

Chapter 8

The Policy Framework for Bilingual Education in Australian Indigenous Languages in the Northern Territory

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Introduction

Since the commencement of a program of bilingual education using Aboriginal languages and English in some isolated Aboriginal community schools in the Northern Territory in 1973, national policy has been the primary determinant of the fluctuating fortunes of these programs. It is therefore useful to look first at the national policy context over time, in order to understand how the Northern Territory Bilingual Education Program fared. In doing so we need to bear in mind that even if there was, at times, no formal language policy, the actions of people and of governments have implemented, and continue to implement, de facto but ‘invisible’ language policies (Bonacina-Pugh 2012, pp. 213–218; Truscott and Malcolm 2010). Basically the trend has been to replace acknowledgement of research and concern for the education and welfare of Indigenous children with an emphasis on uniformity and on English as the national language.

The Indigenous Languages in the History of Australia

At the time of European settlement in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century it is estimated that there were about 250 Aboriginal languages spoken across the continent, many of them with multiple dialects. The people who spoke these languages were nomadic hunter-gatherers, who moved around within their own and neighbouring

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territories. These territories appear to have been relatively small in richer coastal habitats and much larger in the inland desert regions. In some parts of the continent at least, multilingualism was the norm, often with children initially acquiring their mother's language and then their father's language, and adding new languages over time as their range of contacts widened. Into this world came a dominating foreign language, English, spoken by a people whose agricultural and more urbanised way of life came into conflict with that of the owners of the land they appropriated.

While Indigenous languages were forced out of regular use quite early in the southern and eastern areas of densest European settlement, they remained in regular use in the more isolated Indigenous communities of the remote north and centre of the continent, particularly the Northern Territory, north Queensland, Torres Strait, northern Western Australia and northern South Australia. Even today there are Indigenous communities in which Indigenous languages are in daily use and where English is largely a foreign language. It is such communities that were the target for the Northern Territory's Bilingual Education Program.

According to the 2011 Census (ABS 2012), within a total Australian population of a little over 21.5 million, only 11 per cent of Australia's 548,370 Indigenous people reported that they used an Indigenous language at home. Table 8.1 sets out Indigenous language use in each state and territory. While the proportion of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory reporting that they use an Indigenous language at home has dropped since the 1996 census (from 65 to 60 per cent cf. McKay 2009, Table 19.1), the Northern Territory remains the only state or territory in Australia where the majority of Indigenous people use an Indigenous language at home. With 34,084 users of Indigenous languages at home, the Northern Territory has the highest number of Indigenous language users in Australia. The majority (56.3 per cent) of the nation's Indigenous language speakers live in the Northern Territory, with most of these living in the "outback"; that is, in remote areas outside urban centres. (The Australian Capital Territory and offshore territories have been omitted from the Table.) Note that, while a significant majority of Indigenous people across the country are counted in the census as speaking English only, this is frequently an Aboriginal form of English that differs markedly from Standard Australian English.

Language Policy in Australia

From the earliest days of European settlement in Australia there was conflict over language, and English was imposed as the common language of government and education. There were local exceptions, where Indigenous languages were used in schools, churches and other contexts, particularly by Christian missionaries, who recognised the need to use Indigenous languages for effective communication and for building relationships. But these were not the norm. For instance in the 1830s German Lutheran missionaries in the Adelaide area offered education in the local Kaurna language to Indigenous children with the support of Governor Gawler. The next governor, Grey, however, insisted on English-only education and forced these

Table 8.1 Proportion of Indigenous people reporting that they use an Indigenous language at home by state/territory: 2011 Census of Population and Housing (Based on ABS 2012)

State/Territory	Total State/Territory/region Indigenous population	State/Territory/region Indigenous language users as proportion of total national Indigenous population using an Indigenous language at home (per cent)	Number and proportion (per cent) of total state/territory/region Indigenous population using an Indigenous language at home
Northern Territory	56,777	56.3	34,084 (60.0 per cent)
Northern Territory Outback	45,540	54.3	32,895 (72.2 per cent)
Western Australia	69,665	15.6	9,427 (13.5 per cent)
South Australia	30,432	5.8	3,499 (11.5 per cent)
Queensland	155,824	19.4	11,739 (7.5 per cent)
New South Wales	172,621	2.0	1,194 (0.7 per cent)
Victoria	37,990	0.7	401 (1.1 per cent)
Tasmania	19,628	0.1	62 (0.3 per cent)

missionaries to move their program out of town (Amery 2001, p. 146; Gale 1990, pp. 42–44; Harris 1994, pp. 316–334).

