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WHAT SHOULD SCHOOLS DO ABOUT ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE?

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In addressing this question, I will briefly outline the existing types of language maintenance program models, and what schools can do about Aboriginal language maintenance in the Aboriginal community school context. I have suggested a number of guiding principles for Aboriginal schools which are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to establish a basis for dialogue and discussion from which language maintenance programs could be developed.

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS

Before embarking on a language maintenance program, Aboriginal schools need to decide on the type of program applicable to their situation. Devlin (1990) has suggested four types of language maintenance programs: continuation, renewal, revival and resurrection.

"Continuation" programs are designed for those situations where a vernacular language is used by all generations of speakers (the Northern Territory's bilingual program are of this type) 'renewal' programs are for situations where the language is used by most adult speakers but not the children, 'revival' programs are designed to support languages which are only used by a few elderly speakers, and 'resurrection' programs seek to revive a language which is not spoken by anybody' (Devlin in Walton and Eggington, 1990:54).

Thieberger (1988: 86-88) gives examples of these programs. The South Australian 'Nganampa' schools and the Tiwi school of Bathurst Island, Northern Territory are examples of the language continuation model. The Adnyamathanha language and culture project (Turnbridge, 1987) could be an example of a language renewal/reintroduction

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program, where the program for the Ngarrindjeri is based on language revival. Thieberger (1988) states as an example of language resurrection the use of the Aboriginal language, Banjalang, in Victorian schools. Once an analysis of the language situation for a community has been made, a language maintenance program can be decided on. This analysis would most frequently be in conjunction with a linguist who should carry out such analysis at the community's request.

ABORIGINAL CONTROL

The first principle states that control of Aboriginal schools must rest entirely with the Aboriginal community. This could be through the election of an all Aboriginal school council to represent the community in all aspects of education. Representation on school councils could be based on the Yirrakala model where there are representatives of the sixteen clans (Yunupingu, 1990: 76). It is important that this council reflects the aspirations of the community, meaning that representatives regularly canvas the opinions of the families whom they represent. The school council will have a role to play in developing a policy for language maintenance, but it will need support and input from the community.

'...the school will have its role to play in the overall language maintenance design, but it will do so by serving a vibrant and purposeful community'

(Fishman in Harris, 1990:87).

Through Aboriginal control a more effective means of cooperation between school and community could be achieved with a shared responsibility for determining the language needs for their children, and a sound commitment to work together.

'the school and community should work together to put the plans into effect, not work against each other or put all the responsibility on the other side'

(Hudson and McConvell, 1984:40).

This could be achieved through regular meetings of the school council, with any decisions being passed to the community through a variety of means. For some communities information is shared through a newsletter published by the Literature Production Centre, while others receive information through the electronic media - the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Community Scheme (B.R.A.C.S.) network. Where neither exists regular meetings are usually held. The main emphasis here however is the involvement of the community at all levels - the concern for Aboriginal control and the desire for language maintenance programs must come from the Aboriginal people themselves. The responsibility for this lies with the speakers of the language.

'It is important therefore to emphasise the undeniable fact that the responsibility for language maintenance ultimately rests with the speakers of the language themselves.'

(Devlin in Walton & Eggington, 1990:66).

Once Aboriginal communities have control of their schools, the power to make educational decisions must be vested with them. Without control and community involvement, the remaining principles could not follow.

ABORIGINAL POWER

The second principle states that Aboriginal school councils, supported through the community must have the power to implement language maintenance programs and to decide on appropriate strategies. The overall plan for language maintenance would include the total involvement of the community - the school must not be seen as the be all and end all of language maintenance. It is through a strong school council that strategies for language maintenance can be taken up by the whole community.

"The two-way school allows for such options but if Aborigines in remote settlements seriously want to maintain their language and culture, firm decisions will need to be taken and the school can only be one of those measures.'

(Harris, 1990:87)

The school can exercise its power through a number of ways. Yunupingu (1987) suggest that for power to be maintained, school councils must be supported from within the school. The Yirrakala action group was formed for this purpose and comprised all Yolgnu staff, including teachers and ancillaries. Decisions about

'staffing, curriculum, problem children, problem balanda, attendance, and school activities like culture day (were made)'

(Yunupingu, 1987: 3)

Other schools have taken on the use of action groups to carry out similar roles and meet regularly for planning and discussing educational issues:

'I will begin with establishing the Tiwi Action Group every Tuesday morning to involve them in the planning and the discussion in relation to the Tiwi way of teaching our children.'

(Tungatalum, 1988:2)

The important point here is that power to make decisions that affect the operations of the school on a day to day basis is being exerted by Aboriginal staff. The decisions made by School Councils regarding language maintenance programs need to flow through to the community to adopt a firm policy on language usage outside of the school domain and to support each other in their decisions.

'....the principle that Aboriginal homes can contribute more to language survival than schools needs to be widely publicised in Aboriginal communities.'

(Harris, 1990: 81).

