

FAQ sheet:

Indigenous Languages in Education in the Northern Territory

Q.01: Why not just make them learn English?

A.01: It's easy to think that if you teach more English, students will learn more English. But that's not how it really works. Study after study shows that *children learn best in the language they understand best*. That should be obvious. Study after study also shows that where the primary language spoken in the home is not English, teaching them in *both* their own language *plus* English will improve their English far better than just teaching them in English alone. The evidence is overwhelming. The government is not listening.



Q.02: What's wrong with having the first 4 hours of school in English? Doesn't that leave 'space' for indigenous languages too?

A.02: It does give that appearance. But the reality is quite different. Ask any teacher in remote indigenous schools in the Northern Territory, and they will tell you that after 4 hours it's hard to find any students left in the classroom. This seems to be irresponsible politics that is playing with the futures of our children.

Q.03: What are indigenous parents and community leaders saying?

A.03: What many of us who work with indigenous people are hearing them say in community after community, including at public meetings and on television for everyone to hear, is that they want their children to be able to function successfully in *both* their indigenous heritage language *and* standard English. We are not hearing indigenous people say they only want one of these.

Q.04: Is the Northern Territory the only place that has tried bilingual education?

A.04: No. Bilingual education has been tried and has been working successfully in many countries for over half a century. UNESCO made a really good statement about bilingual learning back in 1953 that is often quoted by experts. And a huge amount has been learned since then, especially in the last ten years or so. Many of Australia's near neighbours such as PNG, Vanuatu, Indonesia and the Philippines have policies on minority languages in education that are better designed, more enlightened, more constructive, and more successful than the Northern Territory. This leads some experts to observe that the ineffective policies of successive NT governments are "worse than third world". This is part of what is so puzzling (and shameful) about the position of the NT government. Why can't we be world leaders?

Q.05: Isn't this just a political attack on the Labor government?

A.05: No, the problem has been with successive governments in the NT. You could call it a case of "dumb and dumber". Both parties need to change their policies. Both parties need to go through a process of meaningful consultation with the stakeholders. Both parties need to make a commitment to "do the right thing" by the people of the NT. Both parties need to show that they are sincere in valuing their indigenous citizens and the heritage languages spoken in the NT. Both parties need to understand they are not getting and not going to get good educational outcomes with their existing policies.

Q.06: I get the impression that bilingual schools are only teaching the indigenous language and not teaching English? Why is that?

A.06: That is certainly a common impression, but mostly a false one. Keep in mind that when news shows are focusing on bilingual education programs they want to show that indigenous languages are being taught there, so that is the footage they show. But remember that 'bi-' means 'two'. The goal of any *good* bilingual program is to build on learning basic skills like reading and writing in their first language, as a bridge to literacy and numeracy in English.

Q.07: I thought these children were going to school to learn their indigenous languages. Isn't that right?

A.07: Actually, no, even though many people talk that way. In most cases they already speak their indigenous languages at the level of their age group. That's what they use at home. What they are doing in school is *learning to read and write* in the language they understand best. Once they know how to read and write in their own language it is just a small step to use those same skills to read and write in English. If they first have to learn to read and write in English, that is a much bigger leap, and much harder to do.

Q.08: Doesn't the NT Department of Education have their own experts?

A.08: The NT Department of Education actually has had some very good people, including experts who are fully aware of many of these language issues. The frustration has been that the policy-makers aren't listening to their own experts. And they are also not listening to the repeated recommendations of many independent experts over many years. There are many experts and organisations ready to work with the NT government to formulate a new and better policy.

Q.09: The Chief Minister wants indigenous children to reach the same 'benchmarks' as other children by Year 3. Isn't that reasonable?

A.09: If everyone were already native speakers of standard English, it might be reasonable. But this is requiring children whose primary language in the home is *not* English, to compete on an equal footing with children who *are* native speakers of English. Think how ludicrous it would be if all schooling was done in Warlpiri, or Djambarrpuyngu, or Pitjantjatjara, and the Chief Minister was required to reach the same 'benchmarks' within three years as native speakers of those languages.

Q.10: That's turning the tables a bit, isn't it?

A.10: Yes, but not unfairly so. We've been there too. If we turn the clock back to 14th and 15th century England, English was considered a rubbish language by policy-makers. The king of England spoke French and Latin, and refused to speak English—the language of his subjects. English was not even considered good enough to be used in church. So mothers who wanted to teach their children “The Lord's Prayer” in their own language were burned at the stake. This is all well documented. How does it make you feel when your language has its legitimacy stripped away, is treated as rubbish, and you can do nothing about it? That is the same sense of frustration and unfair disadvantage speakers of indigenous languages in the NT are feeling.

