

# Chapter 19

## Policy and Practice Now

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### Introduction

The history of bilingual education in the Northern Territory (NT) is well characterised as the interplay between people, places and policy, the sub-title of this volume. Many of the chapters in this final section are personal and professional reflections over time, firmly grounded in particular locales, involving particular people. The chapters trace local histories and responses to the openings and closings which language and education policy have provided and which, on the ground, educators, community members, leaders and others have resisted and co-opted to create (García and Menken 2010). Most bring us to the present and lay out challenges that come to bear on bilingual education and learning in the future, and matters of language maintenance and use more broadly. Some chapters direct us to new practices and players outside of schools and their policy remit, or new school structures, which provide openings for first language and bilingual teaching and learning. This chapter explores current policy and practice for languages and education, and provides an anchor for the chapters that follow.

### Languages and Education Policy Now

The dominant policy discourse in Indigenous education is one of deficit, failure and intractable problems, with a definition of educational success measured by comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scores on standardised literacy and

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numeracy tests (Fogarty et al. 2015; Guenther et al. 2013; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011; Wilson 2014, See also Freeman and Bell, this volume). In response, schooling for remote communities is positioned ever more narrowly, with a narrowed curriculum, an intensive focus on English literacy and a proliferation of prescriptive pedagogies promising to raise literacy levels (McIntosh et al. 2012; Fogarty and Schwab 2012). This discourse leaves little room for community expectations or aspiration, or languages teaching and learning (Fogarty et al. 2015). Similar policy discourses, responses and consequences for education of minority-group students can be observed elsewhere, particularly in the US (McCarty 2015; McCarty and Zentella 2015; Romero-Little et al. 2007).

Within the NT Department of Education some recent developments offer potential openings. In late 2014, recruitment for a manager for the remaining eight bilingual programs took place, reinstating the position after its removal in 2009. In 2015, with the pending introduction of the ‘Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages’ as part of the National Curriculum, a manager for Indigenous Language and Culture programs was appointed. However, these moves must be understood within the broader current policy scene, which is taking shape in light of the 2014 NT Indigenous Education Review and the resulting Indigenous Education Strategy.

### ***The Indigenous Education Review and Languages in Education***

The 2014 review (Wilson 2014) dedicates a number of pages to a discussion of bilingual education, a consideration of some international literature, local submissions in the consultation phase and NT data on standardised national testing between 2008 and 2013 (Wilson 2014, pp. 113–121). On balance, it acknowledges international research that shows educational advantage derived from bilingual education, though few studies are cited and caveats are applied. The review characterises the NT Bilingual Program as having a “chequered history”, beginning with pilot programs in 1973, and beset with problems throughout its 40-year history. Building on this, it posits that “controversy about bilingual education is not confined to the NT. There is a continuing international argument about its merits, complicated by the wide variety of approaches gathered under the category”, effectively casting a broad shadow (p. 118). Overall, the review proposes “that there is little research evidence to demonstrate the relative effectiveness and sustainability of specific instructional approaches [including bilingual approaches]:

when they are delivered on a longer-term basis, on a wider scale and under real-world conditions, particularly in very geographically remote and disadvantaged settings” [citing Silburn et al. 2011, p. 48] (Wilson 2014, p. 120).

Such positioning compounds the discourse of Indigenous education characterised as an intractable problem, where ‘nothing has worked’. The appraisal of the

bilingual program makes no mention of its goals beyond English literacy, which are explored in many chapters in this volume, and elsewhere (Disbray 2014).

A shorter section in the review is dedicated to English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) approaches, which is positioned as similarly circumspect. It notes a surprising decline in the use of EAL/D practice, given the high proportion of English language learners, and points to concerns such as a lack of consistency in EAL/D practice, a lack of unqualified or under-qualified teachers and a lack of professional support for classroom teachers. This established, a shadow is then cast over EAL/D pedagogy, due to concern that in the NT practitioners have

strayed some distance from its origins, and is now associated with cultural and first language maintenance as much as with the explicit teaching of English to children who arrive at school not speaking English. It is clear that good EAL/D teaching could make a material contribution to better literacy outcomes, but it is difficult to be confident that the NT is now able to deliver such teaching (Wilson 2014, p. 122).

While the author contests the veracity of this claim, it is more important to note at this point that such framing undermines the potential effectiveness of, and denies access to EAL/D pedagogy, due to the risk of attention to first language and culture.

Earlier in the document, on the first page of the Overview, Languages Teaching and Learning, the importance of first language(s) is positioned equivocally:

The review acknowledges and supports the role of students' first languages in education and supports their teaching. They contribute to identity formation, are important elements in student engagement, help children to feel at home in the school environment and have educational value including instrumental benefits in learning English. First language and culture should be part of a child's education where qualified teachers are available and communities agree.