Practical ways of reinforcing the vernacular within the community are outlined later in this paper. Once a decision has been made to implement a language maintenance program and appropriate strategies have been decided upon by the community, actual programs can be designed.

ABORIGINAL DESIGN

The third principle states that the language maintenance program be designed by the Aboriginal community through the school council and that appropriate methods be developed and implemented. Aboriginal involvement must take place at the very beginning of program design, with the community being consulted about the issues involved.

'Aboriginal people need to be consulted and integrally involved in all policy and decision-making which affects them. Apart from the fact that this is morally justified, it is most unlikely practical and appropriate measures can be taken without such consultation and participatory decision-making.'

(Lo Bianco, 1987: 105)

Communities will need to be informed on the methods used within the program. I agree with Black (1990) when he states:

'One would think that it would make a far stronger combination for the language domains in school to be similar to those in or being promoted for the general community.'

(Black, 1990: 27)

The language domains suggested by Graham (1983) of people, place, time and topic can be used by schools to signal language usage. During cultural days held by the Tiwi at school, the community is involved in various activities where Tiwi language is used. Older people are invited to participate in the telling of oral traditional stories. This is also a signal to the community that cultural activities should be conducted only in Tiwi. These stories are then used in Tiwi language classes.

'The Tiwi teachers tape the stories and then use it in the Tiwi language lessons. Children listen to the stories many times on the tape. Then with the Tiwi teachers re-tell the stories in their own words. Tiwi teachers can share the story with other teachers at our Action Group meetings and then pass it on to the literacy workers to make big books to use in the classrooms.' (Tungatalum, 1988: 12)

This emphasis on oral traditional stories as a means of reinforcing the vernacular is supported by Christie (1989: 29) who mentions caution because the process of collecting, collating and printing stories can lead to dead pieces of classroom material, stripped of all its meaning. For printed material to have any meaning, it must emphasise the 'now' as Tungatalum's process does and that it is linked 'to real people, and real places, real experience and understood events' (Christie, 1989: 29). Having elders participate in school programs not only helps to promote language usage but is also a visual sign to the children that the community supports their efforts.

Harris (1990: 70) states that for successful language learning there must be clearly defined Aboriginal and Western cultural contexts within schools so that language learning and language use will be related to these contexts. Graham's (1983) language domains can be used within cultural contexts. In the case of Tiwi cultural days, this takes place in an outside setting with a distinct Tiwi character. I observed one such activity where a number of older women were invited to tell the story of Purrukuparli and Wayayi, ancestral beings from Parlingarri (the remote past). An area outside of the school was prepared by the children under the instructions of the women. In the centre of this area a fire was lit and the women began to sing, accompanied by the children. All the participants were painted and after the story was told, children danced their totem. Throughout this exercise Tiwi language was used, which reinforced to the children the importance of Tiwi for all cultural activities.

There are however some topics that will need to be discussed in both languages. In the political domain, elections and election procedures rely on discussion in both languages. Election officials must allow for this and be prepared to let it occur no matter how informal and incorrect it may seem. During one such election, I was employed by the electoral Commission to act as the returning officer and after consulting the community, employed the assistance of three translators. Their help was of immense benefit to the community (officially it showed in a dramatic decrease of informal votes) but was not fully appreciated by the two opposing non-Aboriginal scrutineers who questioned and heatedly debated the appropriateness of the translators'

role. They were not convinced that the procedures were correct until permission was granted to observe the translators carrying out their duties both in English and Tiwi. Community Council business also depends on discussion in two languages due to the nature of local government issues, including housing, essential services and council operations.

The community must also be seen to be supporting parents' decisions in encouraging their children to use the vernacular. Parents would need to be vigilant and determined to exert their power over children's language use, which would require school and community support.

'How determined parents are in the home about what language is used makes a lot of difference. This is especially true if there are strong political forces supporting those parents' stand.'

(Harris, : 5)

Measures taken by the community to support and promote the vernacular could include cultural festivals. Aboriginal bands are on the increase and provide role models for younger people, as I observed at a performance by Yothu Yindi. The band performed most of their songs in Yolgnu Matha and had the children singing along. There are many other bands in the Northern Territory who also act as role models, among them Blekbala Mujik from Barunga and Kulimindini Band from Elliot. Through performing songs in the vernacular, interest and pride is nurtured and identity is read back.

'Mutubura was falling into disuse, and its decline took with it the traditional law of the community. But the band composes its songs in their own vernacular. This has become a group activity of the Open College language class that rouses intense involvement. The class defines the spelling of the words and they are written down. Many of those who participate have never seen their own language written down before. A whole repertoire of songs has been built up, and through this activity the language has taken on a new vitality.'

(Link, 1989:4)

The Tiwi Eisteddfod is another fine example of community and school involvement and support of a cultural activity that promotes the vernacular, through the composition and performance of songs. Each year groups meet to perform songs based on oral history, Tiwi stories and ceremonies (pers.comm. Emmie Tipiloura and Stephanie Timaepatua). More activities such as these and strong decisions by schools and communities to exert their decision making power is needed for the development of language maintenance programs. Schools need to foster the development of music and visual art programs that will lead to the maintenance of language within the school and the community.

