
History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory: People, Programs, Policies*Edited by Disbray Samantha, Devlin Brian Clive, Devlin Nancy Regine Friedman*Springer
Singapore

2017

ix + 375pp.
ISBN: 978-981-10-2076-6(hbk)**Keywords** History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory**Review DOI** 10.1108/HER-06-2019-068

It was a devastating car crash involving educators from the NT bilingual program that reminded the editors of this book of the fragility of history – and so set them on the journey of pulling this remarkable collection together. Their concern to widen the understanding of the Northern Territory Aboriginal language bilingual program’s achievements is one shared by many educators, linguists, academics and otherwise enthusiasts who have found themselves at the center of what really can fairly be described as one of the most innovative – and controversial – educational events in late modern history.

Kim Beazley Snr maintains he was shaving one morning, early in the days his tenure as the Whitlam Government’s Education Minister, when he decided that bilingual education might be a good idea. That led to the federal government’s decision in 1973 to fund five pilot programs; by 1995, there were 21 programs in motion (p. 1). Many used a “step model,” introducing initial literacy in a local language before moving into English as a second language over time, while others operated on a “dual literacy model” that introduced a local language and English together. A handful of schools were multilingual, like Alice Springs’ independent Yipirinya school, which for a time taught initial vernacular literacy in four Aboriginal languages and English (in her unique contribution, linguistic anthropologist Inge Kral reflects critically on the wider structural conditions shaping the affordances given by vernacular literacy to graduates of Yipirinya, where she taught in the 1980s).

As practitioners themselves, the editors have drawn on their connections to the field to bring together a series of ethnographic accounts of these programs in their different locations across remote Aboriginal communities. The accounts are organized chronologically, through three phases: establishment, consolidation and resistance. A final section considers some future directions.

These close-up views highlight the creativity, passion and tenacity of the educators involved. In the establishment section, for example, Petronella Vaarzon-Morel and Jim Wafer deliver a poignant history of the bottom-up efforts to secure a bilingual program at Warlpiri community Willowra, which turned their school from one where the reading material “consisted principally of the Bush Books series, with vintage sentences such as ‘Here is Dick’, ‘Here is Dora’, ‘Here is pup’, ‘Dick is looking at pup’” (p. 42) to one where “the community felt welcome at the school, and many elders regularly participated in school activities, telling traditional stories and teaching students Warlpiri culture” (p. 45)[1].

Unlike the situation with Māori (or te reo) language in New Zealand, which, as a single language, was arguably easier to integrate into modern capitalist education systems, Australia’s bilingual schools were working within one of the most linguistically diverse places in the world, where a big language has speakers numbering in just the thousands (and where, as in the case of Yolŋu people, multilingualism is structured into social relationships). The program propelled the development of written literacy in a number of Aboriginal languages, and over its whole history, produced vast amounts of original literature that recorded Aboriginal oral histories and stories. And, at one stage, in no mean feat, it turned the NT Education Department into the biggest employer of Aboriginal people in the country. This persistence and resolve helped to

partly salvage the program, on two occasions in 1998–1999 and 2008, when the NT government introduced policies to, respectively, defund the program and ban the use of Aboriginal languages for the first four hours of the school day (known as the “first four hours policy”).

The book’s strength in bringing together such a variety of accounts is also its one main weakness, however, because it seems to hem in the ability to reflect more deeply on “deep contestations that would eventually lead to the demise of the bilingual program” (Disbray, Devlin and Devlin, p. 2). Positioning the reforms around a discourse of human rights (Devlin, pp. 165–179) seems to miss an opportunity to delve into questions of assimilation and Aboriginal control, and to consider more fully the meaning and purpose of Aboriginal education in a settler colonial context (and in the contemporary era of “mainstreaming” in Aboriginal affairs).

This is also a consequence of how the “anti-bilingual” debate has shaped the discourse of bilingual advocates: often forced to defend the program against highly dubious and nefariously motivated accusations of pedagogical insufficiency, costliness and failure, there has been a long and valiant project to defend the program’s merits, and to contest the claims of its detractors. Here, the contributions of Tess Ross and Wendy Baarda on Yuendumu, Noela Hall on Galiwin’ku and John Greatorex, also on Galiwin’ku, take a slightly different route, building their narratives within Australia’s Aboriginal history, which brings a special richness to these chapters. Elsewhere, Robert Hoogenraad’s and Christine Nicholls’ work, as well as Janine Oldfield’s PhD thesis, stand out as critical accounts.

That work seems quite important to thinking through the pushback against bilingual education which, many argue, has been a feature almost since it began. The book is not settled on whether to declare the bilingual era “over”: former Yirrkala teacher, bilingual program director, and advocate Beth Graham is certain it is (p. 32), as is Michael Christie in his foreword (p. viii) (his impressive contributions to teaching and scholarship began at Milingimbi in the 1970s). The editors, though, suggest a different reading by focusing the book’s later chapters on recent developments in Aboriginal language and culture programs (generally speaking, this means inclusion as a subject, rather than as a means of instruction) and the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages project. It reflects that most new initiatives to maintain language and culture are happening outside the school gates, even though the “first four hours policy” has been dropped.

There are some missing pieces – as the editors’ note, the most obvious issue is the small number of Aboriginal contributors; also missing from the coverage is the program at Maningrida, as well as numerous homelands schools that were, in many cases, attempted bilingual schools. Other interesting curiosities, such as the link between missionary linguistics and the bilingual program, the influence of the global Indigenous movement and US programs, and attempts at “Aboriginalisation,” are also rich histories still in want of further exploration. Because the collection is confined to the NT, there is no discussion of bilingual experiments in Western Australian independent schools, or in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands.

There is much room for further scholarship, but this collection is an invaluable starting point that will be treasured by anyone interested in Aboriginal history or Australian educational history. It needs to be widely recognized and widely read.

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Note

1. The story of the Warlpiri people that formed Nyirripi, literally by cutting a road to their ancestral lands, and their later efforts to establish a bilingual school, is not told here but is covered in Lisa Hall’s fascinating oral history collection focusing on Central Desert Aboriginal teachers, *We Always Stay*.