Overall, the treatment of Indigenous languages (and their speakers) by European settlers and governments from the earliest times was harsh and repressive, as summed up by a House of Representatives committee report on Aboriginal language maintenance:

Apart from some very occasional exceptions where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages were recognised, languages recorded or some missions taught in language, official attitudes to ATSI [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] languages since European settlement were those of repression (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992, p. 75).

That report outlines the treatment of Indigenous languages that led to the loss of many of these languages (pp. 21–24) and this is complemented by the summary of the oppressive treatment of Aboriginal people given in the *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Johnston 1991, p. 8) as ‘deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Aboriginal people starting with dispossession from their land and proceeding to almost every aspect of their life’. Furthermore,

The consequence of this history is the partial destruction of Aboriginal culture and a large part of the Aboriginal population and also disadvantage and inequality of Aboriginal people in all the areas of social life where comparison is possible between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Johnston 1991, p. 11).

Educational policies were consistent with the treatment of Indigenous languages and of Indigenous people in general in these times. In a discussion of early approaches to the education of Aboriginal children around Australia until the 1960s Quentin Beresford writes:

In broad terms, Australian governments up until the 1960s held that Aboriginal children should be offered only minimal schooling consistent with the perceptions about the limitations inherent in their race and their expected station in life at the lowest rungs of white society. In States with large Aboriginal populations, this limited provision was greatly affected by policies which sought to separate Indigenous people from social contact with whites.

In shaping provision for Aboriginal education, governments responded to three forces: theories of racial inferiority, which were widely used to justify limited provision of education; community views on the need for segregation of Aboriginal people away from whites, which underpinned the inadequacy of educational provision; and the official policy of assimilation of Aboriginal people within the broader Australian community, which governed the type of instruction offered to children (Beresford 2003, p. 43).

Leitner (2004, pp. 219–220) has suggested that language policy in Australia can be thought of in seven stages, though these have primary relevance for the relationships between English and other “immigrant” languages, rather than for Indigenous languages. The seventh period (g) is still current.

- (a) A *laissez faire* period to the 1870s
- (b) An assimilationist policy from the 1870s to the 1960s
- (c) An integrationist policy that foreshadowed multiculturalism from the 1960s to the mid-1980s
- (d) A short period of multiculturalism that centred around community aspirations to the early 1990s
- (e) A shift to an economically driven acceptance of plurilingualism to the mid-1990s
- (f) An Asian-language-focused policy to the turn of the 21st century
- (g) A return to seeing plurilingualism as a problem and a shift back to literacy in English at the present time.

The high point of language policy at the national level in Australia, as far as recognition of Indigenous and community (immigrant) languages is concerned, was the adoption of the *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco 1987) by the Hawke Labor government. This policy offered unprecedented recognition of Indigenous and other community languages and saw multilingualism as a valuable community resource to be supported and developed in a ‘two-way’ relationship with English, following the four guiding principles set out in the Senate Standing Committee report on *A National Language Policy* (Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts 1984, p. 4):

- competence in English
- maintenance and development of languages other than English
- provision of services in languages other than English
- opportunities for learning second languages.

Within a few years, however, government priorities changed with respect to languages, beginning with the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP)* (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1991a), which prioritised literacy (in English) and a small number of foreign languages, including Aboriginal languages. Within a few more years the “Rudd report” (Council of Australian Governments 1994) further narrowed the priority foreign languages to four Asian trade languages: Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian and Korean.

The development of the *National Policy on Languages* and the transition to the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* is analysed by Moore (1996), who argues (pp. 481 ff.) that the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* was designed to eliminate the support for pluralism [and multilingualism] that was the essence of the *National Policy on Languages*.

Moore shows that the main focus had shifted significantly. For example, when launching the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, John Dawkins, the minister responsible, said: “the starting point is that Australia is a nation of many cultures but Australia has but one national language, that being Australian English” (Dawkins 1991, p. 1, as cited by Moore 1996, p. 479).

