

English will be the death of Aboriginal languages

Thursday, 20 November 2008

Wendy Baarda, resident of Yuendumu, NT for 35 years, teacher for 30 years, writes:

I can see why NT Minister for Education Marion Scrymgour's announcement that only one hour of classroom time per day may be conducted in children's Aboriginal language might seem like a good idea to many people who've never lived and taught in an Aboriginal language speaking community.

This could be their logic: Aboriginal employment is very low because their education level is very low. The key to educational success and participation in the mainstream is English proficiency. They are not learning English while they are speaking their own language. Therefore we will force them to use English in school for four and a half hours a day.

There are many flaws in this logic.

Low education levels are not the only reason for low employment levels. There are the bureaucratic regulations that demand completion of a literacy based course before allowing a person to work at fixing taps, bandaging sores or any of the many practical tasks which used to be done by Aboriginal people in communities. There is three generations of welfare dependence causing children to grow up never expecting to work. There is the imperative to employ outside contractors to do nearly all the work on Aboriginal communities.

English proficiency in primary school is not the key to better educational outcomes and is very unlikely to be produced in this proposed way -- teaching children in a language they don't understand or understand very poorly.

Decreeing that children be taught in English for four and a half hours a day will not mitigate all the other factors contributing to low education levels. Poor attendance is likely to be poorer. Children say they get headaches from listening to English. Parental support and involvement is likely to be less.

The turnover of teachers will probably be greater. It's not a rewarding task, trying to impose a foreign culture on children in a language they barely understand -- being a lone English speaker in a class of children speaking another language, never knowing why children are laughing or crying, why fights suddenly erupt, why they sometimes refuse to sit or do anything you say. Providing relevant curriculum and materials that children can relate to becomes almost an impossibility.

In fact, if the aim was to make children, parents and teachers hate school, this four and a half hours a day of compulsory English would be the way to go.

It must be obvious from the previous track record on retention of Australian languages, and hunting society languages world wide, that all these languages are at risk. Marion Scrymgour's policy is not aimed at eliminating indigenous languages. But she suggests that children can maintain their first languages at home and in the one hour a day allocated in school in the afternoon when attendance is the lowest,

attention is the poorest, the temperature is the highest and when most traditional Aboriginals are asleep.

English is a very seductive language. It's the language of the powerful and the world youth culture. Teenagers quickly pick up the songs and the cool expressions, banter among themselves in pseudo English. But if the first language is firmly established, and is the accepted medium of interaction between Aboriginal speakers in or from their community, it will still be the language passed on to children.

The problem of English-only for most of the school day is that new things taught in English may be only able to be thought about and talked about in English. The new learning may never be related to the first language or situations outside school. Terms and phrases in the first language for dealing with similar problems may never be recognized or learnt.

Children who spend most of their school day hearing and responding in English may begin to use English in the playground, a sign of success to the English teacher, but the beginning of the end of a language which was customarily always used between speakers of that language. This kept it separate from English and gave it a role and a time slot in everyday life. English is used for speaking to English speakers. When children habitually use English or a version of it between themselves, the indigenous language is then only used for speaking with older speakers.

As these gradually pass away, English or Aboriginal English is the only language passed on to children. Language loss can occur over one generation as has been documented. It's very sad for the old people, the last speakers of their languages who grew up in communities where their language was spoken by everyone. They mourn the loss of their language. They cry when they hear it spoken.

Even Aboriginal people many generations removed from their language-speaking ancestors, mourn the loss of their language. There is a huge difference between migrants who lose their language and Aboriginals. Migrants come knowing they must take on another language. They have made that choice. Aboriginal families have not made that choice. Unlike migrants who know that their language is being continued in their country of origin, Aboriginal communities know that when their language fades out of use it is gone forever.

I know many people think that Aboriginal languages, (and probably Aboriginal people) are doomed to die out and it doesn't really matter. It does, of course, matter to the people themselves. A language is a large part of identity, self esteem and a sense of belonging in your own society. Stripped of these, a person is far less able to venture out into the mainstream for work or any other form of participation.

A language embodies a particular, unique way of seeing, thinking and being. Losing a language doesn't mean that you automatically take on someone else's way of seeing and being and access the advantages of that other language group. Many Aboriginals caught between cultures describe themselves as lost. Aboriginals in communities where traditional languages are no longer spoken (such as those in the Barkley area) are not achieving higher levels of education.

Aboriginal languages carry information on the plants, creatures, landforms and seasons of their environment. Many of the drugs we use today contain active ingredients from plants that were once someone's bush medicine.

It's just not possible to record and archive all of Aboriginal traditional language, knowledge, social organization and arts. The questions we may need to answer may not have been thought of yet. Just as stands of original wilderness around the world have yielded solutions to control of feral plants and creatures, communities of traditional hunting peoples may provide answers to future problems. In starvation prone Niger, fast growing Australian acacias are grown for firewood and holding the soil. Aboriginal knowledge allowed them to harvest and eat the seeds of these trees, which must first be roasted before they can be ground.

Retention of Aboriginal languages should matter to all of us. All humans were hunters when language evolved. Aboriginal languages have stayed free of outside influences for a very long time. They are a window into how language was first used and constructed, where it sits in the brain, how societies attain cohesion, pass on skills and knowledge, the role of art, music and dance, the psychology of human attachment and many aspects of human communication. We can't truly know ourselves until we know where we came from.

This article was published on Crikey.com.au on 20 November 2008 at:
<http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20081120-The-fate-of-Aboriginal-languages.html>