Chapter 5
Lessons Learned from Bilingual Education

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My bilingual education experience began in 1975, just one month after Cyclone Tracey hit Darwin in December 1974. I had been appointed to Milingimbi Community school after completing a teaching diploma in Adelaide on a Commonwealth Teaching Service scholarship. I had tried to prepare myself as best I could—travelling weekly to the other side of Adelaide to study with Max Hart in his fledgling Aboriginal Studies course at Torrens College (which years later became the David Unaipon School of Education), and also majoring in social geography at Wattle Park Teachers College. This was a naïve attempt to prepare for the experiences ahead, and to learn more about the issues concerning Aboriginal Australians at the time. However, when I became one of ten young single women from 'down south' to arrive at Milingimbi in that January, those years of preparation seemed somewhat futile when confronted with the reality of life on a tiny Arnhem Land island. Now, after a 40-year career in Education, I have reflected upon the experiences of those formative years as a young teacher and teacher-linguist working in bilingual programs in the Northern Territory and South Australia, and I recognise the lessons learned from those experiences that have continued to inform and inspire my teaching practice.

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Lesson 1

**Passionate, intelligent and generous leadership, responsive to the needs of the community, and having a clear vision and intent for teachers' and students' learning, will spell success for any school program.*

In 1973 Milingimbi school had become one of the first NT government schools to implement a Model I bilingual program; introducing students to reading and writing in their first language, Gupapuyŋu, before introducing reading and writing in English. This brave and innovative new approach had been a Whitlam Government initiative, acting upon the recommendations of the Watts, McGrath & Tandy Bilingual Education Report, which acknowledged world-wide education theory around the education benefits of first language literacy. At Milingimbi, the program began in the early childhood classes, guided and inspired by a passionate principal (David McClay) and implemented by experienced and talented non-Aboriginal teachers working side-by-side enthusiastic Aboriginal teachers. By 1975, the program was well under way—supported by a teacher-linguist (Michael Christie) working with several Yolŋu literacy workers to produce Gupapuyŋu literature; a literature production supervisor coordinating the illustration and printing of the teaching materials; and a community linguist (Beulah Lowe), who was a fluent Gupapuyŋu speaker with a long history of working in the local community. She had produced a set of Primers modelled upon the work of Sarah Gudschinsky in Papua New Guinea.

For a young graduate, this was an exciting time to be launching into a teaching career. To be surrounded by innovative educators, lead by one of the most inspiring school leaders I have worked with in 40 years, was a privilege. My new colleagues were enthusiastically walking with, and working beside Aboriginal people who were ready to have-a-go at something new and exciting. It was a means to empowerment for themselves and their community. The community elders wholeheartedly supported the program, and willingly participated in the telling of stories and the development of community literature. When the film *'Not to Lose You, My Language'* was filmed in the school and community that year, it was obvious that in the telling of the story about bilingual education, there was a deep community pride and a genuine sense of excitement about the literature being produced to support it.

There was no doubting that we were experiencing what Stephen Harris described later (1985) as 'a quiet revolution in Australian schooling'. Being a part of that 'revolution' meant that we participated in a continuing dialogue across Arnhem Land schools about every facet of our evolving programs. David McClay took every opportunity to facilitate dialogue with and between staff regularly. Besides staying after school for planning and learning together sessions with Aboriginal teachers, the non-Aboriginal teachers were required to stay even longer, for Gupapuyŋu language classes. It was David's reasoning that if we engaged in our own struggle to learn our students' language, then we would more likely understand their struggles in learning English. It worked. Our language learning with the

ever-patient Michael Christie, was far from proficient, but our understanding about the challenges that our students faced daily, was profound.

The 'Milingimbi Spring Lecture Series' was another key learning feature for the staff. Each Thursday evening in 'spring', we would return to the school after dinner, for an intellectual treat. David would organise for interesting community workers, or for one of the many researchers who happened to be in residence or passing through the community, to deliver a lecture. We heard about the work of the community nurse who had lived on the island for 25 years. We heard from a researcher who was investigating housing designs for remote communities. We were kept up to date with the latest thinking around Aboriginal learning styles and the many other aspects of Stephen Harris's Ph.D. research. We listened and learned from the wisdom of Michael Christie, particularly following his time in the USA completing his Ph.D. thesis titled 'The Classroom World of the Aboriginal Child'. We heard from the local Adult Educator about her work with different community groups. Our learning was rich and it was fun—exactly what we hoped for the Aboriginal teachers and students in the school.

Not only was the school leadership inspired and passionate, but there was a generosity of spirit that nurtured the well-being of the school's relatively young staff, who returned their gratitude through their dedication and commitment to the task at hand—the success of the school program.

