

Chapter 15

Defending Our Program at Wadeye

Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe

Foreword

by Samantha Disbray

The body of this chapter is an adaptation of a paper presented by the author to an Indigenous Catholic Community Schools Leadership Meeting at Catholic Education Office, Darwin, on February 12, 2009. The meeting took place at the beginning of the first school year after the announcement of the *First Four Hours of Every School Day in English* policy. He and other colleagues, along with Sr. Tess Ward, sat and carefully planned the key messages and the evidence they wished to draw on to make the case for the bilingual program at Wadeye. The speech is reproduced below.

Though Nganbe and colleagues pitched their message academically for the education leader's forum, the thrust was maintained in the contribution by members of the Wadeye school and community (Nganbe 2011) to the 2011 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). They were concerned at the emphasis on performance on standardised testing at Years 3 and 5, so early in children's English language and literacy learning, and the way that this emphasis pushed out first language and culture learning. They drew on pedagogic arguments to make their case:

We learn best in a language we understand and this is very true for our children. They already know a lot before they come to Western school and if we use our language with them they learn more quickly. We can't learn to read a language we don't speak, so if we give our young children the chance to learn to read first in their language, then they can make a bridge when white people ask them to start to read in English. In the early years they can start to learn to speak some English but not be forced to learn to read in English from those early years when they don't know any English. Let them do one thing at a time. Let them learn to read and write in Murrinhpatha which they speak,

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then later maybe by year 4 or 5 move to reading and writing in English. We think we have a right for our children to learn to read and write in a language they speak. So all our children should be able to have time throughout their schooling for our language and culture to be part of what they are learning, not just the really young ones...

At the moment we are using Murrinhpatha for reading and writing but only to year 3. But a problem is because of NAPLAN they are forced at the beginning of year 3 to start to write English before they are strong in reading and writing Murrinhpatha. It is very confusing for them to have to learn another orthography before they have learnt all their own. They should not have to do NAPLAN in English in the early months of Year Three and they should only begin to write in English when they have become strong in writing in a language they speak well. In our culture lessons we are having lessons for the clans in their own languages to keep those other languages strong or help the ones who have started to forget their own, to learn before it is too late and no-one is left alive to teach them those clan languages (Nganbe, Submission 28, August 19, 2011).

Indeed Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe, Gemma Alanga Nganbe and other educators also emphasised a range of learning areas important for a good education for students at Wadeye (Nganbe 2011). They argued for the value of traditional language, culture, knowledge and intergenerational teaching and learning, along with the importance of this as a foundation for learning English:

We must give our children in Wadeye and the Thamarrurr region the opportunity to receive quality education. Our people are strong in culture and many languages are spoken in the community and back in the Homelands of the different clans. We dream, think and communicate in our daily lives through our language. At OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic School we now have a 'culture centre' called Da Ngimalmin Family Responsibility Centre. It's a place of significance in the centre of the school where our old people come to teach our children our way of life. Teaching the children about people and the relationship to each other, traditional dance and songs, stories, land, name of animals and plants, the universe, art and craft and the list goes on. The culture centre fits in well with what the teachers are doing in the Early Years. We know it will form a very strong foundation for our children's learning and hope that by strengthening education in the first language will make learning in the English language easier. Children will enjoy coming to school every day to learn (Nganbe, Submission 28, August 19, 2011)

The benefits that were identified—more efficient learning, enhanced self-identity and equity—are further elaborated in the submission by other contributors, who raised concern about the impact of the 2008 policy change, and what was at stake:

We have many people with many languages here: Marringarr, Magati Ke, Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Murrinh Nhuwanh and Murrinhpatha. We want to talk in the languages we speak, hold them strong and teach our children in them. We don't want to have to leave part of ourselves at home when we come to school. We don't want our languages and our culture wiped out. We see in communities near us, they speak only English and have lost their language. We don't want this to happen here.

We know who we are. We are not white people, we are black people and we know much about our land, stories, our clans, our foods that we want to teach our children. We have a lot of knowledge that you don't find in white English culture that is important to us. (Nganbe, Submission 28, August 19, 2011)

Despite the arguments put forward in 2011, English literacy continues to be introduced at Year 3, and English language literacy and numeracy performances remain the key measures of school success. However, in recent years the teachers have managed to continue to teach Murrinhpatha literacy in the years above, and are looking to the Australian Curriculum as an opening for further teaching and learning (Bunduck and Ward, this volume).

The presentation by Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe to Indigenous Catholic Community Schools Leadership Meeting at Catholic Education Office, Darwin, on February 12, 2009, is reproduced in full below.

Tobias Ngardinithi Nganbe ‘A Positive Learning—A Step Forward in Community’

This year our school has begun to put measures in place to ensure that our children are receiving the best chance of education. We are using Murrinhpatha as the first language for literacy for children in classes Pre-school to class 2. Murrinhpatha is the language of instruction for at least 50 per cent of the school day. Many members of the community have said that they are pleased that children will become literate in their own language first. We want to see our language valued and used by the children throughout their education, but at the moment we do not have the language used in a formal way as the medium of instruction in classes above class 2. A further positive learning step we hope to make next year is to see this developed above the present classes.

