

## Indigenous languages in education in the NT:



## the Chief Minister's "house of cards"

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## Sociolinguistic background

- ±30% of NT indigenous
- immigrant population also significant
- many children speak Kriol and aboriginal English in the home, **not** Standard English
- significant portion of students in the NT **do not** speak Standard English as their primary language in the home
- don't limit the issue to "bilingual schools"

## Historical background

- **1970s** bilingual ed in some private schools
- **1980s** some public schools designated as “bilingual schools”
- **1998 CLP** withdrew support for bilingual sch
- **Labor** continues to cut the legs out from under bilingual schools
- **2008/9** “English-only, 1<sup>st</sup> 4 hours”
- details in Devlin (2009)

## Research in the NT

- in spite of being under-resourced and under-supported
- multiple studies show students in bilingual schools in the NT perform as well or better than in other schools
- limited models of MLE; costly, labour intensive
- community involvement & support





## Key reports

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- **Devlin, Brian.** (2009). Bilingual education in the Northern Territory and the continuing debate over its effectiveness and value. Paper presented at AIATSIS Research Symposium, "Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory: Principles, policy and practice." Canberra, 26 June 2009.
- **Grimes, Charles E.** (2009). *Indigenous languages in education: what the research actually shows*. Darwin: Australian Society for Indigenous Languages.
- **Simpson, Jane, Josephine Caffery, and Patrick McConvell.** (2009). *Gaps in Australia's indigenous language policy: dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- **World Bank.** (2005). In their own language... education for all. In *Education Notes*, June 2005. <http://www.worldbank.org/education/>



## Grimes (2009)

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- bibliography: 691 entries
- all the research shows the same picture
- NT govt has **no credible research** backing its policy
- NT govt is **not producing the evidence** to support its position
- NT policy **flies in the face** of all the evidence



## Decades of MLE research (all)

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- **bilinguals** can 'succeed' in both worlds, become respected community leaders, & participate in mainstream society
- **literacy** far more effective when basic skills are learned in the language most actively used at home [L1]
- **no space** for indigenous languages contributes to lack of self-worth, increased marginalisation, & often resentment
- **semi-linguals** do not have a voice in either system, are frustrated, and often involved in anti-social behaviour



## Summary of MLE research

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- Children **learn better**
- Children **stay in school longer**
- End-of-primary **pass rates are higher**
- L1 teaching linked to **raising achievement levels** in many subjects, inc. **L2** and **maths**
- up to 3 times **less likely to drop out**
- **more local content** in curriculum & **greater participation** of community
- WB--well implemented MLE is **cost effective**



## 2 views: the maths of MLE

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- Popular (**intuitive**):
- teach more English → learn more English
- overwhelming MLE research (**counterintuitive**)
- teach in language of the home (**indigenous**)  
+ standard language (**English**)  
→ perform better in **both**



## Devlin (2009)

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- after cutting the legs out from under bilingual ed
- govt criticizes it for not performing better (!)
- data tabled in parliament to support new policy were flawed, and included
  - a non bilingual school
  - revitalisation prog. not bilingual prog.
  - school that only teaches at high school level



## Simpson, Caffery & McConvell (2009)

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- history of ignoring the research
- history of ignoring the positive results
- history of ignoring recommendations
- NT policy incompatible with national policy on indigenous languages
- NT policy incompatible with UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples
  - Australia is a signatory



## Indigenous Languages—a National Approach (2009)

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5. "Supporting Indigenous Language Programs in Schools: To **support and maintain the teaching and learning** of Indigenous languages in Australian schools."
- current NT policies clearly **incompatible** with national policy



## UN Declaration on Right of Indigenous Peoples (UN DRIP)

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- NT policies violate the spirit of the entire Declaration
- particularly incompatible with **Articles 13 and 14**
- Australia is a signatory
- CM doesn't seem to have a problem with this



## Diverse voices

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- Australian Society of Indigenous Languages
- leading scholars around Oz
  - Seigel, Eades, Simpson, Caffery, Evans, Devlin, etc
- many others, including ATESOL, NAAJA
- Friends of Bilingual Learning



## Diverse voices-2

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- Uniting Church, Northern Synod
  - "...a serious indictment of successive Governments who have **failed to adequately resource** the needs of indigenous schools in the Territory."
  - Rev. Wendell Flentje, Moderator, 16 Sept 09
- hosted Public Forum at CDU, 29 Sept 09



## Diverse voices-3

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- Anglican Church, Diocese of NT
  - "But here in the NT **we are bungy jumping with children's education**—toying with policy that is neither evidence-based nor going to deliver better English literacy—**hoping we land on our feet and not on our heads.**"
  - Right Rev. Greg Thompson, bishop, 25 Sept 09

## Press conf. 25 Sept 09

- many indigenous leaders present



## CDU, School of Education, 7 Oct

- "As professionals in education we consider the government's decision to require the first four hours of instruction in NT Schools to be in English to be **simplistic and ill-advised, handcuffing schools** from adopting more appropriate approaches involving local languages where these might prove more effective.
- We would like to call the government's attention to the considerable scholarly literature, including results of research in the NT and elsewhere, that make clear the potential benefits of using the first language of students in their schooling, and where such approaches can and should be implemented we do not believe that these benefits should be left until after the first four hours of schooling each day."



## Offers to help form better pol.

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- Many informed experts, NGO's, and church organisations
- have been offering to work with the NT govt to formulate a new policy that
  - is informed by the research
  - recognises the needs of local communities
  - produces better outcomes in all schools, not just bilingual schools



## Politicians

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- **Warren Snowdon** MP (Labor)
- has made some very positive and informed statements about bilingual ed and the need for ESL trained teachers (e.g. **2007**)
  - "...But the Country Liberal Party government scrapped it in 1999 after close to 20 years of operation because they said it didn't work.
  - They **never properly evaluated it**. They **didn't support it** and they **didn't properly resource it**.
  - They didn't even make sure that bilingual education was supported by teachers who were able to combine a high degree of skill in English and Aboriginal languages with a sophisticated understanding of teaching literacy across cultures and the ability to communicate and receive cultural capital across a cultural divide
  - And in the end they just **walked away from it**. As Bob Collins' groundbreaking report Learning Lessons clearly revealed, **they weren't much interested in remote area Aboriginal education.**"
- (**15 December 2008**) questioned the basis of the 4-hour policy



## Politicians

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- Trish Crossin MP (Labor) December 2008
- Marion Scrymgour MLA (Labor)
  - trying to do the right thing has cost her
- other Labor MLA's privately want to see change, "but it is CM's call" Sept 2009
- NT Indigenous Advisory Council
  - top concern 29 Sept 2009
- Terry Mills (CLP) encouraging statements
- rest of CLP ??



## NT DET (my impressions)

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- good people; true professionals
- up on the research;  
know the positive results of good MLE programs
- decision-makers following political agenda & not listening to their own experts
- sackings, turnover and shuffling in NT-DET gives impression of careers put at risk if one wants to maintain professional integrity on this issue of indigenous languages



## CM's house of cards

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- no consultation
- not supported by the research
- not supported by professional bodies
- not supported by indigenous communities
- not supported by mainstream churches
- not supported by many Labor politicians
- not compatible with national policy on Ig
- not compatible with UN DRIP



## My prediction

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- as long as the NT govt continues to ignore the research and 'best practice' in **language-in-education** issues, NT schools will continue to have poor outcomes across the board



## What would I say?

- Chief Minister,
- If you've dug yourself into a hole, the first thing you need to do is **stop digging!**
- Why do you keep digging deeper?
- Please explain what Territorians gain from this irresponsible policy?