Lesson 2

**Empowering Aboriginal teachers to be actively involved in the education of their children, enhances capacity and strengthens culture, language and community pride.*

With a year's experience working in an English-only classroom, I was asked to teach with two Aboriginal teachers in the bilingual Transition (Prep) class the next year. My responsibilities were very clear. I was to work as part of the teaching team, guiding the planning for the delivery of the curriculum content, as well as empowering the Aboriginal teachers with the pedagogical knowledge to manage our classroom and guide the learning of our students. These responsibilities had been outlined to us from Day 1 of the previous year. David McClay emphasised emphatically, that the prime purpose and intent of our work as teachers at the school was not to educate the students. He said "you are here to work alongside our Aboriginal teachers, to equip and empower them to run their own school. You are here to do yourself out of a job". I was to be an Adult Educator. Although officially titled 'Assistant Teachers' by the Education Department, the reality in bilingual classrooms was, that they were teachers, taking responsibility for the students' learning in Gupapuyŋu.

Our 'planning together' sessions at the end of each day, were crucial to the smooth running of our classroom. Although they were primarily concerned with the 'what' and 'how' of the curriculum implementation, as Beth Graham later

emphasised in her *'Team Teaching in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory'* (Graham 1986), "unless we answer the question **why**, much of what happens in the classroom is not effective".

There was no doubting that the questions we were asking, and the conversations we were having daily about the students' learning development, and about the development of the school's program, were crucial. Many of the 'why' questions however, were engaged with in the wider context of our Early Childhood teaching team. The teachers for the Years 1–3 classes would meet together regularly to discuss our thinking around student progress and their engagement with learning. One discussion early on, was concerning the students' reading and writing development. Although the students' reading development, guided through the use of the Gudschinsky primers, was progressing well, there was a tendency for the students to 'parrot' as they read. They were seeming not to pick up books and read them for enjoyment. Our questioning around this observation, led us to create a more vibrant reading culture in our classrooms, where the students experienced a range of different texts. They began to read, respond and enjoy books daily. We soon came to realise, as advocated by Martin and Brogan (1972, in Holdaway 1979) that "emerging readers need a battery of books that they can zoom through with joyous familiarity".

Although the school's Literature Production Centre was producing books of an exceptional quality, the rate of production enabling students to 'zoom through' the literature could not be maintained. Therefore, we began writing and producing our own class books and materials; student-illustrated story books, class-acted photo books, repetitive sentence readers etc. Supplementing this also was the Language Experience reading program that enabled the students and Aboriginal teachers to jointly construct meaningful texts to read daily. This had a two-fold effect. Not only did it facilitate the production of student-centred stories for them to read, re-read and 'zoom through', it also allowed for the Aboriginal teachers to further develop and refine their own writing and transcription skills.

Inevitably, observing the students' enthusiastic engagement with the growing number of class-made books we produced, it answered the 'why' question about student reading development. However, this created a new dilemma that we needed to work through. The Gudschinsky primers had been written in the Gupapuyŋu language, but increasingly, the students were speaking and writing in Djambarrpuyŋu. This then became a discussion school-wide, with the Literature Production Centre producing materials in one language, whilst the student-produced books were in another—often being labelled 'baby language'. This same discussion was being had in schools nation-wide with regard to the Language Experience approach to reading.

Our classrooms were highly organised, structured and predictable. We had a Reading corner, a Maths corner, a Writing corner, an Oral English room—as well as a class mat for whole-class learning times. The morning's teaching time was conducted in small groups, with students rotating through their first learning cycle for Literacy activities and Oral English, then through their second cycle for Maths. Each of the activities would have been well planned, with the necessary materials

prepared well in advance of the lesson. If the teachers were not confident with any aspect of an activity or the content, we would rehearse the lessons in our planning time the day before. This would be followed by a review and reflection at the end of the next day. We worked to a weekly overview timetable, planning at the end of each week for the next. Our daily lesson plans and group rotations were also planned daily. Each teaching team developed a deep level of confidence and trust in each other, learning with and from each other every day.

I particularly enjoyed the challenge of taking new and emerging education theory and translating it into a language that could be understood by Aboriginal teachers; then we would work together, to adapt it for the students' benefit in the classroom. For example, when Stephen Harris wrote an article about the teaching of reading titled 'The Lap Method', we looked together at the meaning of formal and informal learning and how we could use an informal approach to immersing our students in reading—especially reading for pleasure.

