



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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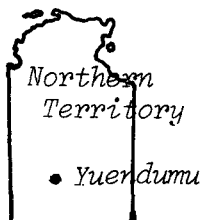
ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

TRENDY EXPERIMENTATION

OR

CULTURAL ENRICHMENT ?



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An evaluation of the principles and aims of bi-lingual education, with special reference to Yuendumu School, Northern Territory.

Having sat himself down excitedly, Johnny, a little European pre-schooler, waits expectantly yet somewhat apprehensively for his teacher to appear. It is the first day of school, and Johnny has not met his teacher yet, but he knows she is a Warlpiri.

Here she comes -

"Ngurrju mayinkili jalanguju! Wardinyi jarri karnanyarra. Ngajurna Nangala, ngaka marda kapurna nyarra yirdiji miliapinyi nyurrurlaju. Ngaka marda kapunkulu pinarri jarrimi nyampuku walyaku kijankulurla palkajarrija.

Kala kanpa marda kanyirni wita turaki manyu karrinjaku, kala kapunpa yijardu pinarrijarri nyampurlaju warrki yijardu.¹

Thus little Johnny is confronted and bombarded with an unknown, incomprehensible language which only receives a vestige of meaning through the teacher's reassuring gestures and prompting voice inflections.

How is it that Johnny finds himself in this position? Some years ago, when the view was still widely accepted that Johnny, being English (European), belonged to a race of such low intelligence that he was impossible to educate, he would not have been here

at all. After all, his language is the basis of a culture of materialism, chaos, self-destruction and greed. Later, however, it was recognized that Johnny did have an intellectual capacity to learn skills, and that if he is provided with a well-trained, patient, self-sacrificing teacher, he may be taught a better way of life. It is now hoped that, in this enlightened day and age, Johnny and his people recognize the privileged position in which they find themselves and take full advantage of the education that is offered them. Johnny will be taught in, and learn, the language of the superior culture, be thoroughly indoctrinated in a new religion, and taught acceptable ways of behaviour. Of course, this does not mean that Johnny has to completely give up all aspects of his previous life-style. Some of the products the Europeans make, the songs they sing, the paintings and sculptures they create, can come in very useful and are often very attractive. But the important factor remains, that Johnny's people were originally immigrants, and it is their moral duty to accept the culture of the true Australians.

The above parable attempts to illustrate the condescending, patronizing sentiments which many people held, and still hold, regarding cross-cultural education. Were you or I Johnny's parent, we would surely be outraged and horrified at the contempt for our way of life practised by an overbearing system. Yet despite our lip-service to equality of opportunity in education for everyone, many seem to have made Aborigines, and to some extent migrants, the exception to whom this principle does not apply. In the past, Aboriginal children have become the innocent victims of educational expediency. That is, they were either not educated at all, or forced to assimilate knowledge and values in a foreign medium - the English language. Thus their educational progress was comparatively slow, which only served to reinforce previously-held stereotypes of Aborigines being slow learners and less intelligent than Europeans. So why waste precious time and resources when these could be more profitably spent elsewhere? Here we have the typical Catch 22 situation.

Despite these rather depressing circumstances, however, there have been attempts, isolated though they were, to provide Aboriginal children with the same educational advantages which European children enjoy and take for granted: to begin to read and to write in the language which is most familiar to the learner. Schools at Hermannsburg Mission in the Northern Territory and at Ernabella in South Australia, have both used the vernacular language for initial instruction. But these pioneers of bi-lingual education were isolated cases, and were working without the resources necessary to conduct a well-planned, comprehensive program.

A major step in this direction was taken by a former Prime Minister of Australia when, on 14 December 1972, he launched a campaign to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages. The following year, five Northern Territory schools commenced bi-lingual programs. This number has now grown to about twenty, and bi-lingual/bi-cultural education has become an integral part of the official policy for the Northern Territory's Aboriginal communities. The implementation of the various aspects of this program has not only had an effect on educational planners in other parts of Australia, but has even prompted Dr Geoff O'Grady, Professor of Linguistics at the University of British Columbia, Canada, and Dr Ken Hale, Professor of Linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States, to remark that

this program constitutes one of the most exciting events in the modern world.²

Whether this statement was the result of an initial bout of enthusiasm or a reflective calculation is really of little consequence. The fact remains that bi-lingual education has established itself as a major force in the educational and cultural development of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory. Its sound theory is demonstrated on the experience of the children, community and teachers of Yuendumu, Northern Territory, where the aims of bi-lingual education have been realized, and are in the process of producing a marked change in the community.

