Chapter 7
Boom and then Bust: Lessons Learnt from My Time Teaching in Three Bilingual Schools in the Northern Territory

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Introduction

It is now nearly 30 years since I left my job at Yirrkala in one of the stronger bilingual schools in the Northern Territory (NT). So I don't have hands-on experience, nor an in depth knowledge, of the more recent changing government policies, pedagogical trends, recommended teaching methodologies and educational gimmicks that have pervaded NT Aboriginal schools since my departure in 1986. You can read about these (at times disturbing) swings, whims and trends in papers by my respected and enduring colleagues (see Disbray 2014a; Devlin 2009; Simpson et al. 2009). However, I do have vivid memories of my time working in three different bilingual schools in the NT, from the period 1978 to 1986—a time of plentiful funding and a period of ideological and pedagogical excitement. It seems this era of innovation, embedded within an ethos of respect for Aboriginal peoples' aspirations, is a thing of the past. In more recent years, all the soundly researched papers (qualitative and quantitative), reviews, petitions, protests and parliamentary inquiries about the slow demise of bilingual education have fallen on deaf ears, especially within the hallowed walls of parliaments, and by government policy makers.

So in this chapter, I am going to resort to telling three stories of my bilingual school experiences—each reflecting back on a time within 'the boom years of bilingual education'. I trust these reflective recounts will teach just a few lessons to at least some listening ears somewhere.

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Story 1: Milingimbi

Stepping off the Connair DC3 aeroplane at the Milingimbi airstrip in January 1978, naïve, and with no previous teaching experience, I was bright eyed, enthusiastic and ready to prove to the long serving Balanda principal (David McClay) that he hadn't made a mistake in appointing me as the new post-primary girls' teacher. I can still remember my well rehearsed script that I practised on him as he drove me to my house in bush camp. "Ŋarra djäl nhe dhu marŋgikum ŋarrany Yolŋu matha. Ŋarra yaka marŋgi mirithirr." (I want you to teach me the Yolŋu language. I don't know very much). David just laughed at my feeble attempts, but I'm sure he appreciated that I was making an effort to acknowledge and learn the local Yolŋu language taught in his bilingual school. I also know that my three classes of post-primary girls appreciated me learning to pronounce all their very long Yolŋu names correctly, and not embarrassing them like some other Balanda teachers with horrendous pronunciation.

Milingimbi is one of the Crocodile Islands in North East Arnhem Land, and I had previously visited there three times, as my sister Kathryn Gale was team teaching in the lower years of the bilingual program. I soon decided I also wanted to teach at this innovative school, which was one of the first three Aboriginal schools in the NT to introduce a bilingual program in 1973 (the other two being Areyonga and Yuendumu in the centre). But the principal told me straight on my first visit that my agricultural training was not what he was looking for. Not to be dissuaded, I quickly enrolled to do some Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) electives as part of my graduate year of teacher training, and then took myself off to a Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) summer school in Sydney. That is where I learnt the script I practised on David on that lift from the airstrip…. Obviously, I (or my sister) eventually convinced David that it was worth taking the risk in hiring me, despite my lack of teaching experience.

The next two years at Milingimbi were challenging, but rewarding, as I strived to contribute to the bilingual education of my students, and I worked hard to make their learning experiences meaningful, enjoyable and relevant. We started a productive vegetable garden (where we grew huge watermelons), and went for a class trip together down south (by raising lots of money—in defiance of Sister Jess Smith's health orders—largely by selling cans of Coke that we ordered by the pallet full on the barge). We also wrote regular letters to pen pals at Yalata school in South Australia (whom we also visited on our school trip), made biographical, bilingual booklets with lots of photos to send to our billets from our trip, learnt about other parts of the world (especially India), and sponsored a crippled, Indian orphan for corrective foot surgery (by visiting all the gambling circles on welfare day). I spent hours on the weekends turning my classroom into such an inviting, comfortable sanctuary that the girls didn't want to leave it during the week at home time. My job was to teach the girls English, and Maths, but the school policy was to

do it in a way that respected their first language, and built on the skills they already had to speak, read and write in their own language.