Lesson 3

**Valuing students' first language and facilitating first language literacy and numeracy, inevitably enhances learning capacity and language maintenance, but it also enhances learning and capacity in English.*

Over a three-year period, I worked with the same group of students, as well as with five Aboriginal teachers consistently; N̲akarran, Gan̲gan̲iwuy, Ŋalambirra, Djambutj and later Milmilany. We had decided that consistency of teachers would progress the students' learning more effectively, and so after starting with one class in their first year of schooling, we then followed them up to Year 1 and to Year 2. They were all developing skills as strong Gupapuyŋu readers and writers, as well as honing their skills in Maths and Oral English. In fact, it became clear that their learning progress was progressing at an exciting rate. Because I had begun teaching in a Year 3 English-only class in my first year at the school, I was well aware of the levels of literacy observed in those students, compared to the bilingual class we had then taught for 3 years. Although we intuitively knew that their progress was obvious and significant, we needed to show it. We therefore set out to establish a school-wide testing program over a four-year period, involving students from both the bilingual and non-bilingual classes.

I was asked in 1979, to coordinate the school-wide testing program. As outlined in Gale et al. 1981 ('Academic Achievement in the Milingimbi Bilingual Education Program') the testing demonstrated what we had intuitively known—our bilingual program was 'successful'. It 'worked'. Overall, on the ten tests administered at Year 7 level, the English only students performed better on two tests, whilst the bilingually educated students had better scores on eight, five of these at 5 per cent significance level and two at 10 per cent. Although the results demonstrated that the bilingual program students generally performed better than the English-only program students by the end their primary school education, 'their standards were still

considerably below the national average' (p. 309). However, as outlined in the article's conclusion, 'initial education through the medium of the mother tongue facilitates deeper and more complete cognitive development in the early years which will later pay off in the relatively easier learning of the second language, the culture, and scientific and mathematical ideas of the dominant society'. As Stephen Harris later pointed out (1981), even more significant was the fact that those tests in which the bilingual program students performed better were 'on the whole those that were more abstract or cognitively demanding … as opposed to the processes which were more dependent on rote learning'.

Despite what we could see and were experiencing as 'success' at Milingimbi school, it was a growing frustration that student 'performance' would inevitably carry more weight in terms of continuing government support, than the myriad of social and emotional benefits for the students being observed. As Stephen Harris wrote (1981), 'bilingual education, along with most other educational innovations that have social as well as academic aims, will stand or fall on its academic performance alone, in spite of the presence of several important non-academic aims such as better child self-concept, more responsibility for Aboriginal staff, maintenance of the child's first language and culture, and improved employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. If these non-academic aims were given more than lip-service, then for the program overall to be regarded as a success where the non-academic aims were evaluated positively, one would expect that on academic measures, the bilingual (program) students would only have to break even with non-bilingual program students'. The fact that so many Milingimbi Aboriginal teachers later went on to Batchelor College to formalise their teacher training, then returned to take up registered teaching roles, was evidence enough of the 'success' of the Milingimbi program in terms of empowerment.

In 1981, after a year travelling overseas, I returned to the NT to take up the position of Teacher-Linguist at Bamyili school. I was following on from the start-up work of Dorothy Meehan who was the first teacher-linguist in the Kriol Bilingual Program. I arrived with enthusiasm and vision, but on my first day, I was left feeling that the success of the Kriol bilingual program had been sabotaged. A decision had been made over the holiday break, to move the literacy centre to a room at the other side of the school. The school ute was backed up to the door of the literacy centre, then shelves and shelves of Dorothy's meticulously organised and levelled books and materials were thrown (literally) into back of the ute, driven to the other side of the school and thrown into a huge pile in the middle of the new room. They were then left for 'the new teacher-linguist' to sort out. It took weeks, but the dedicated literacy workers laboriously assisted, and we set up the literacy centre all over again. This was to be a very different experience from my time at Milingimbi.

With the 'do yourself out of a job' mantra still in my head, I set about organising a training course for the literacy workers at Bamyili. We focussed upon every aspect of being an effective literacy worker; story recording and collation, transcribing and transcription, story writing, language choices, translation, book illustration and production. Over time, as our book production became more proficient,

it was imperative that the literacy workers understood how their work was being used in the classrooms, and that they had an understanding of the appropriateness and applicability of the materials produced. They were therefore scheduled to spend time in classrooms; trialling their stories, talking with students and teachers, working along-side Aboriginal teachers and then reporting back to our literacy centre team about the suitability of their stories and productions.

Students' writing development was a key focus in the Kriol program. We collected student work samples, organised them into progressive levels, and eventually published a book titled *Encouraging children to write: the Kriol experience at Bamyili* (1983). These were the 'process writing' days, preceding the functional linguistics 'genre' movement. But it was exciting to watch the growing confidence of students writing fluently in the language they spoke.