Following from the discussion above, the review thus makes recommendations which are "pragmatic, based on what is repeatable across multiple sites and hundreds of classrooms, on what an actual workforce can realistically deliver in the NT" (p. 14) and focuses on

English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system and proposes that these are gained through rigorous and relentless attention to the foundations of language and the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy. This report recommends that explicit teaching and assessment of foundations elements of English literacy, including phonemic awareness, phonics and vocabulary.

The rejection of Aboriginal languages and aspirations for education in practice could not be more stark (Ross and Nganbe, this volume; Guenther et al. 2015; Minutjukur et al. 2014; and Fogarty et al. 2015).

However, this NT framing resonates with national discourse on language and education, which presents a consensus on the importance of recognising, celebrating and maintaining Australia's Indigenous languages, acknowledging a place for them in education delivery (Australian Government 2009, 2012, 2013; Commonwealth of Australia 2012). Links between language and well-being are articulated in the

current Federal policy platform to ‘Close the Gap’ (Australian Government 2013, p. 2). However, in the formulation of education policy, Indigenous and non-Indigenous parity on national literacy (in English) and numeracy tests dominate as the sole focus (Disbray 2016; Fogarty et al. 2015; Truscott and Malcolm 2010).

An Indigenous Education Strategy has now been developed to implement the findings of the review, with elements and targets that set the parameters for policy and practice in the remote NT schools. There is no mention of EAL/D, Aboriginal languages, bi- or multilingualism or bilingual education in the long term strategy set out in ‘A Share in the Future—Indigenous Education Strategy 2015–2024’ (Northern Territory Government 2015c). It is possible that the strategy will be further developed and fine-tuned, as an evaluation process has been established to guide and monitor the program. The directions are yet to be seen.

A set of short term implementation plans identifying five ‘Elements’ were also released (Northern Territory Government 2015a). In ‘Element 2—Essentials’, Aboriginal languages are included, among the following actions:

- Implement a mandated curriculum and assessment framework in identified schools, providing a consistent approach in very remote schools to the teaching of literacy and numeracy that is inclusive of phonological and phonemic awareness.
- Introduce Direct Instruction into selected remote and very remote schools for Indigenous primary students, to address the low level of literacy and numeracy achievement.
- Establish NT wide age benchmarks testing twice per year for numeracy, writing, reading, phonemic awareness and sight words.
- Revise principal performance plans and school plans to reflect the mandated approaches and identify school based strategies for success.
- Develop and implement policy to guide the delivery of Aboriginal Languages and Culture programs in NT schools following national and NT policy direction (Northern Territory Government 2015b)

The openings available for bilingual education in official policy are clearly limited. This is true of bilingual learning conceptualised more broadly, such as structured second language teaching programs, which recognise learners as speakers of a language or dialect other than English, developing English language proficiency. Like the English-only programs which operate a local Language and Culture program, the bilingual programs that continue tend to operate as ‘Two-solitudes’ models (Cummins 2008), under the pressure and privilege of literacy in English, though some continue to strive for genuine bilingual programs. Overall, the space left for Aboriginal languages is most commonly a weekly class in an Indigenous Language and Culture program (Disbray 2016). However, on the ground there are instances of agency and innovation that respond to this pressure and dis-investment look for alternative ways to continue teaching Aboriginal languages and cultural knowledge.

## Teaching and Learning in and Out of Schools

In a number of novel ways, partnerships between schools and outside organisations allow educators and community members to develop the multilingual resources of young people. In particular, the burgeoning domains of cultural and resource management and digital technology provide opportunities for multilingual, and indeed multi-modal practice and learning (Bow et al., this volume). In addition, community projects outside of formal departmental schooling offer openings for bilingual teaching and learning. These projects are not a substitute for structured education programs, and may not serve to restore local Aboriginal authority in schools. However, they also have what Heath and Street identify as the strengths of community-based learning programs, the “freedoms of time, space, activity and authority that schools as institutions rarely provide” (2008).

### *Partnerships with Schools*

Schools in some locations in the NT have partnered with Caring for Country projects, providing an important opportunity for place-based learning, intergenerational learning and language use (Fogarty 2013; Fogarty and Schwab 2012). At Maningrida in the NT, for instance, in the collaboration between the Maningrida Community Education Centre and the local Djelk rangers, educators have developed science programs delivered largely outside of the classroom, where students and adults use and develop multilingual resources and local and western knowledge. More recently, the Australian Venom Research Unit at the University of Melbourne has entered the partnership at Maningrida and students are taking part in developing health and ecological knowledge resources (Webb et al. 2013).

In the Pintupi-Luritja region in Central Australia, Tangentyere Council operates a ‘Land and Learning Program’ (see Mooney, this volume; Mooney 2010). This program has flourished with supportive and proactive Aboriginal teachers and school Principals (Disbray 2016).