What stood out for me on my arrival at Milingimbi was the key role that was played by the Aboriginal teachers in the school. Like all other Balanda teachers, I was to work alongside an Aboriginal teacher—Lawuk. She was highly literate in both English and Yolŋu Matha, was confident, respected and a wonderful role model for the girls in our class—and of course she was related in some way to all of them. The girls I taught did not start their education in the bilingual program, but the school policy insisted they were not to miss out on vernacular literacy lessons. So one of Lawuk's main tasks was to provide regular vernacular literacy lessons. Yolŋu literacy was not viewed by the school simply as a means to English literacy, but as a right, as stated in the 1953 UNESCO Monograph on Fundamental Education: "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue" (UNESCO 1953, p. 11).

It soon became quite apparent to me that Milingimbi School could not function without the Yolŋu teachers, despite the fact that not many of them (at that time) had formal qualifications beyond their post-primary schooling. Attending Batchelor College was not yet a feasible or possible reality back then, but there was a well-functioning and effective local Adult Education unit. The school principal put a lot of effort into supporting his Aboriginal staff, and before long he set up a Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program for them at Milingimbi. The children in the school could see the important roles their Aboriginal teachers (and relatives) had in the school, so they believed there would be meaningful jobs for them too when they finished school. It gave them a sense that local employment after school was a realistic possibility.

With a thriving bilingual program, one of the job opportunities for Yolŋu was in the Literature Production Centre (LPC), with its slowly improving printing facilities. This was all pre-computer and pre-photocopier days, but there were still urgent demands on the LPC staff to produce quality literature and resources for the classrooms. I well remember having to learn how to develop black and white photos of the girls, for our trip south, and then struggling with the temperamental gestetner machine for printing our booklet, as the LPC staff were understandably too busy to help. To reproduce the ŋ on the typewriter (what we call the 'tailed-n', which features in many Yolŋu words), I had to type the regular n-key, then back space and type over the n with the j-key, and then finally fill in the dot of the j with this volatile, viscous pink liquid. All very messy, and often not successful.

I still keep in touch with 'my girls' today, even though we live at opposite ends of the country. I often fantasise about going back to Milingimbi to work for a couple more years, but despair at the stories I hear about the lack of departmental support, and the struggle to sustain a bilingual program that the Yolŋu refuse to give up on.

Lessons Learnt

- The Aboriginal teachers in the school matter more than the non-Aboriginal teachers—they are the long-term future of the school and won't leave after a couple of years. They are also crucial role models for the children.
- Non-Aboriginal teachers need to be specialist teachers trained to teach English as a second language, as that is their primary job. They also preferably need some experience before they arrive, especially if teaching in small schools with no other experienced teachers as mentors.
- Non-Aboriginal teachers need to commit to staying in schools for at least two years, if not more, in order to build effective working relationships with the community.

Story 2: Willowra

After two years at Milingimbi, where I was fortunate to observe some very experienced and dedicated teachers using a number of teaching methodologies that really worked, I decided to have a 'desert experience'. The department offered me a teacher-linguist position in either of two small bilingual schools in The Centre—Areyonga or Willowra. To help me choose, I briefly visited Areyonga school on my way back to Milingimbi after the holidays. I am not sure why I chose not to take Areyonga. Maybe it was the overwhelming feeling I had after the very dedicated Jan Capp (soon to depart Areyonga) spent a whole afternoon explaining to me, in minute detail, the sequence of all the Pitjantjatjara syllable cards, flash cards and companion Gudschinsky phonic readers that I would be using (and adding to)—if I took the job…. Or maybe it was the big dog that cocked its very large leg and pissed on me as I sat attentively listening to the school assembly.

Either way, I decided to take the teacher-linguist job at the fledgling bilingual program at Willowra School, 450 km northwest of Alice Springs. I bought a ute[1] in Darwin, and in January 1980 headed off on the long drive to Willowra. On arrival, I found there was nowhere for me to live, and no LPC in which to base myself. But the community were keen, so Janet Nakamarra Long (the chosen literacy worker) and I set ourselves up at a shared desk in the corner of the staffroom. Janet was highly literate in both Warlpiri and English, and a talented artist, as well as a lot of fun to work with—we became firm friends.

