

Chapter 2

A Glimmer of Possibility

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Introduction

By way of introducing Part 1, ‘Starting Out’, this chapter sketches the evolution of bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory from 1950 to 1975. This choice of time span is not arbitrary, for it was in 1950 that the Commonwealth Office of Education first formally acknowledged that bilingual instruction for Aboriginal students would be ‘desirable’ in some circumstances. The choice of the second date, 1975, is partly for convenience, but there is a reason for it as well. In 1975, when the *First progress report on the bilingual education program in schools in the Northern Territory* was released, Federal Government funds were still available, but the first students enrolled in remote school bilingual programs had not begun to read and write, so the potential of the approach had not yet been demonstrated. All policy-makers, educators and linguists could point to was a glimmer of possibility. This glimmer of possibility is the stepping off point for events detailed in the chapters that follow.

Our focus in exploring this time frame from 1950 to 1975 is on the formulation of government policy for publicly funded schools for Aboriginal students in rural and remote areas. Relevant pioneering efforts by missionaries in earlier years are therefore not covered in any detail here. (However, see Elkin 1953, which summarises the bilingual literacy plans of missions at Hermannsburg, Goulbourn Island, Bathurst Island and Roper River; McGrath 1976; Kretschmann 1988; McKay, this volume; and McKenzie 1976). It is relevant though to acknowledge the key role which missionary linguists and teachers played when government-sponsored bilingual programs began in 1973.

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The 1950 Agreement

The first government schools for Aboriginal students were opened in the Northern Territory in 1950 at Delissaville (Belyuen), Bagot, Alice Springs and Yuendumu with a combined enrolment of 153 Aboriginal children. These schools were under the control of the Commonwealth Office of Education (Harris 1990, p. 45), which assumed responsibility for Aboriginal education in the Territory until 1955. The basis for this agreement was a memorandum, dated January 5, 1950, from R.C. Mills, Director of the Commonwealth Office of Education to the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department (Mills 1950). This memorandum records that a conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Welfare authorities held in Canberra in February 1947 had resolved that the governments concerned should make "increased provision for the education of natives". Since "the South Australian Education Department, which at present controls schools for white children in the Northern Territory, could not see its way clear to provide teachers for native schools", the Minister for the Interior recommended that "the Commonwealth Government should accept direct responsibility for the provision of education in the Northern Territory". This, along with four other recommendations, was accepted.

What is of particular interest is that, in the agreement that was signed by all the responsible authorities, including the Prime Minister, the Commonwealth Government acknowledged that "the language of instruction in Native schools shall be English, except where local conditions (e.g., where natives are still in a tribal or semi-tribal state) render bilingual instruction desirable". Further, it was resolved that the subjects "should include English Language, [and] Native Language (where appropriate)..." in the "special curriculum" that would be needed. This is the first recorded Commonwealth Government decision to recommend bilingual instruction for Aboriginal children in certain circumstances. The 1950 agreement was approved by Robert Menzies, as the Minister responsible for the Commonwealth Education Act. Other signatories included A.R. Driver (the Administrator), R.C. Mills (Director of the Commonwealth Office of Education) and P.A. McBride (Minister responsible for the NT Administration Act).

The 1950 agreement also noted that the Commonwealth Government, through the Director of the Commonwealth Office of Education, would accept responsibility for administering the education of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory with respect to "staffing; inspection; curricula; school classification; recommendations for the establishment of new schools; the training, appointment and control of teachers; the classification of teachers; the inspection and supervision of mission schools; [and] recommendations concerning mission school standards".