At Lajamanu in the Warlpiri region, the local ranger group is instrumental in supporting country visits for secondary students. With the severe reduction of its bilingual program, in recent years junior classes have been taught for in a one-hour language and culture lesson per week, and the school has struggled to provide a regular senior school program. The local CLC ranger program supports the school by organising country visits, particularly for secondary students. Local rangers, themselves community members, along with elders, community and staff members take part in trips on country a couple of times each year, to teach students about sites, land tenure and local ecology. The country visits represent an important opportunity for intergenerational learning for both students and adults. However, the country visits are not part of a larger program embedded in school (Warlpiri Education Training Trust, May 2015, personal communication).

A further learning opportunity in Lajamanu is the bi-annual Milpirri Festival. The Darwin-based Tracks Dance Company and local community members collaborate with the school to stage a performance by students and elders based on Warlpiri traditional song cycles. The Warlpiri program in the school has also made good use of the community art centre, and has developed exhibitions and enterprises with senior girls' classes through this partnership. Arts-based projects are important for youth engagement in learning (Kral and Schwab 2012). A further example of arts-based projects on Warlpiri country is through Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri media at Yuendumu. This local association produces multimedia products including animations, in Warlpiri and other Central Australian languages, for use in and out of schools. In addition, students from a number of the schools have been involved with production of the animations and other film projects.

Indeed new technologies are being harnessed to develop interactive learning resources for use in and out of schools. The Central Australian sign languages project 'Iltyem-Iltyem' involves partnerships between community members, schools, the University of Melbourne and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (Green et al. 2011). The project documents sign languages in Central Australia, and creates a web-based video dictionary for learning in and out of schools. This project is one of many such collaborations led by Batchelor Institute's Language Centre Support Program, which generally have innovative multi-media elements and target multi-modal communication, including song. And finally, the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages, which involves a partnership between Charles Darwin University and NT Department of Education, is detailed in this volume (see Bow et al.).

### *Out of School Learning Spaces*

A number of innovative remote community learning spaces have emerged, in particular in the areas of early-childhood, youth and adult learning, providing openings for language learning and practice. Other community-driven openings include the establishment of independent schools, such as Mäpuru and, historically Yipirinya (see Greatorax and Kral, this volume). Community-governed early childhood programs have the scope to operate more independently than schools. One such example is the playgroup in the Warlpiri community of Willowra, 300 km north-west of Alice Springs. It is one of four early childhood programs in each of the Warlpiri communities developed through a partnership between the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, a local board responsible for the allocation of earnings through mining royalties, and World Vision Australia (Central Land Council, undated). Each local project is guided by a reference group, and community governance and control are central to its operation. At Willowra, local staff and family members attend the centre with children and run a program of play-based learning, with the support of a non-Indigenous mentor. The program includes bush trips with elders. It is a Warlpiri-speaking environment, with some

English input from the non-Indigenous mentor and some semi-structured English language learning, through songs and games.

A further community driven project, ‘Children’s Ground’ is a whole-of-community development and well-being project underway in the West Arnhem region of the NT (Children’s Ground 2015). An important element of this integrated program is early learning, which like the Warlpiri project above, involves a locally staffed intergenerational program, aimed to develop a range of skills, including home language, English language and cultural knowledge.

In remote Indigenous communities youth programs and learning centres provide further rich sites for multilingual opportunities. Kral and Schwab (2012) have observed a myriad of ways that young people expand their language, literacy and culture skills in their engagement with learning in ‘learning spaces’, including local community learning centres, arts programs, youth and youth media programs. These spaces attract young people in remote settings and allow productive activities that build on Aboriginal language and culture, and frequently, digital technologies (Disbray and Bauer 2016).

## Conclusion

This chapter has painted a somewhat bleak picture of the policy settings for bi- and multilingual learners in remote schools, and the committed educators who have worked and advocated for the programs in the places they know and value. The appointment of senior officers responsible for language policy and programs is heartening, but the degree of power, resourcing and time in classrooms is not yet clear. In many places, the effort to teach and learn first language and culture is irrepressible and so new openings are found. These place-based projects allow local control and direction. There are, nevertheless, various potential limitations. Projects in partnerships with schools may be seen as an ‘add-on’ with no formal role in education settings, and lack longevity and security. Further, when projects are not integrated into a broader learning program, they are often unmonitored and unassessed. Where learning programs are infrequent or do not have sufficient planning time with language specialists, they may achieve little, especially in language revitalisation settings.

As stated above, out-of-school projects are not a substitute for formal schooling, with its attention to individual development and progress, or for bilingual education. Within schools, especially those with at times vibrant, multifaceted and bilingual programs, much is lost and not replaced. Warlpiri educator Barbara Martin observed this in 2009, voicing concern at the First Four Hours of English policy at the time (Northern Territory Department of Education 2009). The policy is no longer in force, however other pressures have narrowed the space for bilingual teaching, pedagogy and ethos in schools:

We used to support each other and work together. But now, this four hours English, it's separate. We don't really know what we are doing, we don't know how to fit Warlpiri. Warlpiri is important too, for our kids, because they understand Warlpiri. They can start learning a lot of new things, school things in Warlpiri. And before it was working really well, when we had team planning, with support from a teacher linguist, learning together sessions, team teaching, all of that.

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