Our job was to produce Warlpiri language resources for the classroom (hand-made Big books, syllable cards, sight word cards, etc.) and to prepare Warlpiri books to be printed at the nearby Yuendumu LPC. We had limited facilities, but with Janet's artistic and creative talents, we did the best we could using black Rotring

[1]Utility van, a tray-backed vehicle handy for transporting goods, such as camping equipment.

pens and stencils. I soon began collaborating with Wendy Baarda (the dedicated and experienced literacy coordinator at Yuendumu) on writing a structured Warlpiri literacy curriculum for both schools. We used the phonic-based principles of the Sarah Gudschinsky approach to vernacular literacy (of teaching each syllable in a systematic order, along with accompanying sight words) but we didn't use the Gudschinsky-style primers with boxes of syllables and letters.

Meanwhile Janet was producing sets of instant readers to support the structured Warlpiri curriculum, with delightful illustrations of donkeys, cowboys, dogs and kids doing things that were familiar and amusing to them. Janet also recorded the old ladies in the community, as they told stories about Dreaming ancestors, and recorded historical stories told by the old men about massacres, or the droving days in the Lander River region. As time went by, a small transportable house arrived on the back of a truck for me to live in, and eventually an even larger transportable arrived to serve as a library and Literacy Centre (without a printer). So the respected story-tellers would regularly come up to the Literacy Centre (LC), and Janet would set them up with a tape recorder to tell their story. Occasionally she would duck off for a *kapati* (cup of tea), complaining that the longer the story the longer it was going to take her to transcribe, and edit into a readable book. She valued the content of the stories, but would often complain that the long ones gave her a 'real proper headache'. I used to feel so sorry for those old ladies, sitting telling their stories to the LC walls, wondering how we could make the whole story-telling experience more relevant, meaningful and productive for all concerned. This and other issues has since been addressed by the 'Warlpiri Triangle' (see Disbray 2014b).

Despite our naivety back then, I think we can feel pretty proud of the successes we had in the classroom in teaching Warlpiri literacy. We had the support of a strong Bilingual Advisory Team in Darwin (including Graham McGill, Bruce Sommer, Stephen Harris, Beth Graham, Cos Russo and later Brian Devlin). They organised professional in-service training, wrote the Bilingual Education Handbooks (see NTDE 1986), and would visit various bilingual schools (on request). I always appreciated the visits and support of Stephen Harris, and the professional discussions we had about the latest recommended methodology, and whether they seemed to be working in the classroom. I would have a long list of things to ask him, or issues to discuss, on such visits. One thing that worried me at Willowra, was the daily chorus of the junior-primary class chanting the Warlpiri syllables, led by a Yapa teacher (pointing to the syllable chart with a very long stick). I wondered if what I heard was educationally productive: *ma, mi, mu, ka, ki, ku, wa, wi, wu, la, li, lu*…. So we discussed how we could translate this oral knowledge into visual recognition of the written syllable cards…. perhaps by using card games (which the children loved) to make the whole learning experience a tangible one, that would eventually help them with their syllable recognition in reading and writing.

At Willowra, I also continued with the 'language experience' approach (first introduced at Milingimbi by the master teacher Merlin McClay)—whereby every Monday morning each child would dictate to their teacher their very own story about the weekend. The Warlpiri teacher at Willowra would write down each child's story in their very own *yimi puku* (story book), like the class production *Pirrarni-rnalu*

yanu wirlinyi Wirliyajarrayi-kurra marnakijiki munu yakajirriki ('Yesterday we went to the Lander River for bush currents and bush sultanas'). Before long each child had a book full of familiar stories that they could proudly read independently to their teachers. With the additional help of our syllable and sight word card games (bingo, patience and snap), and other 'Break Through to Literacy' activities, and some class 'chorus reading', most children learnt to both read and write independently in Warlpiri by the time they reached the upper primary class.