From the program's inception, there had always been debate about the validity of using Kriol as a language of instruction—considering the growing number of traditional community languages that were dying. It seemed that with the passing of each successive community elder, there was another language being lost or at least another fluent speaker lost. In a noble attempt to recognise this decline in the number of community language speakers, and in an attempt to slow the process, we organised community language classes for the students, which brought pleasure and hope to the elders. However, one afternoon per week was not going to save eight community languages if they were not spoken fluently every day with the children. Years later, when I worked in Adelaide with the Kaurna, Narrunga and Narrindjeri language revival program, I looked back on my time at Bamyili and wished that we could have put more time and resources into making recordings and encouraging the use of those community languages. I had come to realise that it was much harder to bring a language back than to record and learn from those who were still speaking their language fluently.

Lesson 4

**Investing in the development of teachers' learning, particularly in a cross-cultural context, impacts them as life-long learners.*

On-the-job professional learning for the non-Aboriginal teachers was a priority at Milingimbi. Staff room, classroom and over-dinner conversations around language domains, Aboriginal learning styles, purposeful learning, Aboriginal knowledge, teaching methodologies and the like, were commonplace in the early years of the bilingual program. We devoured any article written, any Department publication or international journal featuring bilingual methodologies. We also seized upon any opportunity to share ideas with teachers in other bilingual schools at our rare regional or cross-sector conferences. For teachers with potential for becoming teacher-linguists, they were supported to undertake the 10-week Summer Institute of Linguistics field linguistics training course in Sydney. This I did, in the summer of 1977, returning for a further two years in the classroom at Milingimbi

before taking up the teacher-linguist's job at Bamyili. This was a tough gig, but it was preceded by a year's leave that took me to the USA to study at the Linguistic Society of America Summer school in Albuquerque New Mexico.

In Albuquerque I studied with some of the US's great educators in the field of Bilingual and multi-cultural Education—Joshua Fishman and Courtney Cazden among them. Although at the time I was only 25 years old, with only five years of teaching experience behind me, I was surprised to have such eminent educators show interest in what I had to share about Bilingual Education in Aboriginal Australia. I was consequently invited to give several seminars in Courtney Cazden's classes, talking about the developments, methodologies, successes etc. of our experience in the fledgling program in the Northern Territory. As a result of this connection made, Courtney Cazden visited Australia and spent time with Beth Graham and Stephen Harris in the Bilingual Education Unit in the N.T. Education Department, followed by visits to some of our Bilingual schools. It was a connection that would continue for many years to follow.

One highlight of my many experiences in the US, was a visit to Rock Point Navajo school in Arizona. We had read much about this school whilst developing practices at Milingimbi, but the chance to visit and meet the staff and the Principal, Wayne Holm, was a privilege. The evolution of their bilingual program from the late 1960s, mirrored what we had also experienced in the NT—the challenges associated with building the capacity of Navajo staff, creating appropriate and engaging reading materials, and setting up assessment schedules to monitor student progress etc.

In the early eighties, teacher-linguists and other bilingual school employees were supported by the services of advisors in the Education Department's Bilingual Education Unit. Beth Graham and Stephen Harris in particular, were inspiring leaders from afar, as well as welcome visitors when they had the funding support to visit us in the field. It was the 'hey-day' for education magazines with a focus upon Aboriginal Education—'The Aboriginal Child at School', 'Developing Education', and the 'NT Bilingual Newsletter', were devoured enthusiastically. The writings of Michael Christie, Stephen Harris and Beth Graham were pivotal to the development of new learning & teaching techniques and practices. It was also the time when Brian Gray was developing the 'Concentrated Language Encounters' approach to the teaching of English at Traeger Park Primary school in Alice Springs. I joined a group of teacher-linguists who spent time in Alice Springs with Brian, learning from his ESL methodologies and adapting them for our languages programs. At Bamyili, the teachers were ready and willing to adopt new ideas and approaches.

In his reflective paper about Bilingual Education, delivered to the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia Congress in Canberra in 1981, Stephen Harris spoke about the social and psychological strengths of bilingual programs, above and beyond the academic benefits that were obvious. He highlighted the close team-work developed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and the 'increased capacity of both groups of teachers to communicate' (cross-culturally).

