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## **Bilingual Education in Remote Aboriginal Schools; Developing First and Second Language Proficiency.**

**A report to the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia**

*\* Penny Lee*

This publication is Part B of a report on research undertaken in 1991/2 in two desert remote schools in the Kimberley Region. Part A, which gives full details of the research findings, including results of consultations with Aboriginal people in the two communities, interviews with teachers in both schools, and classroom observations, has been restricted for use within the Catholic Education Office. The research was funded under the Commonwealth Second Language Learning Program administered by the Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Part B of the report is, in effect, a handbook on education in remote communities. After short descriptions of the research brief, a summary of approaches to bilingual education, and details about the nature of the study, sections then follow which are intended to provide teachers and administrators with a framework for thinking about bilingual schooling and the whole question of what it means to learn through two languages. The role of language in learning is particularly emphasised, with detailed discussions of the kinds of words learners need to know to negotiate western-style learning successfully. Some thoughts about the way different content learning might be distributed between the students' languages are also offered. The importance of teachers having adequate training in ESL methodology and strategies for teaching hearing impaired learners is strongly emphasised, as is the need for isolated teachers to receive regular visits from support staff with expertise in these matters. A range of recommendations is included with the specific circumstances of the two schools in mind.

Although the focus is on bilingual schools a great deal of the material in the body of Part B is relevant to schools in any remote community. Much of the discussion included in the recommendation section could also be of general interest.

\* The author, Dr Penny Lee (now at Flinders University of South Australia), is a qualified ESL teacher who has also worked with traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people in North-East Arnhemland and lectured (at what is now Edith Cowan University in WA) in Aboriginal Education. Her 1991 PhD thesis deals with the ideas of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), a linguist who argued that much of our thinking behaviour is essentially language-based and, as a result, that our subjective interface with the rest of the world can vary according to the way the focus of attention on different aspects of experience varies from language to language. Penny considers that very important educational implications flow from Whorf's theories and that teachers of Aboriginal students can benefit from learning more about the nature of linguistic thinking.

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# Bilingual Education in Remote Aboriginal Schools

DEVELOPING FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