Throughout this designing process, the important issue is to involve the speakers of the language in all aspects of planning, teaching and evaluation of the program. Under the council's guidance and request, language maintenance plans could be worked out with assistance from non-Aboriginal professionals, be they linguists who can guide the school in linguistic decisions, or professional musicians and artists who can help in the creative development of the school and community programs.

SUPPORT AND THE ROLE OF LITERATURE PRODUCTION CENTRES

The fourth principle states that Aboriginal schools should actively seek financial support for language maintenance programs. The very nature of operating a language maintenance program requires a range of material and human resources. Literacy Production Centres (LPC) are expensive to set up and operate, especially if they are to publish traditional stories. What must be kept in mind is the process advocated by Tungatalum (1990) of not destroying the story's importance. Within this process she relies on the use of elders to tell the stories, tapes to record the stories and the literature production centre to print and publish the stories in book form for use within language lessons. This all suggests the need for financial and human support. LPCs rely on the use of modern technology, especially in the use of computers and assorted hardware/software, printers and copy cameras. The Department of Education meets part of this cost in providing wages for LPC employees and for some consumable and equipment costs.

LPCs need to look further afield for financial support if they are to function effectively. Communities could add to the development of language maintenance programs by supplying financial, equipment and human support. At Nguiu after a request from the Action Group, Council supplied the school with a bus to transport people involved in culture days.

'The Action Group wrote a letter to the Community Council to assist and support us in the use of the bus as means of transport for the old people from their homes to the school and back.'

(Tungatalum, 1988: 10)

Various submissions by communities to A.B.T.A. and other funding organisations such as the Australia Council, have proved to be successful in securing monies to finance LPCs. School fetes in many communities are also a reliable source of funding. The important point is that Aboriginal communities should determine how the funds are spent and how the LPCs function in supporting language maintenance programs.

LPSs should function in such a way as to allow Aboriginal people and communities to explore new and different styles of literature and media production which better suit their way of looking at the world and education. The old assumption that books will be the central form of literature may change in the future when Aboriginal people take greater control of education and media production.'

(Hutchinson in N.T. Bilingual Education Newsletter, 1990: 19)

ABORIGINAL TEACHERS

The fifth principle states that Aboriginal schools need to promote and support the training of Aboriginal teachers. For language maintenance programs to be successful, the vernacular must be seen to be an active part of school and community life. This calls for the active participation of language speakers within the school.

'Any community that is serious about local language maintenance should have a school in which speakers of the local language(s) teach a wide variety of classes in that/those languages.'

(Black, 1990: 277)

Due to the complexities of issues in language maintenance - code mixing, code switching, domain theory, two way learning, bilingual education - teachers need to be trained and to be aware of their own language use, so that they become language models. Gifted language users from the community can be used within the school context - through their involvement in activities such as cultural days; and within the community context - this in most cases happens anyway through their participation in cultural events and ceremonial activities. Trained teachers will need to be aware of the issues and monitor language activities.

'The Aboriginal language learning context in two way schools needs some of the most gifted, prestigious Aboriginal teachers as models, hopefully working with older Aboriginal people who have an established identity as strong bearers of the Aboriginal Way or as gifted users of the local Aboriginal language.'

(Harris, 1990: 78)

Teachers will need to receive appropriate training, which in most cases will require them to leave their communities for periods of time. The community must be seen to be supporting these teachers' efforts in gaining teaching qualifications and experience in developing sound language practices. Support by the schools could include tutorial assistance, financial assistance, study leave provisions and access to materials and equipment.

A UNIFORM POLICY

The sixth principle states that schools belonging to the same language group need to decide on a definite language maintenance policy. In a recent discussion with a student, a remark was made that some children were 'losing about both ways' (pers. com. Emily Rankine). The granddaughter lives with her at Alekerenge and attends an 'all English' school. Because of family ties, her movement between

Alekerenge and Willowra is quite constant. Willowra C.E.C. has a bilingual program, using Warlpiri and English. Emily felt that this was having an adverse affect on her granddaughter's education and expressed concern, stating that schools within that language area should meet to decide on a uniform policy. The three schools on the Tiwi Islands also present this problem for families and their children who move from one community to the next. Traditional Aboriginal society in most cases was nomadic - education policies have not allowed for this.

CONCLUSION

By presenting these guidelines, I have intended to suggest ways in which schools can do something about language maintenance. The emphasis throughout this paper is that Aboriginal schools must be controlled by Aboriginal communities and that they must have the power to implement appropriate strategies and policies. Communities have a large role in language maintenance - schools cannot do it on their own. External agencies must also have the fortitude to stand by and support communities decisions; governments and educational institutions must be part of this process. Ultimately, the responsibility for language maintenance lies with the speakers of the language, and this rests not only with the school but involves the community as well.

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