Moore goes on to note that:

He [Dawkins] stresses that “English language education, English language training, is by far in a way [sic] the most important part of this policy document” (p. 1) and that the government’s second priority is “that more Australians should speak foreign languages” to enhance Australia’s role “as a trading nation” (p. 2) (Dawkins 1991, as cited in Moore 1996, p. 479).

Such an emphasis on English was echoed a decade and a half later by the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, who, while “not asking Aboriginal children to give up their own languages”, was quoted as saying in 2007:

Too many [Aboriginal children] still only have a rudimentary understanding of the language spoken throughout the country [English] and can only speak their own language, which perhaps is only known to 200, 300 or 400 other people ... That must end (ABC Newsonline 2007, 25 May).

Starting with the *National Policy on Languages*, there has been funding from the Australian Government for various Indigenous Languages programs, including Regional Language Centres, Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR), and most recently Indigenous Languages Support (ILS) (Ministry for the Arts 2014).

Nevertheless the fundamental policy provisions, despite sometimes sounding very supportive of Indigenous languages and cultures, are often fundamentally focused on English language literacy in order to bring Indigenous people into the mainstream. For instance, McKay (2011, pp. 303–305) analyses the website supporting the 2009 *National Indigenous Languages Policy* and shows how a prime aim and major funding target for an Indigenous Languages Policy turns out to be literacy and numeracy (implicitly) in English, a non-Indigenous language. And bilingual education, an approach widely supported by research as improving

English literacy levels for minority language speaking children, is not even mentioned.

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) noted significantly in 2006 that:

The home language, whether an Indigenous language or a contact language like Aboriginal English, not only carries the culture of Indigenous students but also encapsulates their identity. For schools to put standard Australian English in an oppositional relationship to the home language, for example, by making it the only recognised vehicle of oral communication in schools, will be to invite resistance, whether active or passive, on the part of Indigenous students (MCEETYA 2006, p. 17).

McKay (2011, pp. 309–310) shows that MCEETYA’s own recommendations, however, include no substantive use or teaching of Indigenous languages in school programs but only, at ages 0–5, “educational programs for Indigenous children that respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts” while “explicitly teach[ing] standard Australian English and prepar[ing] children for schooling” (MCEETYA 2006, p. 20). If Indigenous languages are not actively used, English effectively becomes the only recognised vehicle of oral communication in the school, with potentially serious consequences.

The 2008 introduction of NAPLaN testing (the *National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy*) by MCEETYA was yet another national policy decision that further promoted English at the expense of Indigenous languages. As a national testing program, NAPLaN assesses English literacy. It was early results of these tests that gave the Northern Territory’s Minister of Education at the time, Marion Scrymgour, the pretext to severely curtail bilingual education programs in Northern Territory bilingual or ‘two-way’ schools by insisting that the first four hours of school time every day must be devoted to English.

Beginnings of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory

The original Australian Constitution (1901) had contained discriminatory provisions explicitly excluding “Aboriginal people in any state” from the powers of the Australian Parliament to legislate for them, and explicitly excluding “the Aboriginal natives” from being counted among “the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth”. The removal of these exclusions from the Constitution was supported by 90.77 per cent of those voting in a 1967 referendum (National Archives of Australia 2015) and was formalised in the same year. Aboriginal people had been given the vote federally and in every state not long before—between 1962 and 1965 (National Archives of Australia 2015).

Perhaps significantly, it was after the 1967 recognition of Aboriginal people as people, and therefore worthy to be counted in the census and after Federal Parliament could “make special laws” for Aboriginal people, that the Australian

Government initiated bilingual education for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, which was, at that time, under Australian Government control. It was one of the first acts of the new Whitlam Labor government, elected in late 1972, after more than two decades of Liberal government. The Minister responsible for implementing this new bilingual program, Kim Beazley, later indicated that he himself had observed that classroom activities and interactions in Aboriginal schools were much more effective when Indigenous languages were used, but that the mission schools who used these languages in the classroom were jeopardising their government funding by doing so under state and federal government policies at that time (Beazley 1999, p. 5).

