

Policy for Preschoolers

A Different Perspective on Education

By Katherine McCallum

The Australian government has consistently failed to deliver effective education reform to remedy the disadvantages suffered by Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children¹. This failure appears set to continue with the Federal government's National Indigenous Education Action Plan announced by Julia Gillard, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, in September 2009.

The Language Factor

The proposed Action Plan exhibits an almost exclusive preoccupation with quality mainstream education at the expense of Aboriginal languages. The absence of the "language factor"² contravenes international law³ and is perplexing in view of the 2006 Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs report that recognised an absence of Indigenous languages in the classroom invites resistance, whether active or passive, on the part of Indigenous students⁴ and communities. This opposition continues to be a problem and is evidenced by the comparatively poor attendance rates of Aboriginal children in schools and their corresponding academic underachievement. Germaine Greer has taken this notion further in her

controversial 'On Rage', arguing such alienation births alcoholism, domestic violence, homicide and suicide amongst male Indigenous adults. At its simplest, it is impossible to impart a quality education without the kid in the chair.⁵ If native language instruction will act to reinstate Indigenous confidence in our education system it must be our goal.⁶

The Northern Territory Bilingual Education Scheme, What Went Wrong

The most comprehensive Australian bilingual education scheme to date was that implemented in the Northern Territory (NT) between 1973 and 1998.⁷ The scheme was withdrawn on the basis that participating children were underperforming.⁸ In order to design functional bilingual education reform, it is necessary to analyse the NT scheme, its resourcing and implementation to discover and remedy its faults.

The scheme did not receive the requisite financial support. The program was chronically underfunded and there was an unremitting shortage of teaching staff proficient in both classroom languages. Most significantly the program progressed on a fundamentally flawed assumption

about the way people learn. The NT bilingual program implemented a 95:5 ratio of native Indigenous to English language teaching in preschool.⁹ The program was founded on the principle that the cognitive skills of children gained when taught their first language would readily transfer to a second language.¹⁰ This principle has since been proved false.

Studies have shown that children below the age of seven have a superior capacity to acquire language, and that such an ability gradually declines with maturation beyond this 'critical period'.¹¹ Accordingly, young children acquire language automatically from mere exposure, whereas older children and adults must persist with a conscience and laboured effort to acquire a foreign language.¹² It is clear the drafters of the NT scheme failed to realise the primary importance of a child's early years on language attainment. Indigenous communities are extremely diverse. Some children are raised in English speaking households that miss out on exposure to their native dialects, while others are raised speaking creoles, traditional languages or an Aboriginal variation of English.¹³ Immersing preschoolers in a bilingual environment

seeks to capitalise upon the ‘critical period’ giving all Indigenous children the opportunity to become adept in both their native language and Standard English. The former is necessary for a sense of cultural identity and wellbeing, but the latter is essential for participation in mainstream society. Consequently, instruction in both languages should be non-negotiable, and neither should suffer as a consequence of the other.

Reform

Bilingual preschool placements must be readily available and accessible. Teachers must be proficient in both classroom languages with additional training in English as a second language. The language ratio should oscillate around 50:50 at this stage to ensure children are highly familiar with both standard English, as opposed to Aboriginal creoles,¹⁴ and their traditional tongue. If not compulsory, enrolment in early childhood education should be encouraged from a very young age with strong incentives, to maximise the advantage of every child’s ‘critical period’.

Incentives should derive from affirmative action. Paternalistic sanctions attract vehement opposition amongst indigenous communities; as illustrated by the recent introduction of welfare quarantining to combat poor school attendance in Cape York.¹⁵ Punitive measures are apt to violate Australia’s obligations under

the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.¹⁶ Thus incentives should be geared to win community support whilst confronting the causal problems associated with poverty.¹⁷ For example, poor nutrition and hearing loss are the two most detrimental health conditions that impact Indigenous education outcomes.¹⁸ Consequently, both preschools and schools should introduce breakfast and lunch programs, invite parents to participate with the preparation of healthy meals,¹⁹ and institute regular student health checks. Such a scheme would provide the children with a wholesome diet whilst educating parents on good-nutrition. Working effectively, the scheme would help to rectify the disproportionate prevalence of diabetes among the Aboriginal population, which currently stands at four times the national average.²⁰

