

Preface

For some time I had been thinking of writing a book that would draw on my own experiences of Northern Territory bilingual education over the last 36 years. However, a cruel event prompted an abrupt revision of that plan. On November 6, 2012, three people were killed in a crash between a cement truck and a taxi on a main road in Darwin. In addition to the unfortunate driver, two remote-area school principals were killed. One was Greg Crowe, 71, Principal of Ltyente Apurte School at Santa Teresa, south-east of Alice Springs. The other was Leah Kerinaia, Acting Principal, of Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School on Bathurst Island, about 150 kilometres north of Darwin. The principals had been on their way to a meeting at the Catholic Education Office. The principal of Murrupurtiyanuwu had been planning to present a paper advocating stronger support for the bilingual program at her school, so several people told my wife and me before we attended the funeral on Bathurst Island shortly afterwards. On the way home in our small plane, Nancy and I grieved over the loss—not only of those in the car accident, but the many friends and colleagues who had worked in bilingual programs around the Northern Territory, but who were no longer alive or very ill.

“We should think about putting together a book that gives those who are still alive a chance to tell their story”, Nancy suggested, and so the idea for this particular compiled book was born. My initial project was shelved, and we began contacting a range of people to see if they were interested in contributing. A husband-and-wife team can have some real strengths, but I felt certain that we needed the involvement of a trustworthy scholar who could identify with the vision we had vaguely projected. Samantha Disbray had worked as a regional linguist supporting bilingual programs, after many years as a community and research linguist. She had started to research bilingual education as it evolved for the Warlpiri, and other groups in Central Australia. In 2013, she approached me to seek advice about developing a history of bilingual education in the centre. At our first meeting we found much shared ground. When I proposed that we collaborate, and draw together narratives and case studies from some of the people who had committed their time and energy to the program, she readily accepted. Nancy, Samantha and I have continued to work closely on this project ever since.

Anyone presuming to compile a book such as this needs to have some credibility, some relevant experience in connection with the topic, and some professional ability to address it. Samantha's professional life of language work in Central Australia spans two decades and she has presented and published in this field. Nancy, whose expertise is inclusive and special education, has on-the-ground experience working in bilingual classrooms as a teacher. In my own case I will simply allude to 36 years of involvement in this field, successively as teacher linguist, principal, university-based teacher and researcher, consultant, policy analyst and advocate, and now principal investigator working with Michael Christie, Cathy Bow and others to develop the Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages.

Whenever we enter a new discipline or field of study, especially when taking up a challenging cross-cultural role for the first time, we naturally look to sources of guidance and inspiration. In that connection I acknowledge the role played by Joshua Fishman, Jim Cummins, Stephen Harris, Joy Kinslow-Harris, M. Yunupingu, R. Marika, Marta Rado, Michael Christie and Beth Graham, in enlarging my understanding of what contribution bilingual education could potentially make in expanding life opportunities for students, parents and community members in remote Northern Territory schools. Some of those who inspired me I am no longer able to thank in person.

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