So, although it is customary to say that bilingual education in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia, began in December 1972 as a result of a Federal government initiative, it is apparent that the foundations of this policy change were formally laid in 1950, at a time when assimilation was still the accepted policy. In

support of that policy, Elkin (1964, p. xiii) explained how important it was to formulate “policies and methods designed to assist the Aborigines in the task of adjusting themselves to the great changes which have come upon them. ... Their very presence in the country imposes on us a dual mandate to seek their good as well as our own”. To assist with that ‘dual mandate’ Elkin had, in 1947, “called for a bilingual education system with a fully planned curriculum, as part of a policy for the training of both children and adults aimed at economic self-sufficiency in a context of increasingly westernising material culture” (Cited in Etherington 1986, p. 33, drawing on Cole 1975, pp. 58–59). The Commonwealth’s position in 1950 was not in conflict with this view, though from 1950 to 1975, always in the background, “the White Australia Policy... was still largely in place” (Catley 2005, p. 8).

The Decision to Introduce Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory

The *Watts-Gallacher Report* advocated bilingual education as the ideal approach for the Northern Territory, even though the authors considered that such a program would not be viable (Watts and Gallacher 1964, p. 71). In their view non-Aboriginal teachers could not really be expected to learn Aboriginal languages, there were too many languages anyway, and preparing textbooks in many languages was thought to be unreasonably difficult. Nonetheless, this report was later adopted as the NT’s guide in developing these programs (letter from Hedley Beare, Director of NT Education to the Director of ACER, June 13, 1973. NTDE File 89/2392).

In 1968 Joy Kinslow-Harris wrote a paper arguing that bilingual education was definitely possible, provided Aboriginal people were allowed to do the teaching in their own languages through a system of team-teaching in partnership with qualified non-Aboriginal teachers (Kinslow-Harris 1968; see also Graham, this volume). Her proposal was picked up in 1971 at a National Workshop, *Aboriginal Education: Priorities for Action and Research*, organised by Professor Betty Watts in Brisbane, where it was recommended that “Pilot projects be established to test the efficiency of teaching literacy in the vernacular following the proposals put forward by Mrs. Kinslow-Harris” (Watts 1971, p. 104). The Labor Party obtained a copy of these workshop recommendations, and in December 14 1972, within hours of being elected, and after 24 years of Labor being out of office, Gough Whitlam announced the beginning of the NT bilingual program. The Prime Minister declared that the Commonwealth Government would “launch a campaign to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages” (Whitlam 1972).

Kim Beazley Snr. was appointed Minister for Education in the Whitlam Government. Years later, in 1985, when he was visiting the Northern Territory to see for himself the program he had started, Beazley told staff in the Bilingual Unit in Darwin that he had begun to think about bilingual education 14 hours after the election, while shaving (Harris and Devlin 1999). He had then suggested the idea to Gough Whitlam, who subsequently announced the policy change over the parliament's loud speaker system on December 14, 1972.

Beazley explained that bilingual programs were favoured at the time because they were considered to be the best route to mastery of English as a second language:

I had seen the truth of this at Hermannsburg mission in Central Australia, where the primary pupils were taught in Arrernte. When I visited the mission in 1961...the quality of spoken English at Hermannsburg was vastly superior to that of Aboriginal children in government schools (Beazley 2009, p. 205).

To guide the establishment of bilingual programs he set up a three-person Advisory Group on Teaching in Aboriginal languages in Schools in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory (the Watts Committee). It was headed by Betty Watts (Reader in Education at the University of Queensland), W.J. (Bill) McGrath (Inspector of Schools in the Northern Territory's Aboriginal Education Branch) and J.L. Tandy (from the Department of Education in Canberra).

The Watts Committee convened for the first time on January 22, 1973. The three advisers visited potential bilingual schools and put forward some influential recommendations. Their report (Advisory Group 1975), was tabled in Parliament by the Minister for Education on March 15, 1973 and unanimously accepted. When presenting that report, Beazley confessed that

We knew then that this would not be an easy policy to implement. There are more than a hundred Aboriginal languages and dialects in active use in the Northern Territory alone. Only a very few of them have been linguistically analysed and written down. Furthermore, in some communities a number of different languages is spoken. There are few trained teachers available to do the job, and nowhere near the quantity of written material in these languages needed for school work (Commonwealth of Australia 1973a).

