

Bilingual Education: the bridge that closes the literacy gap

Introductions

We are a group of concerned church and community leaders, scholars, and non-government organisations who believe the policies relating to indigenous languages in education in the Northern Territory must change, and this change is urgent.

‘Closing the Gap’ on Indigenous disadvantage is firstly closing a communication gap. The inability of many Indigenous people to understand the many new government policies in remote communities bears witness to this gulf between government and communities.

- If I cannot read or write my name in my birth language, how can I learn it in another?
- If I don't yet speak English well, how can I ask for help in the classroom?

But that is what government is demanding of First Australians in remote schools in the NT. This is not simply about the right to learn in mother tongue but about the best way to learn. This is not simply about cultural significance but about **sustainable** education in a remote environment.

We want Indigenous people to know our English language well for their better future, but the best way is for them to be strong in reading and writing in their own language. This is not about learning English only or learning Aboriginal language only but about literacy in **both** languages.

For indigenous people to be great with English, the bridge that closes the gap is through their First language. All evidence supports such a bridge of learning—that is research from the NT, from Australia and from around the world. Bilingual education has been tried and tested for over 50 years around the world. UNESCO and the World Bank both agree on the economic and social improvements through bilingual education. Many of our near neighbours such as PNG, Vanuatu, Indonesia and Philippines have good policies that support learning in minority languages.

The research supporting learning in first language is overwhelming; we have a bibliography here with 691 entries; but we know of no credible research that supports the government position.

But here in the NT we are bungy jumping with children's education—tosting with policy that is neither evidence-based nor going to deliver better English literacy—hoping we land on our feet and not on our heads.

We are enforcing English as the only language of learning among people whose skills are in another language. This is asking children to jump the gulf of English learning without the necessary framework of literacy in their own language.

Here in the NT, we have made historical attempts with shaky rope bridges—under resourced remote schools, unprepared teachers and ambivalent support for learning through First languages. These bridges have swayed and children have not reached levels of literacy that we would expect of any children who live in this nation. It is sad that bilingual education has become the scapegoat for the failure to recruit the best teachers supported by the best methods, with cross-cultural training and proper housing in remote communities. It is sad because most Indigenous parents want their children to go to school and learn their language and English.

The proposed 4 hours of English only taught each day in remote schools is gambling with an approach to education that has not been shown to deliver English literacy.

The government is **not** saying that bilingual schools are performing worse than other schools, But incredibly it is putting all the eggs in the one basket consultation and without research to support its new approach.

The best way for children to gain literacy and numeracy in their own language is when they first come to school to have trained Indigenous teachers from each community who already know and speak the same language as the children they are teaching.

Many who have signed our letter to the Chief Minister are also willing to work with the government to help develop a better policy that is aware of the research and not destructive to the indigenous people of the Northern Territory.

Bilingual Education is the bridge that closes the literacy gap because children learn best in the language they understand best.

Bishop Greg Thompson
Anglican Bishop of the NT

On behalf of People for Education in Indigenous Languages
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