AIM 1

To help each child to believe in himself and be proud of his heritage by the regular use of his Aboriginal language in the school and by learning about Aboriginal culture.³

Literacy in any language is invariably associated with a sense of pride, achievement and self-assurance, especially when the members of a dominating society are predominantly literate, or when that society demands literacy in order to adequately comprehend its many complex characteristics and functions.

At Yuendumu school, classes are team-taught by a European teacher and a Warlpiri teaching-assistant. At the pre-school level, the Warlpiri language is used almost exclusively for instruction.

The European teacher uses English in an informal way, to enable the children to learn to follow simple English instructions and become familiar with its use, some basic vocabulary and structures. In the infant years (Grades 1 to 3), children begin to read and write in their own language. Once Warlpiri literacy has been established, an English literacy program is commenced. Both English and Warlpiri literacy are subsequently consolidated, expanded and diversified, until the child leaves primary school.

At present there is a tendency, as the child advances from one grade to the next, for the medium of instruction to become increasingly English. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, subjects become more complex the higher the level at which they are being taught. Consequently, the Warlpiri teacher tends to leave the teaching to the European teacher, with the former merely aiding in various ways. Secondly, at Yuendumu school there is as yet no sequential, locally-based vernacular curriculum that embraces all grades in any subject except Warlpiri reading and writing. This disadvantage is in the process of being rectified by a curriculum working party of Warlpiri teaching-assistants and the teacher-linguist, and next year should experience the trial run of a locally based Social Science curriculum beginning at pre-school and ending at the post-primary level. It is hoped that an equally extensive natural science program will follow shortly after. These two subjects, together with Warlpiri reading and writing, will then form the backbone of the bi-lingual program.

Although the bi-lingual program at Yuendumu school is still developing, there have been encouraging signs. There is, for example, no evidence that the children on entering the upper primary grades are in any way lacking in English language skills due to having been taught initially in Warlpiri literacy. One could conclude, therefore, that the bi-lingual program has provided children with a bonus of Warlpiri literacy without taking away any other skills. At Yuendumu school. such observations are, of necessity, empirical, but ample scientific evidence is available from overseas sources which asserts that initial instruction and literacy in the vernacular increases rather than decreases learning skills.⁴ Although a monolingual program will not necessarily negate a child's own culture, a bi-lingual program teaches a child by experience that his own language, and by natural extension, his own culture is worthy of study and respect.

AIM 2

To teach each student how to read and write in his own language.

This aim is the most obvious distinguishing mark between a bi-lingual and a mono-lingual program. Implied is the recognition by the children, the teachers and the community, of the vernacular as the main, and English as the second language.

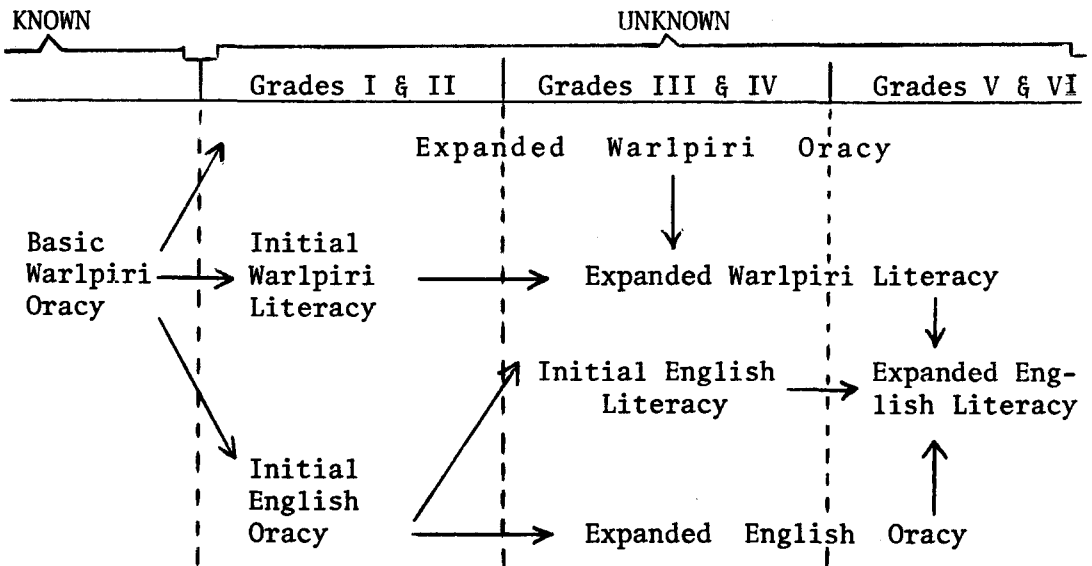
With any language program, literature to provide practice and reinforcement is an absolute necessity. In the case of an Aboriginal language program, expense and a limited and highly specialized readership make commercial printing of this literature an uneconomic proposition. It is for this reason that Yuendumu school has its own printing press which, to date, has printed over one hundred titles, and a monthly community newspaper. This literature is written and prepared by a team of specialist staff that includes a linguist, a teacher-linguist, a bi-lingual education co-ordinator and a literature production supervisor, as well as Warlpiri full and part-time literacy workers. Thus there is a team of supportive staff to ensure that the bi-lingual program lives up to its name by providing advice, literature and teacher-training of unskilled and semi-skilled teaching assistants.