But by upper primary, things got challenging for the kids. The teacher tried using the same successful methods we used for teaching Warlpiri literacy in the junior primary, with the children dictating their own English stories to the teacher—but it didn't work. The kids just didn't have sufficient oral English skills to dictate stories of any kind to their teacher. In the meantime, we heard about this new method of 'Concentrated Language Encounters' that was just being developed by Brian Gray at Traegar Park Primary School in Alice Springs. He came to visit Willowra one weekend, as he was a friend of the principal's. He was suggesting that we should be helping kids develop their oral English skills by having concentrated experiences together as a class around a single long-running language encounter. Unfortunately, I never got to see this new approach working effectively at Willowra before I left at the end of 1981.

Lessons Learnt

- For a bilingual program to function there needs to be adequate facilities for the specialist staff, including housing and a functioning Literacy Centre.
- Staff in schools need regular professional development to share and/or familiarise themselves with the latest educational ideas and methodologies.
- The recording of stories and the eventual production of vernacular literacy materials need to be embraced by schools as part of a learning experience for the whole school, preferably with the story being told on country.

Story 3: Yirrkala

After Willowra, I felt I needed more professional development, so I sought out the best literacy and TESL specialists in Adelaide, and did another year of teacher education. We had some interesting debates, especially as my lecturer Adeline Black promoted Frank Smith's (anti-phonics) methodology (see Smith 1973). Phonics was out, and teaching children to read by using semantic and syntactic cues was in. I argued with my lecturers about the importance of phonics when teaching children to read in a language that is written phonemically. They hadn't heard of Sarah Gudschinsky of the Summer Institute of Linguistics fame (see Gudschinsky 1973), and based all their arguments on the inconsistencies of the

English writing system. I decided to put my ideas into print (see Gale 1982), and to my great pleasure, won myself a scholarship to study linguistics at the Australian National University (ANU).

So with a Masters in Linguistics under my belt, as well as a husband (whom I also acquired at ANU, also studying linguistics), I headed off for my third bilingual school encounter as the teacher-linguist at Yirrkala school in northeast Arnhem Land. Yirrkala was a real challenge. It was in a transition period, with a (notorious and unwilling) outgoing non-Aboriginal principal, and an incoming Yolŋu principal —the late and now famous Mandawuy Yunupingu. Mandawuy was just completing his Masters in Education studies at Deakin University. I think I learnt more at Yirrkala school (about leadership, life and relationships) than I was ever able to offer them as a teacher or linguist. My job was to work with the brilliant (now late) Raymattja Marika in the LPC, but I am not sure what I had to offer. My memory of that time, however, is of Raymattja struggling to balance the demands placed on her time and expertise by both work and family, as well as the community. She had just had another baby, yet the school and LPC still relied on her heavily. Raymattja eventually decided to take some leave, so as I sat alone in the LPC, I decided to write a letter to the Aboriginal Teachers Action Group (this group is a concept from Paulo Freire's work and was promoted by Mandawuy from his 'Action Research' studies at Deakin; see Freire 1970).

My letter to the action group was a plea for a literacy worker to work with. I was eventually provided with a co-worker, who lacked some of the multi-skills required of a productive literacy worker—but she was a delightful person, and we enjoyed our time together. The action group had decided I primarily needed company, and the rest could come later. They were seeing things from a long term perspective while I, on the other hand, was on an urgent mission, and had the (regrettable) pattern of only staying in a school for two years. I was driven by the department ideology that the job of the LPC was to 'flood the community with literature', no matter whether they were primers, local newspapers, culturally based books generated by the community, or translations of popular English books. We received a handwritten letter from Mem Fox while I was at Yirrkala, stating that the translation that the LPC had done into Dhuwaya, of her book *Possum Magic* was "the best thing that had ever happened to her book".