Policy in these programs has earlier been discussed by McKay (2007, 2011), showing the mismatch between policy and implementation and the strong emphasis on English. A national summary of policies related to Indigenous languages was provided in the *Social Justice Report 2009* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2009, pp. 80–83). A chronology of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, drawn from earlier unpublished work by Harris and Devlin, was published by the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Four Corners* program (ABC 2009) and summarised by Devlin (2011, pp. 263–264).

It was no accident that the first five schools targeted for the introduction of bilingual programs in Aboriginal languages in 1973 were schools associated with Christian missions which had developed the use of Indigenous languages in their work in the respective communities, thus giving the implementation of bilingual education a head start.

The early years of bilingual education were exciting times, with a sense amongst the staff involved that these programs represented an innovative and effective means of assisting the effective education of Aboriginal children who did not speak English and were largely not exposed to English at all before they started school. There was a high level of commitment from staff involved in the programs and from the Aboriginal communities in which the programs were based. Indeed the strengthening of the links between the school and the community and the Aboriginalisation of the education process, including the greater employment of Aboriginal people and the professional development of Aboriginal teachers, was one of the positive effects of the bilingual education programs in their early years (Collins and Lea 1999, pp. 123–124; Gale 1990, 54–59; McKay 1996, p. 115). Furthermore, the bilingual programs proved effective, with Collins and Lea (1999, p. 122) noting that outcomes in English in bilingual schools 'clearly show positive outcomes compared with benchmark non-bilingual schools', while Devlin (2009, p. 8) showed that 'students in bilingual programs were generally attaining better literacy and numeracy scores than their peers in non-bilingual schools' according to the available studies conducted in the Northern Territory.

I joined the Northern Territory bilingual program in its third year (1975) as a linguist charged with carrying out the basic linguistic research required to develop an orthography for the Ndjébbana language of Maningrida, in Arnhem Land, and then with assisting a Teacher Linguist and Ndjébbana-speaking Aboriginal Teaching Assistants and Literacy Workers to develop materials to establish the

program. The Ndjébbana bilingual program itself commenced in 1978 (Devlin 2009, p. 5) in the sense of establishing a separate Ndjébbana-speaking class. It was implemented fully in 1981, after approval of the orthography and the development of classroom materials in Ndjébbana. But one of the earliest effects was to improve the attendance rates of Ndjébbana-speaking children, who were no longer scattered amongst classes of speakers of up to six or seven other languages but could work and learn together with fellow-students and teaching assistants with whom they shared the language.

From the beginning, the aim of the Northern Territory bilingual education program had been to provide the earliest school experience to children in their first language—thus reducing the alienation of school—and to develop literacy in their first language, while teaching English as a second language in a gradually expanding pattern throughout the years of primary school.

The 1975 aims (under the Australian Government) included both the Indigenous languages and English, but placed the Indigenous languages first, suggesting that Indigenous language maintenance was a significant priority aim:

- (a) To help each child to believe in himself and be proud of his heritage by the regular use of his Aboriginal language in school and by learning about Aboriginal culture
- (b) To teach each student how to read and write in his own language (Australian Department of Education 1975, p. 1).

By 1980, now under the newly established Northern Territory Government, the aims were re-ordered. The following aim, which had been lower in the list before, was raised to the top, suggesting that transfer to English had now taken over as the priority aim:

- 1. To develop competency in reading and writing in English and in number to the level required on leaving school to function without disadvantage in the wider Australian community (Northern Territory Department of Education 1980, p. 2).

Those of us who questioned the significance of this re-ordering at the time were assured that it made no difference, since the aims relating to English and to Indigenous languages were all still in the list. However, it was difficult to see why the re-ordering had been carried out unless it signalled a change in priorities. This change in priorities took some years to take full effect, but in the end, in line with national policy changes, the focus did shift strongly to literacy and numeracy in English.

The Collins Review of Bilingual Education, set up following the 1998 attempt to transfer funds from bilingual education programs to English, also noted the diverse strands of support for bilingual education from its early days (Collins and Lea 1999, p. 121). We should note, however, that in fact the programs were achieving both maintenance and transfer aims, thus satisfying different groups of stakeholders.

