

Aboriginal bilingual education axed in Australia's Northern Territory

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Aboriginal people, linguists and teachers have reacted angrily to the decision announced late last year by the Country Liberal government in the Northern Territory of Australia to phase out long-established bilingual programs for Aboriginal students over the next three years and to replace them with classes in English as a Second Language (ESL). The axing of bilingual curricula in public schools is a cost-cutting measure aimed at saving the government \$A3.7 million as part of a \$100 million package of cutbacks, with \$20 million to be slashed from public education.

The Northern Territory has an area larger than the combined landmass of Germany, France and the United Kingdom and a population of only 200,000 people. Nearly a quarter are Aborigines, many living under harsh conditions in isolated areas with few facilities and services. The predominant languages spoken by Aboriginal people in the remote communities are creoles--distinct dialects of English, which developed as a result of Aboriginal contact with English-speaking people. Aboriginal English is unintelligible to English speakers and has to be treated as a foreign language for educational purposes. The aim of the bilingual programs was to facilitate education in English for children whose first language was a creole or a traditional Aboriginal language.

Since its introduction in 1973, bilingual education has been provided to Aboriginal students from 21 remote schools, representing less than half the indigenous primary schools in the Northern Territory. Students were educated in their native language or a creole while being taught English simultaneously. The aim was to enable the students' education to progress unhindered despite their lack of English language skills.

Studies evaluating the bilingual education programs found a significant improvement in English skills.

Edward J. Murtagh, a linguist from Stanford University, assessed the bilingual program at the Beswick Reserve, which is situated 450 km southeast of Darwin and found that "the results of this study indicate very definite trends towards the superiority of bilingual schooling over monolingual schooling for Creole-speaking students with regard to oral language proficiency in both the mother tongue, Creole and the second language, English". Similar studies found enhanced English results for Yirrkala, St Terese's, Shepherdson College, Barunga and Milingimbi at the end of primary school.

Attendance figures at bilingual schools indicate that Aboriginal students supported the programs literally with their feet--for the period 1974 to 1981 average attendance was 94.6 percent in bilingual schools and 73 percent in ordinary schools. Although Aboriginal students educated in a bilingual setting are ahead of Aboriginal students in regular schools, they are still far behind the national average.

Overall educational indicators for Aboriginal students are appalling. A Northern Territory government report found that Aboriginal students in remote areas at the school leaving age of 15 had the education level of eight-year-olds from urban areas. Only four percent of the Aboriginal population reaches tertiary education, as opposed to 24 percent of the overall population, while many Aboriginal students fail to complete school altogether. The educational difficulties faced by Aboriginal students in remote communities are bound up with many factors including lack of proper housing, recreation and health facilities, and few prospects of a future other than one of permanent unemployment and poverty.

The withdrawal of established bilingual programs, which encouraged the wider involvement of the

Aboriginal community, including the training and hiring of Aboriginal teachers and assistants, is regarded by many linguists and educators as a retrograde step. The substitution of cheaper, limited ESL teaching for the bilingual programs will undoubtedly have a severe impact on the education of many Aboriginal children, for whom language and the alien character of the school classroom are a barrier to their involvement.

Northern Territory Education Minister Peter Adamson claims that the cuts have overwhelming support from the Aboriginal communities, but his statement is contradicted by protests from the communities themselves. Rallies have been held as far afield as Alice Springs in Central Australia on December 16 last year, attended by people from bush communities as well as the town. A meeting at Nhulunbuy in the east Arnhem region on December 10 received messages of support from Milingimbi, Galiwinku, Maningrida, Umbakumba, Gapuwiyak and other communities in the region.

The protests have been supported by a number of international linguistic experts. Dr. David Wilkins from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands wrote to the government: "While your move may have economic advantages it is thoroughly detrimental to the social, cultural, cognitive and educational development of those Aboriginal children whose first language is not English". A petition signed by linguists, psychologists and anthropologists affiliated to the Max Planck Institute, accompanied the letter.

Australian Linguistic Society president Professor Peter Austin also wrote to the Minister explaining the importance of the bilingual programs: "We do not understand the reason given for the dismantling, namely that this will enable better teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). It suggests a misunderstanding of the nature of bilingual education programs. ESL teaching is a fundamental part of bilingual programs. We do not understand why sensible, staged, ESL teaching cannot be carried out in bilingual schools. The premise of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, that indigenous and materially disadvantaged children learn better in their first language, is backed by the findings of a wide range of international second language acquisition research."

Dr. Christine Nicholls, senior lecturer in Australian

Studies at Flinders University, spoke to the WSWs on the importance of the bilingual programs. Dr. Nicholls was a teacher linguist and later the principal at Lajamanu School in the Tanami desert, half way between Alice Springs and Darwin, from 1982 to 1991.

"There was a link with the self-esteem of the children and the community. The children had their identity affirmed and it brought the adults from the community into the school; many of the Warlpiri people went on to do teacher training in order to teach in the schools. In my time at the school the attendance rate went up from 65 percent to 90 percent."

Dr. Nicholls commented on the government's proposal to substitute the bilingual programs with ESL: "It's not an either-or situation and shows their complete lack of understanding of what bilingual education means--bilingual means two languages. Second language learning should be based on the solid foundation of the first language, rather than the linguistic equivalent of quicksand."

Commenting on the impact of the cuts, she added: "The people are feeling very depressed. Truancy will increase. The programs were hard won in the first place and the communities have said loud and clear that they want these programs. It seems very discriminatory."



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