Given these challenges, the Minister continued,

the wise course seemed to be to have a small advisory group of people to go to the Northern Territory and, as quickly as possible, look into the resources of trained manpower, the teaching materials available and the state of linguistic analysis reached in the various languages and dialects. They were to discuss the matter with educationists, linguists, administrators, and with the Aboriginal people themselves, and in the light of all this, to make recommendations for a program of teaching in Aboriginal languages which would incorporate the teaching of traditional Aboriginal arts, crafts and skills (Commonwealth 1973a).

For the benefit of his fellow parliamentarians Beazley summarised the Watts Committee's report as follows, making particular note of the team-teaching approach that would be employed, and the expected benefits of teaching bilingually:

They advocate a bilingual approach with most of the children's early schooling in the appropriate Aboriginal language, leading to the acquisition of literacy skills in that language. This will be followed by a transition to literacy in English and the use of English as the medium of instruction for a substantial component of the children's later schooling. There will be increased emphasis upon the teaching of traditional Aboriginal arts, crafts and skills and this will continue through the entire period of the children's schooling. The teaching will be done on a teaching team basis, the Aboriginal member teaching the Aboriginal language component of the curriculum, assisted as required in the preparation of lessons and so on by the non-Aboriginal member, who will also teach the English language component (Commonwealth 1973a).

The authors envisaged that schools with bilingual programs would be "agents of cultural continuity" (Advisory Group 1975, p. 1), which fostered pride in ethnic identity and facilitated English reading and writing through initial vernacular literacy. The need for subsequent literacy in English was strongly emphasised (Advisory Group 1975, p. 1, §1.4). Continued study of Aboriginal languages was also advocated. For example, on p. 11, they stated that "the Aboriginal language would remain as the appropriate language for arts... and for Aboriginal Studies".

Programs were intended to be bicultural as well as bilingual. Schools were intended to be integral to the communities they served. However, at least one of the recommendations in the Watts, McGrath and Tandy report was never picked up by authorities and endorsed; namely, §5.4.4.2: "Children's mastery of literacy skills in the Aboriginal language must also be assessed".

The Watts Committee stipulated that creating a rich reading environment in the school was essential if a bilingual program was to succeed. What it recommended, in order of priority, were (1) traditional stories, as told by parents to young children; (2) stories of high interest to young children; (3) graded reading books and (4) stories of high interest to various age groups (Advisory Group 1975).

Justification for the Decision

Why then did the Government commit to such a difficult undertaking—"the first large scale implementation of bilingual education in Australia" (McGrath 1976, p. 2)—when it knew that there were insufficient written materials in NT Aboriginal languages, insufficient trained teachers were available to do the job, and of the more than a hundred Aboriginal language varieties in active use in the Northern Territory, few had been linguistically analysed and written down?

The first reason had to do with the requirements of international human rights conventions. The Labor Government recognised that initially educating children in their own languages was in accordance with Australia's obligation as a member of international organisations. When he addressed Parliament on March 27, 1973, Beazley, explained that

Australia is a member nation of the International Labour Organisation. Article 23 of the ILO Convention Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-tribal Populations in Independent Countries reads as follows:

- (1) Children belonging to the populations concerned shall be taught to read and write in their mother tongue, or, where this is not practicable, in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong.
- (2) Provision shall be made for a progressive transition from the mother tongue or the vernacular language to the national language or to one of the official languages of the country.
- (3) Appropriate measures shall, as far as possible, be taken to preserve the mother tongue or the vernacular language (Commonwealth 1973b)

Accordingly, the Federal Minister for Education lamented the fact that, until 1973, “little 5 and 6-year-old Aboriginal children ... going to school for the first time, have been faced with a European teacher speaking to them in English—which they must very soon learn to read and write or drop hopelessly behind in all of their school work” (Commonwealth 1973b).