Resourcing

A considerable budget would be required in order to successfully realise the recommended reforms. The education of teachers and support staff in the requisite languages, recruiting them to regional postings, and improving their retention periods are massive tasks, as is the building of necessary infrastructure to support such reforms. The latter is a major commission, particularly in view of the present situation in the NT where approximately 94% of Indigenous

Photo: Lee Smith



communities do not have a preschool.²¹ Such a significant undertaking is necessary to remedy the Aboriginal education-achievement gap that has evaded reform attempts for decades.²²

Get Involved

President and Vice-Chancellor of UNSW Professor Fred Hilmer described the university as committed to new and creative approaches to education and research.²³ As an institution motivated towards intellectual betterment, UNSW should strive to support the maintenance of Aboriginal culture and linguistics. To achieve this, UNSW should introduce Indigenous language courses, aid in the publication of Aboriginal texts and increase the number of Indigenous scholarships, particularly in education. In order to support the introduction of Indigenous languages into the national curriculum, students of UNSW should also get involved. Students across a variety of disciplines, such as music, education, anthropology, creative

writing and dance, can engage in the recording of Aboriginal language, storytelling and culture, so that this rich oral tradition may cease to decline with each generation.

In conclusion, it is imperative that the Australian government demonstrates a recognition of and value for Indigenous language and culture in order to foster Aboriginal confidence in a system that has so consistently failed them. ■

References

- [1] Throughout this article any future use of the word Aboriginal is to extend to both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- [2] Language Perspectives Team, Far North Queensland Indigenous Schooling Support Unit (FNQ-ISSU), Response to the Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014, p.2
- [3] The *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (Article 4); the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Article 14); and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (Articles 5 and 6), see Australian Council Of TESOL Associations, Applied Linguistics Association Of Australia & Australian Linguistic Society, Response to Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014, 3 (2010), 7.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] ABC Television, 'Noel Pearson joins 7.30 Report', *The 7.30 Report*, 01 October 2009 <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2702544.htm>> at 22 July 2010.
- [6] Additionally bilingualism should be embraced for its numerous neurological advantages. It enhances one's ability to concentrate (evident from preschool age), protects against age-related cognitive decline, and improves prospects of rehabilitation following brain injury. See, *The Bilingual Brain*, (2008), Society for Neuroscience, <http://www.sfn.org/index.cfm?pagename=brainbriefings_thebilingualbrain> at 22 July 2010.
- [7] ABC Television, 'Chronology: The Bilingual Education Policy in the Northern Territory', *Four Corners*, 14 September 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_ed/20090914/language/chronology.htm> at 22 July 2010.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] *Learning Lessons an Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory Department of Education, (1999), 121. A greater emphasis on English was implemented as children progressed through primary school.
- [10] Ibid. This principle was put forward by Canadian language researcher James Cummins.
- [11] Jacqueline S. Johnson & Elissa L. Newport, 'Critical Period Effects in Second Language Learning: The Influence of Maturational State on the Acquisition of English as a Second Language', (1989) 21 *Cognitive Psychology* 95.
- [12] Lenneberg E., *Biological Foundations of Language*, (1967) 176.
- [13] Australian Council Of TESOL Associations, above n 3, 6.
- [14] Australian Council Of TESOL Associations, above n 3, 5.
- [15] Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, *Welfare payments and school attendance: and analysis of experimental policy in Indigenous education*, (2008), University of Technology Sydney, 6. <<http://www.aefederal.org.au/Publications/2008/LBehrendtpaper.pdf>> at 22 July 2010.
- [16] Ibid, 32.
- [17] Ibid, 10.
- [18] Dennis Trewin & Richard Madden, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, (2005), Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 22.
- [19] Acknowledgement George Newhouse.
- [20] Trewin, above n 18, 96, 22. Similarly children in Indigenous communities are more likely to suffer middle ear infections and hearing loss than their non-indigenous peers. Schools should offer regular health checks to their students.
- [21] Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, above n 14, 30.
- [22] Pearson, above n 13, 29.
- [23] Fred Hilmer, Welcome from the President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Fred Hilmer, (2010), UNSW, <<http://www.unsw.edu.au/about/pad/about.html>> at 22 July 2010.

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