AIM 3

To teach each student how to read and write in English.

A fallacious argument against a bi-lingual program is, "the more English these kids get, the better"; that is, the brain is like a vacuum in which vernacular literacy skills compete for space with a desirable command of English literacy. However, as education is a qualitative rather than a quantitative process, initial literacy in the vernacular has the effect of aiding, not hindering the development of English literacy skills.

In Yuendumu school the children are taught formal English reading and writing skills as from Grade 2, after the written alphabet has been practised on a language that the children know best. Thus, the following principle of progressing from the known to the unknown is applied:



As very complex educational processes are involved here, the above formula is grossly oversimplified. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate the point that the bi-lingual program is based upon the recognition of the spoken vernacular language as being worthy of further study, which will, in turn, enhance the learning process of English as a second language. Concentrating exclusively on English literacy is, therefore, not only educationally disadvantageous, but it is tantamount to dismissing the vernacular language as an unsuitable medium for educational instruction.

AIM 4

To help each child understand school work better by the use of the Aboriginal language.

As mentioned previously, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers work as a teaching team in Yuendumu school. This makes the Aboriginal teacher far more than merely a translator. He is, in fact, the link between the teaching situation and the child's real world. Because Yuendumu settlement is a homogeneous, closely-knit community, the Aboriginal teacher will probably know each child and his relatives personally, besides having an intimate knowledge of tribal laws, taboos and traditional learning that may affect a child's educational progress and behaviour. Although the non-Aboriginal teacher may enjoy a very close relationship with the

children and the community, he/she is a representative of a different culture with different values and priorities. This fact, as well as his/her lack of fluency in the Warlpiri language, immediately produces an inevitable barrier which can only be bridged with the aid of the Aboriginal teacher. Although instruction in, and use of, the Warlpiri language decreases somewhat as the children progress through the school, it never ceases to be a vital part of classroom interaction.

AIM 5

To give the children skills in oral English before using English to teach other subjects.

As the rationale behind a bi-lingual program is to eliminate problems such as those confronting poor Johnny, obtaining skills in oral English as early as possible in the school life is of paramount importance, and until the main teachers in the classroom are Aborigines teaching according to relevant and systematic vernacular curriculum guidelines, this necessity will not alter. What will alter, and what does vary, is the length of time it takes for the children to obtain a sufficient grasp of oral English skills to enable them to follow and respond meaningfully to a lesson taught in English.

Yuendumu school had, until the beginning of this year, the services of a specialist oral English teacher who conducted and developed a systematic, sequential oral English program throughout the school. Under this program children receive a sufficient grasp of the English language by Grades Two-Three to enable them to respond meaningfully to a lesson given in simple English. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that instruction in the Warlpiri language still occupies a significant part of the school day in the early primary years.

AIM 6

To teach each subject in the most suitable language for learning about that subject.

Invariably linked to this aim is the need to Aboriginalize existing curricula and to instil principles and knowledge that are both meaningful and relevant to the children. Yet in the past, so much education of Aborigines has simply consisted of the imposition of a European culture-based curriculum onto a society whose culture

is just as rich and varied, but which is based upon different social and religious value systems. It is little wonder, therefore, that Aboriginal children had difficulty assimilating knowledge and acquiring learning skills which were often totally removed from their reality. Consequently, these children were branded as slow learners, and taught at levels well below the ideal.