Second, although he did not use the term, Beazley saw a need to help maintain Aboriginal languages, believing that “One can also confidently expect psychological benefits from this recognition of the children’s language and culture, and more enthusiastic support from the parents for the schooling their children are offered” (Commonwealth of Australia 1973b). In a rhetorical question put to parliament, Beazley asked:

What of their own language, the language their mothers and fathers speak, the language the old people speak, the language of the tribal stories, myths, legends and ceremonies? The schools have turned their back on that language and it is no wonder that the shocking comment has been heard from a 10-year-old Aboriginal boy: ‘Ours is a rubbish language, isn’t it’ (Commonwealth 1973b).

Third, Beazley had become convinced, as a result of his own observations, that well-conducted bilingual lessons had the potential to engage children deeply:

During a recent visit to the Northern Territory I saw the first steps being taken towards this form of schooling. The 2 classes being taught in their own language were the most entranced classes we saw on the entire trip. In one class, young children were so riveted by a lesson being given in their language by an Aboriginal woman teacher that they paid no attention to the invasion of their classroom by more than a dozen adult Europeans. The second case was where a distinguished Aboriginal bark-painter was used as an art instructor, teaching senior boys the art of bark painting. They obviously had for him a reverence, even awe; they thought it a great privilege to be taught by him. This is the very essence of the matter and I have had no hesitation in accepting recommendations which will have the effect of implementing this quality in education in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities (Commonwealth 1973b).

As a result, and this was the fourth reason, such an educational approach should lead both to vernacular literacy and to greater proficiency in English:

The educational aim of such an approach is the development of children who are thoroughly competent in their own language and able to read and write it, who are more proficient in English than they would have been under the present system, and who are better at all their school subjects because their schooling, and their early schooling in particular, has been more interesting, enjoyable and meaningful to them (Commonwealth 1973b).

The fifth reason had to do with fostering the all important support needed from parents. Beazley believed that “One can also confidently expect psychological benefits from this recognition of the children’s language and culture, and more enthusiastic support from the parents for the schooling their children are offered” (Commonwealth of Australia 1973b).

Finally, the Government was convinced that thoughtful and sensible planning measures and a graduated approach (“This is not a program that can be implemented immediately in schools in all Northern Territory Aboriginal communities”) could overcome many of the obstacles that were apparent. For example, in relation to the question of which language should be chosen for a school program, given the multiplicity of languages available, Beazley reassured his parliamentary colleagues that a start could be made

where only one language is spoken or where there is a dominant language acceptable to that community, where that language has been linguistically analysed and recorded, where there are Aboriginal people able to teach in it and where the Aboriginal people themselves want it to be used in their school (Commonwealth 1973b).

In the same parliamentary session Sam Calder, Member for the Northern Territory, guardedly praised Beazley’s initiative and the work done by Watts, McGrath and Tandy, but added, “Whilst it is difficult for Europeans to teach many of these languages I think that the Government will have quite a lot of trouble in getting the Aboriginal people themselves to teach these languages correctly, as is envisaged” (Commonwealth 1973b).

The introduction of bilingual programs and the prospect of more being established, prompted a call for more linguistic work to be done in Aboriginal languages to support these educational efforts (Northern Territory Education Division 1973, Appendix E). Accordingly, the School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) was established in October 1973.

The ‘Bilingual Unit’ Is Set up in Darwin

Early funding allowed the formation of a head office advisory team, which became known as ‘the Bilingual Unit’. It comprised five key positions: a Principal Education Adviser (W.J. McGrath), a Senior Education Officer (SEO) Linguistics (Toby Metcalfe, who later became the first head of the School of Australian Linguistics); an SEO Early Childhood (Beryl Edmunds), SEO Anthropology (Maria Brandl), and an SEO TESL (Keryn Lynch). Five linguist positions were set up in the field and others were created in the School of Australian Linguistics (SAL), then part of Darwin Community College. At first it was very hard to recruit linguists and so only three were appointed at the beginning: M. Laughren, V. Leeding and G. McKay. When Cyclone Tracy destroyed Darwin in December 1974, half of the senior Bilingual Education advisory staff left and the Head Office team was not properly rebuilt until late 1977.