I would like to put before you some of the thinking and principles behind our renewed efforts at using *our* language as the language of instruction in our school.

Jim Cummins from the University of Toronto has done much research and is internationally acclaimed. He has written much and had wide experience. A paper that holds much enlightenment is “Bilingual children’s mother tongue: Why is it important for education”? This paper states a number of principles that underpin our use of our language in the school system and I would like to quote a number of points taken from this paper. Cummins (2001, p. 3) says:

Any credible educator will agree that schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and instruction should also promote children’s abilities and talents. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we destroy children’s language and rupture their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are contradicting the very essence of education.

Our children and our adults have much learning, but it is not always valued by the white culture—the culture of the Government and of the dominant wider white

society. We often have different values, different ways of doing things, different ways of seeing things, which are often at odds with the main culture of white Australia.

Cummins asks the question: “How can schools provide an appropriate education for culturally and linguistically diverse children?” He then proceeds to answer it by saying: “A first step is to learn what the research says about the role of language, and specifically children’s mother tongues, in their educational development”.

Briefly, I would like to touch on the points he makes.

What We Know About Mother Tongue Development

The research is very clear about the importance of bilingual children’s mother tongue for their overall personal and educational development. More detail on the research findings summarised below can be found in Baker (2000), Cummins (2000), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000).

Bilingualism has positive effects on children’s linguistic and educational development. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality. The research suggests that bilingual children may also develop more flexibility in their thinking as a result of processing information through two different languages.

The level of development of children’s mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. Both languages nurture each other when the educational environment permits children access to both languages. Mother tongue promotion in the school helps develop not only the mother tongue but also children’s abilities in the majority school language. This finding is not surprising in view of the previous findings that (a) bilingualism confers linguistic advantages on children and (b) abilities in the two languages are significantly related or interdependent. Bilingual children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and develops literacy in that language. By contrast, when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue and, consequently, its development stagnates, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.

For this reason, we hope that in the future, Murrinhpatha will be extended above Year 2 and used as a language for ongoing learning, including literacy within the school system and that there will be an air of inclusivity, rather than a monolingual English learning environment. Strong support for this thinking is found in Cummins’ next point: Spending instructional time through a minority language in the school does not hurt children’s academic development in the majority school language. Some educators and parents are suspicious of bilingual education or mother tongue teaching programs because they worry that these programs take time

away from the majority school language. For example, in a bilingual program where 50 per cent of the time is spent teaching through children's home language and 50 per cent through the majority school language, surely children's learning of the majority school language must suffer?

One of the most strongly established findings of educational research, conducted in many countries around the world, is that well-implemented bilingual programs can promote literacy and subject matter knowledge in a minority language without any negative effects on children's development in the majority language. We can understand how this happens from the research findings summarised above. When children are learning through a minority language (e.g. their home language), they are not only learning this language in a narrow sense. They are learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language (Cummins 2001, p. 18).

For many years the school has made lists of children with their English Christian names. When the bilingual program began in the school, children learnt to write first their Aboriginal name—the name they were called at home, the name they knew, and then as they became more literate as well as familiar with their English name, began to write that as well. But for many years this practice has ceased. They have learnt only their English name—a name that most children when they enter school are unfamiliar with. So another simple positive learning is that we have begun to teach children to write their Aboriginal name—or in the Pre-school their preferred name, which in most cases is their Aboriginal name, but in some cases is a nickname. Writing your own name, representing your own identity in school is important.

Cummins' next point brings us to reflect on whether we are living Christian values if we fail to offer children the opportunity to continue to learn in their own language. His point states:

To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child. When the message, implicit or explicit, communicated to children in the school is "Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door", children also leave a central part of who they are—their identities—at the schoolhouse door. When they feel this rejection, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom instruction. It is not enough for teachers to passively accept children's linguistic and cultural diversity in the school. They must be **proactive** and take the initiative to affirm children's linguistic identity by having posters in the various languages of the community around the school, encouraging children to write in their mother tongues in addition to the majority school language (Cummins 2001, p. 19).

In recent years there has been much debate over the importance of English and much effort, resources, including more non-Indigenous teachers have been poured into our school. This is very good, but at the same time, many Aboriginal teaching assistants and other staff have dropped off—perhaps because they feel left out or run over by the powerful white society. There has not been the same amount of resources poured into our people to enable more to be trained and skilled to teach in ways that the majority non-Aboriginal system accepts. We have fewer Aboriginal staff—because they don't have the qualifications demanded by the majority culture.

This year, we have another positive learning going on—a number of our people are doing ongoing training and some are beginning preservice training. In addition, some staff have returned to the school because they feel there is a return to giving a more prominent place to Murrinhpatha within the school curriculum.

In conclusion, I ask that those of you who are non-Indigenous and in leadership positions will think seriously about how you can support more strongly our language and culture within the school system, and bring to bear all your authority to enhance its place and give our people a sense that we—our language and culture—are valued, rather than you thinking that bilingual is not working, because our students do not achieve test results in English that are to your pleasing. If we can once again have a strong Murrinhpatha program, the research suggests our students will in time also achieve better academically in the majority language.

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