Lesson 5

**Successful school learning requires teachers and students to act with purpose and intent.*

Armed with experience and confidence from further study in the mid-1980s, I took up an offer to work for the South Australian Education Department and establish a new regional Literature Production Centre in the APY (Anangu/Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara) Lands to produce literature for the seven Pitjatjantjatjara bilingual schools in the NW of the state. The story of bilingual education in South Australia was a unique one. As early as the 1940s, eminent Presbyterian missionary Dr. Charles Duguid, saw 'education as a solution for Anangu people' and his aim was to 'encourage Anangu people to maintain traditional cultural practices, which included the development of Pitjantjatjara literacy in the school'. Although a bank of Pitjantjatjara literature had been developed over many years, there had not been an opportunity for a coordinated literature production and curriculum development approach across all Anangu schools. Three teacher-linguists were employed in three of the schools, and we very quickly became a tight unit, setting up literacy worker training programs, expanding the scope of Pitjantjatjara literature production and conducting professional development programs for teaching staff across the region. It was an exciting time to be involved in this program, because there was a strength and depth to the Pitjantjatjara program going back decades. Among the Anangu and non-Anangu staff too, there was a collective level of long-standing experience, knowledge and expertise that I had not experienced across any one language group in the NT.

Education theory informing our practice at the time stemmed from the continuing work of Michael Christie, Stephen Harris, Beth Graham, Jim Cummins and Brian Gray. Michael's work (1982) challenged our understanding of what successful classroom learning looked like for Aboriginal students. He talked about the need to make Aboriginal students' learning purposeful; ensuring they were goal focussed, they had a sense of learning control, and they could make judgments about their progress towards their goals. We thought in terms of empowering students to write, instead of, as previously written about, 'encouraging' students to write. In the Pitjantjatjara schools we took on the challenge, with the understanding that, as Stephen Harris wrote 'for those Aboriginal children who wish to be successful in the context (of school) and so have access to power inherent in the dominant society, they will need to learn the "language of schooling"'. He and others (Graham and Cummins) maintained that careful consideration was needing to be given to how school-language skills such as 'being able to reflect on and anticipate events and experiences, and form and justify opinions' could be 'developed initially in first language, and then … simply brought into use in the new medium'—requiring an adaption of Aboriginal languages to accommodate such learning. These thoughts and theories also coincided with teachers' growing understanding of language 'genres' movement, emerging from a functional linguistics base. It was a challenging but intellectually stimulating time as we grappled

with new and forward thinking theories, always working towards our own goals with purpose and intent.

Lesson 6

**Education policies can come and go with changing governments, but it is the commitment and resilience of Aboriginal staff that determines the success of community education programs.*

With each new state or federal government has come a new raft of policies impacting Aboriginal communities, along with a new set of programs recommended as the 'answer' for Aboriginal Education. More recently, this includes programs that require the employment of more and more non-Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal communities, as well as the adoption of hugely expensive 'fix-all' programs imported from overseas.

Soon after the October 2008 decree by a former NT Education Minister that "all schooling in Northern Territory Schools is to be conducted in English only for the first four hours of every school day", I happened to be at a work function in Melbourne where a Federal Government Minister was a guest. I took the opportunity to express my concern about the NT Government's education policy shift concerning bilingual education in remote communities. Sadly, the response I received was automatic and swift. It was, "they have shown it doesn't work".

My first thought was "who are *they*?"

My second thought was "clearly, this person has not taken the time to speak personally to those for whom the NT government's decision has affected the most —the Aboriginal teachers, literacy workers, students and their families whose languages, meaningful employment, empowerment and education are now under threat".

Despite such obstacles, however, the continuing determination, resilience, spirit, and courage of Aboriginal people who dare to engage in the Education space today, has been inspirational. Their courage is undoubtedly fuelled by their belief that their children have the right to be educated in their mother-tongue and to gain proficiency in English.

I am currently working as the Head of School at the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School (MITS). In this and previous roles, I have supported young Aboriginal students from remote and regional communities who have chosen to undertake their secondary education in Melbourne. Some of these students are the grand-children of the students I taught at Milingimbi and Bamyili in the 1970s and 1980s. Sadly, because of changing education policies over the years, our students do not have the first language literacy skills that their parents and grand-parents have.

Recently, one of these grand-parents accompanied her grand-daughter to Melbourne to help her settle into her new school. She attended our school assembly where she heard me speak about the importance of celebrating students' learning

achievements and goals. We recognised one student for her outstanding efforts in progressing five spelling levels in just one semester. We recognised other students for their outstanding achievements in Maths. We also acknowledged students who had made progress in first language literacy. When she realised who I was, and remembered her education experience at Milingimbi, whilst also contemplating the possibilities ahead for her grand-daughter, she approached me saying *"Kathy-Gale, you make me cry!"*

How far have we come since those early days of Bilingual Education in the 1970s? Not far enough!

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