Starting Out

By March 1973 the NT bilingual education program had begun to be implemented in line with the recommendations of the Watts, McGrath and Tandy report. The first sites were those where mission linguists had already developed orthographies for the Aboriginal languages, and where the people agreed to choose one language variety for use as the language of instruction in the school together with English: for example, Gumatj at Yirrkala, even though up to 12 clan language varieties were spoken in that community.

Experimental bilingual programs commenced in five schools in 1973 in line with the advisory group's recommendations: at Angurugu in Anindilyakwa and English; at Areyonga in Pitjantjatjara and English; at Hermannsburg in Arrernte and English; at Milingimbi in Gupapuyngu and English; and at Waruwu, Goulburn Island, in Maung and English. However, the program at Angurugu never really got underway, nor did the one at Hermannsburg.

In each of these schools bilingual programs were introduced to children in pre-school and Year one. Senior students were generally given literacy instruction in an Aboriginal language as well.

During the time frame covered by this chapter it was generally agreed, on the grounds of efficiency, that one vernacular language should be chosen per bilingual program. However, this principle was later overturned in the 1980s, when more Aboriginal control in the three large Arnhem Land schools was asserted, and some school time was set aside for other clan languages. In 1993 Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School at Wadeye also began including additional languages in its program.

By 1975 larger, school-based bilingual programs generally had access to four specialist positions: linguist, teacher-linguist, printer, and Aboriginal literacy worker, but this infrastructure was not in place in 1973 when the first programs began.

Similarly, the first bilingual education handbook was not produced until December, 1975 and only then "as an interim measure". The Watts, McGrath and Tandy Report advocated two frameworks for bilingual education programs in schools: Model I, which incorporated reading and writing in Aboriginal languages, and Model II, which did not. That is, the aim of a Model I program was to achieve literacy in two languages (English and an Aboriginal vernacular), whereas Model II meant that an English literacy program was supported by oral use of an Aboriginal language. While Model II programs were always a possibility, Aboriginal communities mostly opted for Model I.

Programs were not started without evidence of community support; for example, a letter sent to the NT Department of Education requesting a bilingual program would typically be signed by a dozen or more community-based people. Once official approval had been given, it wasn't so difficult for a school to begin a bilingual program. This only required commencing the program in Pre-school and

Table 2.1 The establishment of NT school bilingual programs (1973–1975)

Years	Schools	Languages
1973	1. Angurugu	Anindilyakwa and English
	2. Areyonga	Pitjantjatjara and English
	3. Hermannsburg	Arnernte and English
	4. Milingimbi	Gupapuyngu and English
	5. Warruwi, Goulburn Is	Maung and English
1974	6. Oenpelli (Gunbalanya)	Kunwinjku and English
	7. Shepherdson College, Galiwin’ku	Gupapuyngu and English
	8. St Therese’s (now Murrupurtiyanuwu)	Tiwi and English
	9. Yayayi (Papunya outstation)	Pintupi-Luritja
	10. Yirrkala	Gumatj and English
	11. Yuendumu	Warlpiri and English
1975	12. Bamyili(now Barunga)	Experimental oral Kriol pre-school program
	13. Pularumpi (formerly Garden Point)	Tiwi and English
	14. Roper River (Ngukurr)	Experimental oral Kriol pre-school program

Source Various NTDE documents, including file 93/483, folios 27, 40–1 and 176, and suggestions made by Paul Bubb and Peter Jones

Year 1, then adding an extra year every 12 months. Preparing materials for bilingual programs became harder and more complex beyond those initial grade levels. Table 2.1 gives a brief listing of the first NT programs, indicating the years they commenced.