From the Northern Territory Government point of view, these programs appear to have been conceived of, and supported, as transfer-to-English programs. This eventually led, in 1998, to an attempt by the government to refocus the programs

primarily on English. Reasons given for this proposed move by the Northern Territory Government (Devlin 2009, p. 6) included the alleged concern of Aboriginal communities about bilingual education, the alleged lower performance by students in bilingual programs, and a desire to reduce the cost of education, allowing “schools to share in the savings and better resource English language programs”.

In the meantime, Indigenous people in communities where these programs were running, as well as most of the staff of these programs, saw them primarily as supporting Indigenous languages and communities and as more effective means of providing education to Aboriginal students who did not speak English upon entering school. In fact the outcry from Indigenous communities, bilingual staff and language experts against the 1998 prioritisation of English at the expense of Indigenous languages was on the basis of loss of support for Indigenous languages rather than a protest against English per se, and gave the lie to the first reason advanced against the programs. Indigenous people generally want their children to develop competence in English, but not at the expense of their Indigenous languages (Collins and Lea 1999, pp. 117, 120; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992, pp. 3, 34). The parents generally choose both languages, rather than one or the other, if given the choice (cf. Ouane and Glanz 2010, p. 45).

The possibility of transfer programs assisting indigenous language maintenance was also noted by Chimbutane in discussing bilingual education in Mozambique,

Based on the positive impact that the program is having on cultural affirmation in both sites in this study, my argument is that in those contexts where pupils are surrounded by their native languages (instead of a second/foreign language), a transitional model may strengthen the vitality of low-status languages and associated cultures, instead of weakening them (Chimbutane 2011, p. 166).

Even the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* companion volume had noted that, “It is important to recognise that gaining skills in English need not be at the expense of gaining skills in Aboriginal languages” (Department of Employment, Education and Training 1991b, 90). This was echoed, many years later, by the Australian Council for Educational Research’s review of Indigenous language programs in schools across Australia:

4. Learning an Indigenous language and becoming proficient in the English language are complementary rather than mutually exclusive activities” (Purdie et al. 2008, p. 190).

Pressures on Policy

In this final section I propose to outline a number of conflicting pressures affecting bilingual education policy and its implementation (or not) in the Northern Territory.

Concern for rights, equity and addressing social injustice can be a significant motivator for governments and lobbyists and, indeed, Moore (1996, pp. 475–476) suggests that such motivations lay behind the 15-year development process, from the initial work of the Whitlam Labor Government to the *National Policy on Languages* in 1987. However, subsequent developments suggest that other factors have frequently been given precedence by governments and policy makers.

Resources are a significant concern for governments, and rightly so. There is no doubt that in the case of the Northern Territory's bilingual education programs in Aboriginal languages the cost of developing and delivering programs in a number of different languages, each spoken in relatively small communities, was high compared with a one-size-fits-all English-based program. As noted above, one of the reasons advanced by the Northern Territory Government in 1998 to phase out bilingual education was to save money and to redirect the remaining resources into "further development of ESL programs" (as cited by Devlin 2009, p. 6). Research in Africa, however, shows that, while implementation costs of national/international language medium education are lower than for effective mother tongue education, this saving is more than outweighed by the higher cost of the resulting less effective educational achievement rates and the resulting higher student dropout and repeat rates (Heugh 2011b).

Research is, or should be, an important element informing all decision-making. What is of concern in the language policy debates in Australia more generally, and in relation to bilingual education in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory in particular, is how the research findings have often been either ignored, discounted, misquoted or denied in order to reach policy decisions deemed more appropriate on other grounds, even though the research shows that the resulting policies are less likely to lead to the claimed results.

The key findings of research related to bilingual education have shown that students' education is most effective when it is commenced in a language that the students know, and that strong development of the students' first language (including development of literacy in the first language) provides a strong basis for enhancing the development of a second language. Some of this research is listed or summarised by various scholars (e.g., Devlin 2011, pp. 270–271; Purdie et al. 2008, pp. 18–21).

