

Ignorant decisions exacerbate declining outcomes for Indigenous learners

Misty Adoniou

'We express profound dismay at the actions of the Northern Territory Minister for Education, Marion Scrymgour, to effectively end bilingual education in the Northern Territory.

Minister Scrymgour's directive that all Northern Territory students receive four hours of English instruction each day effectively closes the 10 remaining bilingual programs in the Northern Territory.

This marks the final blow in a systematic undermining of bilingual education in the Territory, where prior to 1998, 21 programs were in operation.'

'Recent national testing in literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory showed below-average results which has prompted the Minister's directive.

However, the rationale for the decision lies in a misplaced 'common sense' notion that Indigenous children's learning outcomes will be improved if the Territory adopts a Bush-style English-only policy.

The emphasis on standardised testing in the adoption and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States has been severely criticised (e.g., Kohn 2000).

The move to English-only classrooms will be as ineffective in Australia quite simply because it flies in the face of all current second language acquisition research which clearly demonstrates the multiple benefits of bilingualism for cognitive development and the maintenance of social and cultural identity.

Quite simply, the best indicator of success in a second language – which English is for many Indigenous students – is competency in the mother tongue. 46% of the Northern Territory's students are Indigenous; of these, 16% are currently educated in bilingual programs. This 16% makes up 7.8% of the entire student population in the Northern Territory.'

'Why are 7.8% students, and their bilingual schooling, being held accountable for low overall NT student outcomes in the national testing?' asks Ms Adoniou, 'This is particularly the case when we have data comparing bilingual schools with 'like' English-only schools which shows the students in the bilingual schools achieve higher standards in the Years 5 and 7 national literacy benchmark tests. Perhaps the Minister would be better advised to scrap English-only schools and mandate bilingual education.'

'Certainly the federal Labor government claims to understand the benefits of bilingualism with millions of dollars currently being spent on the reintroduction of mandatory teaching of languages other than English (LOTE), beginning in primary school.

Indeed LOTE is being slated as next in line for the development of mandatory national curriculum – ahead of curriculum areas like Health and Physical Development, Social Science, Technology and the Arts. However, the new LOTE initiative does not include the languages that Indigenous children already bring with them to the classroom.'

'It would seem that in this great multicultural 'fair go' nation of ours, not all languages are equal in value,' says Ms Adoniou. 'With one hand we take away from Indigenous children their right to learn and think in their mother tongue, and with the other we spend millions of dollars seeking to ensure that all Australian children can count to 10 in an Asian language before they leave primary school.'

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