Following the wording of the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII ESEA), and advice from the Watts Committee (Advisory Group 1975, p. 1), this working definition was adopted by the Northern Territory Education Division for its bilingual-bicultural programs:

Bilingual education is the use of two languages, one of which is English, as mediums of instruction for the same pupil population in a well-organised program which encompasses part or all of the curriculum and includes a study of the history and culture associated with the mother tongue. A complete program develops and maintains the children’s self-esteem and the legitimate pride in both cultures.

The general aims of the bilingual programs as set out in 1973 were:

- (1) To present subject matter of the school program in the language most suitable for the instructional purpose, bearing in mind the language proficiency of the children and the special needs of specific areas of study.
- (2) To develop competency in reading and writing in the Aboriginal language.
- (3) To develop competency in reading and writing in English.

- (4) To develop sufficient skill in the use of oral English before attempting to teach specific subject areas in that language.
- (5) To foster greater proficiency in school work, and better understanding of it, by use of the Aboriginal language where appropriate.

These aims were “not arranged in any particular order”. (McKay, this volume, has further to say about the aims and how they were changed).

Missionary Linguists Provided Considerable Assistance

Bilingual teaching in English and an Aboriginal language had been introduced by missionaries at various places in Australia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These pioneering efforts are outside the scope of this book—which is to examine *government* policy and practice with respect to NT bilingual education—but they were of foundational importance nonetheless.

A fuller treatment of this subject would explore the pioneering roles missionary linguists played in conceptualising team teaching (Joy Kinslow-Harris), developing the first orthography (Beulah Lowe), formulating the key reading program used in the early years (Sarah Gudschinsky), preparing conversational lessons (Beulah Lowe, Joyce Ross), as well as the grammars, lexicons and primers that were to prove indispensable in the early years and were innovated over time (see Murray, this volume). McKay (this volume) alludes to some of these efforts. With respect to the various missions and missionaries concerned, this short overview only hints at the range of work undertaken to facilitate the use of vernacular languages in schools such as Yirrkala, Mililingimbi, Goulburn Island, and Bathurst Island.

Just as SAL was established to assist with the linguistic work needed to support bilingual education, it became the role of Batchelor College not only to offer a range of vocational training for Aboriginal people but to provide the qualified teachers, literate in a vernacular language, that Watts, McGrath and Tandy (Advisory Group 1973) had called for (see Disbray and Devlin, this volume). Uibo (1993, p. 17) notes that

The large intake of assistant teacher trainees for the commencement of the 1974 academic year, the year the assistant teacher course moved to Batchelor, reflected the interest and enthusiasm in the remote communities by Aboriginals to take on the extra responsibilities associated with teaching in the bilingual program.

In 1974 a ‘crisis of stagflation’ began occurring in developed countries, including Australia, resulting in increased inflation, more unemployment, an imbalance in fiscal accounts and negative growth. One contributing factor had been the sharp rise in oil prices initiated by OPEC. The resulting global recession stymied the growth needed to finance Whitlam’s initiatives, which had included an improved deal for Aboriginal people, expanded industrial training, a larger

university sector, and more regional development. Nonetheless, six new bilingual programs were commenced in 1974:

- (1) Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) started a Kunwinjku and English program.
- (2) At Shepherdson College, Galiwin'ku, a bilingual program in Gupapuyŋu and English was introduced into Year 1 and Year 2. Adult education and linguistic work also began in Djambarrpuyŋu.
- (3) St Therese's (now Murrupurtiyanuwu) began a Model 1 program in Tiwi and English.
- (4) At Yayayi (Papunya outstation) a Pintupi-Luritja and English program was introduced.
- (5) Yirkala School commenced a bilingual program in Gumatj and English.
- (6) Yuendumu School began a Warlpiri and English program.