Q.11: That's pretty powerful. Can you help me envision another scenario?

A.11: Think of the fictional John Marsden novels in which an unnamed power from the north invades Australia. How would it make you feel if the language of government and education had to be in the language of the invaders, and they made no provision to help Australians who grew up speaking English to transition into learning their language? That scenario should ratchet up your sense of injustice. But that is pretty much what is happening to speakers of indigenous languages in the NT.

Q.12: The government says “bilingual schools don't perform any better than regular schools”. So why not just leave it at that?

A.12: The problem is it is an unsupported claim. Study after study shows that well run bilingual schools *do* perform better than regular schools for speakers of minority languages. These are studies both in the NT and elsewhere. They all show the same results. The government is not producing credible evidence to support their position.

Q.13: Why should we care?

A.13: Australia is about having a “fair go”. In the early 1980s the NT government started up some bilingual schools on an early model of how to go about it. Then in 1988, for questionable reasons, the CLP stopped supporting the idea. They and now the Labor government have whittled away steadily at budgets, teachers, materials, hours, and ignored the voices of many community leaders and educators. Then after undermining bilingual schools so they can't possibly perform to their potential, they have the gall to criticise bilingual schools as “not performing any better than regular schools”. And they are not producing credible evidence to support their position. That doesn't seem like a “fair go”. But note, they are not saying bilingual schools perform worse. Even mainstream schools in the NT have not been performing well. With around 30% of the population of the NT being indigenous, perhaps it's time for the government to take a closer look at language-in-education issues.

Q.14: Doesn't it cost too much to run bilingual education programs?

A.14: The World Bank has looked at this question carefully. From a number of studies they show that after only a few years, well designed and well run bilingual education programs *are* cost effective, as well as producing much better educational outcomes. In Papua New Guinea, they are doing it in hundreds of languages (they have around 800 languages to deal with). Why can't Australia do it even better?

Q.15: If the government continues with this policy, what outcomes can we expect?

A.15: Study after study shows we can expect higher dropout rates, lower community participation, lower competency in literacy and numeracy, and an increased sense of marginalisation—which contributes to anti-social behaviour.

Q.16: So you're saying the policy of teaching English for the first 4 hours, could contribute to increased anti-social behaviour? Isn't that a bit farfetched?

- A.16:** Here's how it works. Good bilingual programs produce people who are *bilingual*. They can function successfully in *both* systems. The current NT policy is likely to produce people who are *semilingual* in their indigenous language and *semilingual* in English. They don't have fully developed language or cultural mechanisms for problem-solving. They are not recognised as 'somebodies' in either system. They have no real voice in any community. People like this tend to be very frustrated. And long term frustration leads to anti-social behaviour.
- Q.17: Are we just talking about the few so-called 'bilingual schools' in the NT?**
- A.17:** Actually no. There are hundreds (probably thousands) of indigenous students in mainstream schools too. But many mainstream teachers are not aware of language-in-education issues, and teach their students as if they were all native speakers of standard English. That means they are not being as effective as they could be. Perhaps that is part of why so many schools in the NT perform poorly. We'd like to see all teachers in the NT become more aware of these issues.
- Q.18: Will paying attention to these issues just help indigenous students?**
- A.18:** No. Many of the same language-in-education issues are also relevant to children of migrants whose primary language in the home is not standard English.
- Q.19: Why do you keep saying 'standard English'?**
- A.19:** In the NT, many students also speak varieties of Kriol and Aboriginal English. Both of these languages are historically based on English, but they have different words and grammars. Kriol even has its own Bible and dictionary! But many mainstream teachers treat students who grew up speaking Kriol or Aboriginal English as if they are native speakers of standard English, which they are not. Again, by not understanding this simple fact, many teachers in the NT are not being as effective as they could be.
- Q.20: Wasn't there a process of consultation before the government put through its current policy?**
- A.20:** No. In this democracy we call Australia, you'd think the government would know that something of this magnitude should go through a process of meaningful consultation with those who will be most affected by their decision, and with other stakeholders. But after ignoring the recommendations of language-in-education experts over many years, this government handed down its current policy without any process of consultation. That is part of the reason why so many people are upset.
- Q.21: But isn't it true that many indigenous students are not performing well?**
- A.21:** Yes, but think about it. Successive NT governments have created an educational system that clearly disadvantages indigenous children whose primary language in the home is not standard English. Then they criticize these same children for not performing well in this system that disadvantages them! There are better approaches to the problem in use in other parts of the world that achieve better results than we're seeing in the NT. That is why so many people are appalled at the educational policies and practices of the NT government.
- Q.22: Isn't the policy of 'social inclusion' a positive thing, intended to help bring indigenous people into the mainstream?**
- A.22:** It's probably intended to be helpful. But several people have observed that a dark shadow of old colonial era ideas are lurking around the ideas of 'social inclusion' and 'normalisation'. A healthy and respectful approach to indigenous Australians promotes them functioning successfully in their heritage languages and cultures, *as well as* in mainstream society. But some politicians seem to use these phrases to mean assimilate (or force) indigenous people into mainstream culture, (and by implication, let their heritage languages and cultures die out). This is a throwback to ideas behind the destructive policies that led to the stolen generation, and behind the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Instead of bringing them into the mainstream, it can alienate them both from their roots and from participation in Australian life.
- Q.23: Why not just leave it up to indigenous communities to develop their own materials and programs, if it's so important to them?**
- A.23:** Think about it. 90 million Javanese in Indonesia have the numbers to have people specialising as educators, linguists, doctors, and politicians. The Cherokee Indians of North America have been organised long enough, and have the numbers to have their own tribal Language Officer. But many aboriginal languages in Australia have only a few hundred speakers. So they depend on partnerships with the government, with churches, and with organisations to help them be able to function successfully in two worlds. What is remarkable is that even with such small numbers, almost every bit of material written in indigenous languages in Australia has either been done by, or with the significant involvement of indigenous people. This includes storybooks, dictionaries, and Bibles. And the fact that these small indigenous groups have also produced professionals such as teachers, police, lawyers, politicians, and helicopter pilots who are still proud of their heritage is something to be celebrated. But

