Islands; and Pitjantjatjara-speaking parts of Central Australia) I accept that there are sufficient numbers of students to justify teaching of the "step" method if it can be done effectively. Although I am of course no longer in a position to directly implement policy, I am open to being persuaded that I was wrong about my view as to the contemporary effectiveness of "step method" teaching in those critical mass areas.

CONCLUSION

The unresolved status and future of the discontinued bilingual education programs for remote Indigenous students in Australia is an issue of national and international concern. This paper outlines one view of the current stalemate in the Northern Territory. The author would welcome correspondence regarding any possible constructive strategies for resolving this deadlock.

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ENDNOTE

1. The author's past and present roles range from teacher linguist assisting the bilingual program at Yirrkala, principal of a bilingual school (Shepherdson College), principal education officer, Chair of the Education Advisory Council, bilingual school appraisal panel member, university-based teacher, researcher and writer. As researcher, the author was given approval in 1995 to access Northern Territory Department of Education bilingual files (C. Fowler, A/Deputy Secretary, personal communication, December 15, 1995).