In June 1974, at the invitation of the NT Department of Education, two linguists—Geoff O'Grady from the University of Victoria, British Columbia in Canada and Ken Hale from MIT in the US—visited four of the new bilingual programs in operation, and one in preparation. A report of their visit, *Recommendations concerning bilingual education in the Northern Territory*, was released on July 1 and tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament by Kim Beazley Snr, the Minister for Education, on November 12 1974 (O'Grady and Hale 1974).

The report included 25 recommendations to government. One (#18) was “That the introduction of literacy in English be adjusted according to the proficiency of children in vernacular literacy and English” (O'Grady and Hale 1974, p. 5). These scholars emphasised “the academic promise of bilingual education”, which was that “vernacular literacy greatly accelerates the acquisition of basic literacy skills”.

Following their visits the authors stated that they were “extremely impressed with the Northern Territory Bilingual Program—so much so that we are inclined to assert that this program constitutes one of the most exciting educational events in the modern world” (O'Grady and Hale 1974, p. 1). With some prescience they added, “It is, of course, just beginning and has a long and difficult road ahead of it”.

The two linguists asserted that “one of the goals of bilingual education should be to enable Aboriginal communities to gain local control over the education of their children and young adults with the role of non-Aboriginals becoming more consultative in nature” (O'Grady and Hale 1974, pp. 3–4). Unfortunately, this just did not happen over the decades that followed, despite efforts by Aboriginal leaders, educators and community members to achieve this. (See also individual chapters by Disbray and Devlin, Stockley and Christie in this volume). If anything the role of non-Aboriginals became more and more directive. Another important goal (p. 15) was that of “enabling an Aboriginal scholar to write or talk about literally any subject under the sun”.

Stagflation was not the only problem to limit the scope of what government could provide in 1974. All areas of activity were impacted by the natural disaster that occurred later in the year, for on Christmas Eve, 1974, Darwin was devastated by Cyclone Tracy.

In early 1975 Hedley Beare, Director of NT Education, who greatly assisted the people of Darwin in the aftermath of the cyclone, left the Northern Territory. James (Jim) Eedle was appointed to the Commonwealth Department of Education as First Assistant Secretary with responsibility “for all school education in the Territory during a period of rapid change and growth” (Carment et al. 2008, p. 168).

In March 1975 Film Australia spent 3 weeks on location at Mililingimbi, Yuendumu and Yayayi shooting footage for the film *Not to lose you my language*, but they did not record any reading or writing in English, as the programs had not advanced that far yet, as mentioned earlier.

It should be noted that pilot bilingual programs had commenced in the NT at the same time as the School-based Curriculum Development model was being introduced. Ten years later this was described by the head of the NT Education Department as “a disastrous situation” (memo from Geoff Spring to Janet Margon, February 2, 1983, NTDE File 14/81 Part II f. 152). This meant that, with respect to some areas of school operation, teachers had to be the pioneers to some extent. (See also Graham and Murray, this volume). Off-the-shelf answers to teaching-learning questions were not so readily available. In setting up these pilot programs, international advice had to be sought.

The bilingual program had few supporters in the Department hierarchy above PEO level (Harris and Devlin 1999). Virtually since their establishment bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory were opposed by most senior education officers.

Nonetheless, three NT schools began bilingual programs in 1975. Pularumpi (formerly Garden Point) commenced one in Tiwi and English, but it only lasted two years. Bamyili pre-school began an experimental oral Kriol program. Numbulwar commenced an official bilingual program in Nunggubuyu and English at its pre-school (Lewis et al. 1975; Nicholls 1994; also Carr, Stansell, Wilkinson this volume).