International research studies also show the importance of strong development of the first language in order to be successful in learning and using a second language such as English. See, for instance, overviews or summaries related to different contexts by Alidou and Brock-Utne (2006), Qorro (2008, pp. 7–10), Ball (2011, esp. pp. 6, 23–25, 27, 28, 30, 35–36, 57), Ouane and Glanz (2011, pp. 23–24), Heugh (2011a, pp. 119–129), Hu (2005, pp. 18–19), Madiba (2012, pp. 16–17). Ethiopia presents an interesting case, as noted by Ouane and Glanz (2010, p. 27):

The Ethiopian education policy stipulates that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction for the first eight years of schooling. In the decentralized Ethiopian education system, some regions apply this rule and others, such as the capital, Addis Ababa, introduce a foreign language, English, as the medium of instruction as early as year

six. A comparison of the learning achievements in year 8 showed that students with stronger mother-tongue education performed better in all subjects, including English (Heugh et al. 2007).

Research and experience show that students are much more active in classroom participation and more involved in active learning when the language of the classroom is a language they know and can understand; for example, Hornberger (2002, pp. 41, 42) with respect to South Africa's Zulu speakers and Quechua speakers in Latin America; Ouane and Glanz (2011, p. 35) for Africa and Qorro (2008, pp. 12–14) for findings in Tanzania.

In the early days of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, and in the lead-up to the National Language Policy, the research of language professionals appears to have been taken seriously. As time has gone on, however, it seems that results of research on bilingual education have had little or no influence on policy and decision-making.

Political expediency, as well as **public opinion** and/or **(mis-)understanding** can be significant counter-forces to educational and language research in policy formulation and decision-making in relation to bilingual education. Chimbutane notes that “language policy decisions in Africa are not guided by research findings but mainly by political pragmatism” in the view of some authors (Chimbutane 2011, p.21).

As outlined above, Aboriginal communities and parents in remote Northern Territory schools generally supported the use of Indigenous languages in their schools and for their children, and therefore objected to the government's shift to English-focused education. On the other hand politicians and policy makers seem to be more influenced by the Australian public majority's view that English is the paramount language and by the mistaken understanding that maximising teaching time devoted to English and the use of it as the medium of instruction are the best ways to improve English skills, despite repeated research results showing the opposite.

In some other contexts the strength of public opinion favouring the dominant ex-colonial language can persuade parents and communities to support a focus on that language, even when they realise that such an emphasis is not necessarily helpful. Qorro, for instance, notes that in Tanzania: “the majority of parents in the sample admitted they were aware their children learned very little when taught in English; however, they objected to the proposal to change the educational medium to Kiswahili [the national language]” (Qorro 2008, p. 15). Qorro attributes this to a misunderstanding amongst parents of the distinction between teaching a language and using a language as the medium of instruction (Qorro 2008, pp. 10–11; cf. Babaci-Wilhite 2010, pp. 297–299). As in Tanzania, public opinion, policy and practice in Australian schools show little regard for the results of the research done on medium of instruction in that country.

The example of schools using the Pitjantjatjara language in South Australia shows that Indigenous public opinion can also be misinformed, though experience may eventually lead to a different view:

These communities had bilingual education programs in Pitjantjatjara since 1937, and chose to give them up in the early 1990s, arguing that their children needed to learn English. But in 2006, Katrina Tjitayi, an Anangu teacher who was then Director of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee, argued for a return to bilingual and bicultural education, claiming that the children had better literacy and numeracy under the earlier bilingual academic program (Simpson et al. 2009, p. 29).

Conclusion

Building on the use of Indigenous languages in education by a few mission schools during much of Australia's history, bilingual education in Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory was initiated in the Northern Territory by an innovative Australian Government that was concerned for social justice and equity during a period when justice and equity concerns for Aboriginal people were emerging after more than a century and a half of dispossession and oppression of these people. It came at the beginning of a short period of a decade and a half, during which such concerns were combined with respect for the results of language education research and a willingness to listen to communities of speakers of Indigenous languages about their priorities for the education of their children. These priorities were for development of skills in English combined with maintaining and developing skills in the local Indigenous language(s). The research then and now suggests that beginning education in the child's first language will render all of their education more effective, including their development of English (second language) skills.

Official moves to discontinue or redirect bilingual education can be explained in part by the costs of such programs, a nationalistic focus on English as the national language, a pandering to public opinion that was unwilling to recognise the results of bilingual education research, the public's fear of the unfamiliar, and a willingness to ride roughshod over the minority status and rights of remote Aboriginal people.

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