As my time at Yirrkala went by, more literacy workers came and went, while I decided to concentrate my efforts on writing a school literacy curriculum, on the first ever (Apple) computer in the LPC. The school already had a room full of Gudschinsky primers in Gumatj, produced by the linguist Joyce Ross and her Yolŋu co-workers such as Mutilnga, but they had no appeal for children and weren't being used. So I decided to include in my curriculum document an explanation of all the approaches and activities that I thought could work in teaching Yolŋu Matha literacy to children. In all my teaching, I have always adopted an 'eclectic approach', so I tried to outline all the current recommended approaches, such as: 'Language Experience', 'Look-Say' with sight word cards, 'Break through to Literacy' with syllable cards, Concentrated Language Encounters, and of course phonics. I also tried to encourage use of the latest

approach, developed by Fran Murray of *Walkin' Talkin' Stories*, after an exchange visit to see Fran on the Tiwi Islands (see Murray, this volume). This approach uses story books as the basis for the concentrated language encounter in the vernacular, with each book being sustained over a long period of time.

Another thing that was being promoted by the NT Bilingual Advisory team during this time was the importance of 'team work' and 'learning together sessions', between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff working together in bilingual programs. This was particularly championed by Beth Graham, who had taught at Yirrkala for many years, and held the teacher-linguist position there when its bilingual program began in 1974. She knew from experience that success in the classroom depended on teachers working collaboratively and respectfully together in teams (see Graham 1986).

But after hearing and reading about the innovative, culturally embedded and holistic approaches that were implemented at Yirrkala after my departure, under Mandawuy Yunupingu's leadership, I think I was just keeping the teacher-linguist's chair warm. After I departed at the end of 1986, Raymattja Marika returned to the LPC, and I was replaced by Michael Christie (who was my mentor at Milingimbi in my first teaching appointment). The LPC initiated a community-run newsletter *Yän*, which shared stories and entertained with purpose and meaning for the Yolŋu (see Gale 1997), and the innovative Garma and Galtha Rom ideologies were introduced into the school. These community initiatives, among others, under Mandawuy's leadership, all made a lot more sense for a school under Yolŋu control (see Marika-Munuggiritj and Christie 1995; Ngurruwutthun 1991; also Gale 1997).

Perhaps one useful contribution I made during my time at Yirrkala concerned the sensitive issue of using the Dhuwaya dialect in the classroom and in the books produced in the LPC. Dhuwaya is a koine language that has developed as the communilect spoken by the younger generation at Yirrkala. It is an amalgam of the traditional clan languages of the Yirrkala region, and is stigmatised because it has no tract of land or songs or designs to call its own. But it was the dialect spoken by the students and teachers in the school, and was easier for them to read and write than the Gumatj clan language that was used in most of the old school primers. My newly acquired husband (Rob Amery) proved useful in this debate, when I organised for him to come and research a Masters thesis at Yirrkala that analysed the structure of Dhuwaya (see Amery 1993). Active discussions we had about Dhuwaya, particularly during our learning together sessions with Yolŋu staff, proved valuable and productive, and also demonstrated the passion and depth of feeling Yolŋu have for their own clan languages.

Lessons Learnt

- Literature in the vernacular needs to be relevant, purposeful and directed by the literary needs in the community.

- No one approach works in teaching literacy—an eclectic approach, especially when teaching literacy in a phonemically written language, can work.
- No matter what teaching methodology is adopted, or even if an eclectic approach is taken, it is far easier for Aboriginal kids to 'catch onto literacy' if it is first taught via their own first language.
- Teaching in an Aboriginal community is all about team work, and building close relationships. Non-Aboriginal teachers and specialists are welcome (and needed) in Aboriginal schools, but only if they are prepared to work as a team and listen to the community and its needs and aspirations.

Discussion

One thing I have found over the years is that we often don't truly appreciate something's worth in our lives until it is taken away from us, and is no longer there for us to enjoy. This seems to be the case not only when we lose people and tangible things, but also for Aboriginal languages. I had to return from the NT to my home state of South Australia (SA) to truly appreciate the worth of an Aboriginal child growing up in his or her community where they can learn to speak their own Aboriginal language as their first language. In SA, there is only one Aboriginal language still being passed onto children as their first language—and that is Pitjantjatjara, in the remote north west of the state. The schools in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, as in the NT, have also suffered from ever changing government education policies regarding their vernacular literacy programs (since they began at Ernabella in 1940, see Gale 1997). They were also re-labelled in the late 1990s as 'Two Way Schools', to accommodate the departmental push for more English, and less vernacular education. The Anangu teachers I helped train, within AnTEP (the Anangu Teacher Education Program), on my return to SA, now share the same feeling of alienation as their NT Aboriginal colleagues, as the curriculum becomes more mainstream, and they lose control of their schools.