Of late, however, there have been moves to eliminate this kind of cultural discrimination. Yuendumu school, for example, has until this year, based its English reading scheme on the "Endeavour" series, with whose characters Aboriginal children do not readily identify. Now a new reading scheme, "Tracks", has been phased into the program. Developed by the Curriculum Development Section of the Northern Territory Education Department's Professional Services Branch, this scheme in its pictorial layout, sentence patterns and content words, is geared much more accurately towards the interests and strengths (e.g. the acute visual perception) of Aboriginal children.

Attempts have also been made in other subjects to provide more meaningful learning experiences for the children of Yuendumu school. Especially in the fields of social and natural science, efforts have been made with the help of Warlpiri teachers and community members, to teach the children indigenous skills and knowledge that were in danger of dying out. This year, a social science curriculum development project has been started at the school which will, in the final analysis, be developed by Warlpiri teachers with the help of non-Aboriginal teachers and specialist staff. Thus it is hoped that the specific wishes and needs of the local community will be catered for and the professional development of the Warlpiri teachers will be enhanced by providing them with their own program which they can teach in their own language. Plans are also on the drawing board to develop a natural science program along similar lines. Although such developments are necessarily long drawn out processes requiring a lot of research and collection of material and information, there is no doubt that when a subject is culture-based and taught in the vernacular, the rewards for both teacher and pupil are greatly increased.

AIM 7

To help the school and the community to work together and understand each other.

Inherent in the philosophy of bi-lingual education is respect and esteem for the traditions and language of the children it serves.

Therefore, despite the fact that the environmental and philosophical concepts of schooling are alien to traditional Aboriginal culture, bi-lingual education and the traditional way of life complement and support each other.

Being at an age when a great deal of language development occurs, there is a great danger of English words becoming a part of a Warlpiri child's language, rather than equally or more appropriate Warlpiri words. Such a drift into Pidgin or Camp English was a very real problem in Yuendumu prior to the introduction of bi-lingual education when, for example, most children could not recall the Warlpiri words for emu, goanna or moon. There is evidence that today this trend is being checked, due to a systematic and well-structured program of Warlpiri literacy.

The fact that children are taught Warlpiri language skills is greatly appreciated, especially by the older members of the community, who lament the erosion of much of their traditional way of life by the dominating influence of the European culture. They also recognize that the school is making a conscious effort to preserve their traditional lifestyle. In Yuendumu, this recognition has greatly increased their direct involvement in the school by often and regularly coming and teaching the children (as well as, indirectly, the Warlpiri and European teachers) traditional skills, customs and folklore, which they would have learned as a matter of course in former times.

Despite this healthy understanding and mutually beneficial relationship between the school and the community, a major problem has been, and still is, lack of parental involvement in the school and the education of their children. As the school environment is often unfamiliar and even intimidating to many Aborigines, an attempt has been made this year, after the limited success in bringing the parents into the school, to bring the school to the camps of the parents. Every Friday morning the Warlpiri pre-school children go into the camp, where they are taught skills by both teachers and parents in surroundings that are congenial and familiar to the adults concerned (except, perhaps, to the non-Aboriginal teacher) and conducive to learning for the children. Although this approach has struck some minor problems, such as the parents not being present in the camp at the appointed time, it promises to be the forerunner of future moves to shift the Warlpiri children's learning experiences into an environment where, ideally, they should take place.

AIM 8

To help Aborigines to learn about non-Aborigines;
for non-Aborigines to learn about Aborigines; and
for Aborigines from one place to learn about
Aborigines elsewhere.

Although it seems axiomatic nowadays to go along with the assertion that the Aboriginal culture is no "better" or "worse" than the European culture, such an attitude has not always prevailed. Aboriginal education in the past has been very much characterized by strong assimilationist or integrationist goals. It was considered an unquestionable right for the dominating culture to exercise its influence over the minority culture in such a way as was considered by non-Aboriginal policy-makers to be best for Aborigines. Few genuine, thorough attempts were made to understand and appreciate the unique value of the Aboriginal culture, and the resultant mistrust led to a similar reciprocal attitude.