Late in 1975 there was a move within the Department of Education to reduce the bilingual program to a small pilot project (Harris and Devlin 1999). This proposal was set out in a document which ‘fell off the back of a truck’ and reached schools. David McClay, Principal of Mililingimbi School, publicly challenged the Secretary of the NT Department of Education at the annual bilingual staff conference, held that year at St. John’s College. The Secretary denied any such plans and confirmed Departmental support for the program. Among the reasons the program wasn’t toppled then, these seem to be likely explanations: (1) It was imagined that there would be a loud outcry from academics ‘down South’; (2) it was thought there would be a huge revolt on the part of Aboriginal schools; (3) bilingual advisors and linguists in the Department were highly qualified and the hierarchy assumed they knew more than they actually did; (4) there was respect for the obvious hard work and commitment of school staff; and (5) during the first few years of the program, there were annual Territory-wide conferences where many staff could meet for mutual support and ideas-sharing. These in turn created a wide basis of support for the program.

From August 1976 onwards NT bilingual programs entered a consolidation phase. ‘Consolidation’ was essentially understood to mean that there was no money

available to establish new programs. On August 16, 1976 James Eedle, the Secretary of the Department of Education, directed that “Further expansion be limited and existing programs be consolidated and evaluated prior to an eventual decision as to which should be maintained indefinitely” (Eedle 1976, p. 2). He also called for “a shift in emphasis so that the bilingual programme is recognised as providing a bridge to English once lasting grounding in the local language has been established” (Eedle 1976, p. 2)

Self-determination

The Prime Minister (Whitlam) had stated on April 6, 1973 that “The basic object of my government’s policy is to restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs”. He went on to say that: “An opportunity for self-determination and independent action would serve little purpose if Aboriginals continued to be economically and socially deprived. The Government therefore plans to help them as individuals, groups or communities, in crafts, trades and professions and as business entrepreneurs” (quoted by Dawkins, in Commonwealth 1975). So self-determination was a key framework influencing government thinking. For example, the Whitlam Government officially handed back land to the Gurindji people at Daguragu on August 16, 1975. This was in line with the Government’s view that it was important to restore “to the Aboriginal people their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs”.

Monolingual, monocultural attitudes and mindsets did not disappear when bilingual education was introduced in 1972. For a time though, during Whitlam’s brief ascendancy, they were not so readily apparent. In time they soon resurfaced.

After the Whitlam Government lost power in November 1975 as a result of a constitutional crisis, this principle of self-determination was set aside. The Liberal and National Country Party Government announced that it supported self-management instead, declaring “Aborigines and Islanders should be free as other Australians to determine their own varied futures”.

Conclusion

The early 1970s could be regarded as a fragile beginning for bilingual education in the NT; although a honeymoon period in some ways, there was a natural disaster to contend with. Several programs had been established in 1973 and 1974, but after Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Eve 1974, time had to be set aside over the next few years for rebuilding. In addition, the program was always politically vulnerable, given the number of politicians and bureaucrats who were opposed to it.

Setting up bilingual programs in the Northern Territory turned out to be a formidably challenging exercise. Devlin (2011) has explained another reason why:

Australia took the plunge in 1973 when it initiated bilingual education in the Northern Territory. The task of setting up new language programs was logistically challenging, for sufficient materials had to be written and printed. Appropriate specialist staff needed to be appointed—literacy workers, literature production supervisors, linguists, teacher-linguists—to support the other regular school staff. A number of languages were spoken by at least a few thousand people: Pitjantatjara, Murrinh Patha, Arrente, Warlpiri, Tiwi and the Yolngu Matha dialects, for example. However, these languages were really only known by the speakers themselves and by a few non-Aboriginal people such as missionaries and ex-patrol officers. Few written materials in those languages existed.

Economic problems (stagflation in particular), a natural disaster (the cyclone) and a political crisis (the dismissal of the Federal Government in November 1975) were not the only challenges limiting the growth of bilingual education in remote NT schools in the years that followed.

Acknowledgments Parts of this chapter draw on “The Northern Territory Bilingual Education Program: Some historical reflections”, dated July 12, 1999, by Stephen Harris and Brian Devlin.

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History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory
People, Programs and Policies

Devlin, B.C.; Disbray, S.; Devlin, N.R.F. (Eds.)

2017, XXVII, 375 p. 22 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-2076-6