I currently work in the field of language revival in SA, and have shared many discussions with Ngarrindjeri (and Kaurna) colleagues who envy the people from Arnhem Land, who come to Adelaide to perform at the WOMADelaide music festival. They hear them speaking their language fluently, and singing their traditional songs passed onto them by their Elders. One Ngarrindjeri Elder, Phyllis Williams, with whom I work closely, says "my dream in life is to one day speak my own language fluently"—just as they do in the NT. She has lived and worked in Darwin, and is fully aware of the lack of language opportunities afforded her when she grew up on the Point McLeay mission (now known as Raukkan). Growing up in the assimilation era, she was forbidden to speak her own language at school—the school policy was 'all English'—just as the NT government Minister for Education Marion

Scrymgour declared in 2008 that the first four hours of each school day would be in English only in Aboriginal schools in the NT (see Disbray 2014a, p. 129).

But it was not just what happened at school that caused the demise of Phyllis' language over the years in SA. It was the government attitudes of the time. The parents could feel the disrespect the government had for their Ngarrindjeri language, and culture. They convinced them their children's future lay in assimilationist policies, and to only speak English in the presence of their children. Unfortunately, it only takes one generation to stop speaking a community's language for it to be lost. Phyllis, and others (see Brodie and Gale1997), have told me that when their Elders were speaking their language among themselves at Raukkan, and they saw children within ear shot, they stopped speaking Ngarrindjeri and quickly switched to English. So how could the children learn to speak their language when their parents clammed up in their presence? Language loss was inevitable…. And so it will be in Arnhem Land, and in central Australia, if attitudes towards traditional Aboriginal languages drift towards a negative one, over time. It just takes a gradual shift in language attitudes, across one generation, for a group to stop speaking one language in preference for another. The growth of the Kriol language across Aboriginal Australia in recent years (now the largest Aboriginal language spoken) is living evidence of how language loss and language shift can occur over a short period of time (see Meakins 2014). But I am not arguing that there is not a place for English in schools. The term 'bi-lingual' implies that schooling will embrace both the vernacular and English, equally.

Conclusion

It seems serendipitous that a few months ago the two grand-daughters of my Ngarrindjeri colleague Phyllis Williams flew from Sydney to South Australia to teach some dances to our newly formed Ngarrindjeri dance group, *Ringbalun Porlar* ('dancing children'). These two talented young dance graduates of the National Aboriginal and Islander Dance Academy (NAISDA), during their own training had previously travelled to Yirrkala, where they learnt some Yolŋu dance styles. So when they came to teach dance to our young *porlar*, they incorporated some Yolŋu dance moves (with permission) into their contemporary choreography. The Ngarrindjeri *porlar* thrived on the experience, and have since performed four times at public events (NAIDOC and Come Out, in 2015). The confidence boost these performances have given to our *porlar*, and the increased pride in their Ngarrindjeri identity, is palpable. But it seemed ironic to me that to bring back dance to southern SA, we had to draw from the dance and musical knowledge that has been maintained in the NT on the other side of the continent. I only hope (and pray) that in 30 years time, the Arnhem Landers do not have to call on the Ngarrindjeri people, from the other side of the continent, to ask them how to go about reviving their own Yolŋu language, should it ever go to sleep.

So, my concluding comment is: We need to learn from the hard won lessons of the past. There are many things to be gained from government policies that show respect for Aboriginal languages and cultures. One obvious way this respect can be demonstrated to the younger generation is by acknowledging and accommodating their first languages in their schooling. I trust this trip down memory lane, reflecting on my current work in SA, and especially on my time spent in the 'boom years of bilingual education' in the NT, when Aboriginal languages were respected and valued in schools, will not fall on deaf ears.

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