

Why more schools need to teach bilingual education to Indigenous children

Written by Samantha Disbray, Senior linguistics researcher, Charles Darwin University



Indigenous children can benefit greatly from learning in a language they understand. Neda Vanovac/AAP

In [this series](#) , we'll discuss whether progress is being made on Indigenous education, looking at various areas including policy, scholarships, school leadership, literacy and much more.

[Nancy Oldfield Napurrurla](#) has taught at [Yuendumu school](#) for over 30 years.

In her preschool transition class, the children attentively sing along in Warlpiri to [Marlu Witalpa](#) (Little Kangaroo). It's a seemingly simple children's song about a kangaroo looking for its mother. But with its complex expressions and traditional [hand signs](#) , it's also an effective tool for learning.

Nancy has introduced generations of children to school routines, literacy, and early years knowledge and skills all in a language they understand: Warlpiri. At the same time, they learn oral English from another teacher in a staged curriculum. As they master some English language, they are introduced to English literacy.

Learning in a language you understand

This dual language approach is based on research showing that many concepts are best learned in the language that the learner understands. And mastery in first language supports second language learning, [success in literacy](#) and [academic achievement](#) in both languages.

Increasingly, [international](#) and Australian [research](#) and [policy](#) make strong links between recognition and use of first language and cultural knowledge, and student identity, wellbeing and education outcomes.

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Teachers in Warlpiri-English and other bilingual schools, such as Yirrkala school, have long worked to [innovatively blend traditional](#) and contemporary knowledge.

The overarching aim of this dual language focus is to provide young people with the [skills](#) they will need as bicultural adults in the modern world. This is relevant in sectors such as [the arts](#)

,
[land management](#)

,
[interpreting](#)

in legal and health settings and education, to name just a few.

The importance of bilingual education was recognised more than 50 years ago when, in 1961, politician Kim Beazley Senior saw a classroom like Nancy's at Hermannsburg school in central Australia, where children were learning in Arrernte and English.

The success of this classroom, compared with its English-only counterparts, inspired him.

Later, as education minister in the newly elected Whitlam government in 1972, he oversaw the launch of the Northern Territory Bilingual Education program. These early days and the decades that followed are documented in a new volume, [History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory](#)

At its most ambitious in 1988, 24 remote schools had programs in English and 19 Aboriginal languages. Local people were directly involved in the education of their children, and champions for schooling in remote communities.

Too few qualified Aboriginal teachers

The schools desperately needed Aboriginal teachers, and training programs were developed through the establishment of Batchelor College and the School for Australian Linguistics (now combined as [Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education](#)).

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Many Aboriginal people, like Nancy, often of the first or second generation in their families to attend school, were supported by their school and the department to obtain professional qualifications and leadership opportunities.

These opportunities were provided by combinations of in-community on-the-job learning, intensive courses at Batchelor College, and support from travelling Batchelor College lecturers.

However, in the intervening years, changes to accreditation regimes and changes to Batchelor College funding have meant that these opportunities are now rarely available to Indigenous people in remote communities.

Sadly, there are fewer qualified Aboriginal teachers in remote Australia today than in the 1980s.

Team work

Indigenous teachers worked side by side with non-Indigenous teachers in bilingual teaching teams. This required professional development in the skills of team teaching, and teaching English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD).

Non-local teachers were trained, supported on the job and/or accessed professional learning in these skills.

This support was not only essential for young non-local teachers to acquire these skills, it also provided them with social and intellectual support that helped them stay longer on communities.

The need for trained English language teachers and structured EALD programs in remote schools has been raised in virtually every report since the 1990s.

The lack of these skilled professionals continues to hamper Aboriginal students' learning English and [academic success](#) across the Northern Territory.

Bilingual language approach creates jobs

The dual language focus created jobs in remote communities, not just in teaching.

With a great need for written materials to support the program, Literacy Production Centres were established, with a prodigious output of books. These included fiction, history, science and reference works in Aboriginal languages. Recently much of this has been made digitally available in the [Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages](#) .

Despite efforts to promote the dual language focus and its importance to communities, it remained controversial, and subject to shifts in policy and resourcing. Ideological disagreements often drowned out evidence and the opportunity to review and improve practice.

Importance of community involvement

While much has changed since 1972, [recent research shows](#) the continued importance of community involvement in schools.

Now in 2017, the Northern Territory Education Department is [preparing policy](#) and developing curriculum for teaching Aboriginal languages, including the remaining bilingual programs, based on the new National Curriculum.

These moves recognise the value of Aboriginal languages in education and employment.

But policy and curriculum on their own are not enough. Aboriginal classrooms need more Nancy Oldfields, more trained teachers from their own communities who speak their own languages. The Western Australian [Department of Education](#) has a practical and innovative model to achieve this.

Classrooms need more trained teachers who are skilled in teaching oral and written English to children who speak other languages. And they need these teachers to be skilled in working

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together as professional teams.

This is where Australia needs to invest in [Aboriginal education](#) - in teacher education, professional learning and team-teaching, and excellence in languages education.

- [Read more articles](#) in this series.

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