Although a sensitive mono-lingual educational program can play its part to reverse such a trend, a bi-lingual program does this to a considerably stronger degree. As language is the essence or basis of any culture, a very strong factor of bi-lingual education is bi-cultural education. Learning a language or about a certain culture without its relevance in its cultural or linguistic context respectively, is not only educationally unsound but also virtually useless, as it ends up being mere unapplied theory. Aboriginal children in a bi-lingual/bi-cultural educational situation, therefore, develop a well-grounded language-based understanding and appreciation of their own and the European cultures.

In the early grades at Yuendumu school, Warlpiri culture is almost continually taught, directly or indirectly, paralleling the children's progress in gaining initial mastery in Warlpiri language skills. In the latter grades, although further education in Warlpiri is not neglected, there is a greater emphasis than in previous years on gaining skills, knowledge and understanding about European culture. Thus, in a Warlpiri child's primary-school life, he gains respect and tolerance for two cultures, taught by representatives of both.

While team-teaching is advantageous in a mono-lingual school, it is absolutely essential in a bi-lingual school. Accordingly, for non-Aboriginal teachers to be professionally and educationally effective, personal relationships must be developed between him/her

and his/her Aboriginal team-teacher. In addition, the children the non-Aboriginal teacher teaches, are members of another culture. Thus, their problems, strengths and weaknesses are often different from those of their counterparts in a non-Aboriginal society. Consequently, it is as impossible as it is unwise for non-Aboriginal teachers to attempt to dissociate themselves from the Aboriginal culture, as an understanding and appreciation of it is vital to his/her competence as a teacher.

In order to facilitate this cultural awareness among non-Aboriginal teachers, regular Warlpiri language classes are conducted throughout the year by a teacher who is fluent in the language. The cultural advantages to be obtained through a thorough grasp of a language have been specified earlier. On an immediate, practical level, even a basic level of conversational Warlpiri is a great aid in classroom communication.

A further positive result gained from acquiring literacy and oracy skills in the language of one's pupils is that they instil in the non-Aboriginal teachers an empathy for their pupils that can only be achieved by a clear and sensitive recognition of the difficulties that these children face in learning a language that, to them, is just as difficult as the Aboriginal language is to the non-Aboriginal teacher. The benefits to a teaching situation are obvious.

In summary, therefore, due to the fact that bi-lingual and bi-cultural education are the two major interrelated facets in a total education program, a deep involvement of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals (teachers, pupils and others concerned with education) in the other culture is inevitable. Each culture is treated with respect and a full realization of its relevance.

What about the last part of this aim: "For Aboriginals from one place to learn about Aboriginals elsewhere"? As bi-lingual education presents itself as a unique, yet vitally important facet of education throughout the Northern Territory and the rest of Australia, and, indeed, throughout the world, it is only natural that, with exchanges of ideas, horizons are broadened and knowledge is expanded. Minority cultures face basically similar problems everywhere, and once pride and self-confidence in that culture are fostered and asserted, it will be only natural that members of these cultures will want to learn about others. As the bi-lingual program in the Northern Territory has only been operating for a relatively short period of time, this part of the aim has perhaps not as yet been completely fulfilled. Nevertheless, the groundwork is being laid.

In this Year of the Child, may we pay special attention to the fact that -

all children, "without any exception whatsoever, regardless of race, colour, sex, religion or nationality", are entitled to "equal opportunity to develop their individual abilities".⁵

Certainly little Johnny, his parents and his people, would have liked to have been educated on this principle of equal opportunity upon which bi-lingual education is based. The program has its weaknesses (which program hasn't?) but it represents a sincere attempt to provide children of a minority culture with the educational opportunities they deserve. Johnny would have appreciated it. Aborigines do too.

References

1. Translation:

"Good morning, children! It is so good to see you. My skin name is Nangala, and I hope before too long I will know all of you by name. All of you, I'm sure, will have a very interesting time learning the ways and customs of this peaceful country that has adopted you. You may sometimes bring a little toy to school, but not too often, because you will be taught things that are far more important to what you have been used to."

2. O'Grady, G. and Hale, K.: *Recommendations Concerning Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*. Australian Department of Education, Darwin, July 1974.
3. The eight aims expounded in this article are taken from the *Handbook for Teachers in Bilingual Schools in the Northern Territory of Australia*. Australian Department of Education, revised edition. Darwin, 1975.
4. Murtagh, E. and Harris, S.: Bilingual education and pre-literate societies: research re-visited. *Developing Education*, Vol.6, No.5, April 1979, Darwin, pp. 8-13.
5. The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

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