these are the special few who have made it through a system that disadvantages them. If there were really well designed and well run bilingual education programs, a much higher percentage might be able to be successful in *both* worlds. Not just in mainstream anglo Australia.

Q.24: What does this mean for new teachers? Does having a bilingual program mean teachers coming to work in Aboriginal communities must learn to speak an indigenous language first?

A.24: Not necessarily. It does mean that policies developed to support bilingual education programs must provide training and orientation for new teachers and school administrators, as well as for local indigenous teachers and teaching assistants. The best people to teach children basic literacy and numeracy skills using their own language when they first come to school will be trained indigenous teachers from each community who already know and speak the same language as the children they are teaching. Remember: *children learn best in the language they understand best.*

Q.25: If so many teachers coming to remote communities only stay for a short time, how can you hope to run successful bilingual education programs?

A.25: One of the main reasons teachers don't stay for very long in remote communities is because the Education Department has not been taking seriously the fact that life in a remote communities is very different from living and teaching in a large city. When there is little or no attempt to help new teachers adapt by orienting and training them to live successfully in a different cultural setting, then of course you are going to get high drop-out rates among teachers. Organisations who take seriously the need to orient staff to living and working cross-culturally have a much better track record of people staying on, being productive, and enjoying their work. There are many ways in which teachers can be made more successful in both living and working in remote communities. But not if these issues continue to be ignored. This is equally true for teachers, health workers, and people working in the criminal justice system.

Q.26: Is Labor united in their stance on this issue?

A.26: No. It is a matter of public record that several Labor politicians have expressed concern or disagreement over the policy on indigenous languages in education in the NT. Some have even left the party.

Q.27: This is interesting. Where can I go to learn more?

A.27: There are a number of websites that provide resources and talk about these sorts of things:

<http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/110/>

http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/first_language/index.htm

<http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/100/>

http://www.unesco.org/education/literacy_2001/broch_eng.pdf

www.sil.org and www.sil.org.au

<http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/index.html>

<http://www.sil.org/sil/annualreport/index.html>

<http://www.norrag.org/pdf/NN39.pdf>

http://www.norrag.org/db_read_article.php?id=1068

http://www.norrag.org/db_read_article.php?id=1089

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li100.htm>

<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/ILAC/>

<http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/>

www.ttext.org/MLE/resources/Stringer2001_WTL.pdf

<http://www.catchword.com/rpsv/catchword/mm/13670050/v5n1/s2/p1>

<http://www.pngcurriculumreform.ac.pg/elementary/index.htm>

<http://www.pngcurriculumreform.ac.pg/policies/index.htm>

<http://www.campaignforeducation.org/resources/Nov2005/1.%20Writing%20Wrongs%20Literacy%20Benchmarks%20Report.pdf>

<http://www.cal.org/crede/pubs/PracBrief2.htm>

<http://www.iteachilearn.com/>

<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/obemla/institutes/2001/index.htm>

www.hawaii.edu/spcl03/pace/

<http://groups.google.com.au/group/foblmail>

