



Evidence, policy and the 'Step' model of bilingual education in the NT: A brief outline

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[This short paper is based on a presentation given at a Public Forum in Darwin on September 9, 2010. Courtesy copies of an earlier version have been sent to the present and former NT education ministers to acquaint them with the issues raised. Comments, critical or otherwise, on the matters raised here are welcome. Please send them to brian.devlin@cdu.edu.au.]

The purpose of this outline

From conference presentations to book publication

Over the last 18 months or so the author and various other researchers (including Simpson, Caffery & McConvell , 2009) have drawn attention to the weakness of the NT Government case against the ‘Step’ model of bilingual education. The ideas summarised in this short paper will be more fully developed as a chapter in an edited book to be published by ACER early next year. The matters covered here important, for people have been transferred, staff at Literature Production Centres have been directed to work in classrooms, resources have been diverted and Indigenous teachers have been marginalised—all on the basis of dubious claims, the questionable interpretation of national test scores (NAPLAN, 2008), the selection of an invalid school sample for comparative purposes and incorrect basic arithmetic.

The key events to be examined

The 2008 NAPLAN test summary	The ‘English first’ rule	Data on bilingual schools
Released on September 12, 2008	Suddenly announced by the former Minister of Education on October 14, 2008, after little or no consultation with remote area school staff. The former Minister of Education claimed that she was not dismantling bilingual education, but acknowledged that ‘step model’ programs did not fit within the framework she was advocating.	Prepared by NT DET on October 26, tabled in parliament on November 26, 2008. The following day, the Hon Marion Scrimgeour explained that the this data document provided the evidence on which her policy was based.
Mean scores were presented as ranges to allow for standard error in the method of measurement. In the NT the standard deviation of the sampling distribution is higher than for other state and territory jurisdictions.	In November 2008 NT DET prepared a draft policy statement that exempted pre-school and non-government schools. The Minister’s accompanying statement was not released.	In early 2009 the author advised politicians and senior officials that the data document was “incomplete, selective, erroneous and biased”. He explained that it was too insubstantial a basis on which to initiate a major policy shift that imposed compulsory changes on remote rural schools (Devlin, 2009a). Senior officials agreed.
Standard deviation and the possibility of standard error in the measurement were ignored when NAPLAN test scores were presented in the Data in Bilingual Schools document (November, 2010). This was not in accordance with NAPLAN reporting protocols.	In January 2009 DET’s final version removed the two exemptions mentioned above.	Now that the MySchool site allows individual school NAPLAN scores to be accessed and compared, it is apparent that some key claims made in the November 2008 document are open to question. In view of the importance of this evidence base, given the policy decision it is said to justify, the author believes that some open discussion of this issue is warranted.

One consequence of this sequence of events since September 2008 is that inaccurate and exaggerated claims concerning the comparative performance of school-based bilingual programs have put the staff who work there and their communities at a disadvantage. The author believes that the real issue for the Department of Education and Training is the cost and complexity of lifting both performance standards and pupil attendance rates across remote schools. Bilingual education is a decoy. Since only around 1 in 5 remote students were attending schools with bilingual programs in 2008, to imply that a few bilingual-biliteracy programs have somehow contributed to the disappointing system-wide performance indicated by the NAPLAN results is just a major, unwelcome and divisive distraction. It is a red herring that has divided people who should be working together with a sense of common purpose.

The author is committed to improving the English language proficiency skills of students. He has spent more than 30 years in the NT doing this work with Indigenous teachers, tertiary students and others. He is convinced that the aim of achieving higher English standards will not be achieved by a one-size-fits-all, top-down policy mandating four hours of English in the morning at the expense of schools with step bilingual programs, some of which have been performing creditably when well supported. Just as an illustration, consider the comparative performance of Yirrkala last year on the Year 9 reading test (below). It doesn't prove anything. It cannot be advanced as a reason for the superiority of the bilingual approach. On the other hand, it is an example that does not sit well with the Government's repeated claims to the contrary.

Comparison of Year 9 Reading scores in 2009 (Source: MySchool, 2009)

'Non-bilingual schools'	School means	'Bilingual schools'	School means
Alekarengce CEC	322	Lajamanu CEC	300
Angurugu CEC	410	Maningrida CEC	365
Borroloola CEC	344	Milingimbi CEC	323
Gapuwiyak CEC	401	OLSH Thamarrurr CEC	373
Kalkaringi CEC	330	Shepherdson College	354
Ngukurr CEC	361	Yirrkala CEC	428
Ramingining CEC	402	Yuendumu CEC	355
Group school means	258.8	Group school means	355.9

Yananyumul Mununggurr was a Year 4/5 student in the bilingual program at Yirrkala, when the author started working there as the teacher-linguist in 1979. She was a member of the *Ngurula* ('seabird', 'tern') group in her class, able to read and write in both languages. She learnt to write in Yolngu Matha before bridging to English literacy. Now head of the Laynhapuy Homeland Association, and an articulate spokesperson in Yolngu Matha and English, she is a successful leader, and a role model for young people in north-east Arnhem land. Let us put our combined energy into encouraging the emergence of more, similarly skilled individuals, rather than denigrating the program that has helped to produce them.

Data in bilingual schools (2008) was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on November 26, 2008 as evidence to support the NT Government's decision to phase out 'step' model bilingual programs the previous month. It claimed that, compared to 'non-bilingual' schools, 'bilingual' schools achieved better academic outcomes on only three of the 20 items in the 2008 national literacy and numeracy tests; namely, Year 3 Grammar, Year 3 Reading and Year 5 Grammar. Using MySchool data, Devlin (2010) has checked the accuracy of that claim and found that the authors had neglected to mention a few other cases where the bilingual group did as well or better. For example, see the results below for Year 3 Spelling, Year 3 Numeracy, Year 7 Numeracy, Year 9 Grammar and Punctuation.

The case against the Step Model is quite specific and easily tested

Disconfirming evidence

As this is just intended to be a brief outline, only a few tables have been set out below. However, they should be sufficient to show the extent to which the anti-'Step Model' case seems to rest on a faulty interpretation of the 2008 NAPLAN data.

#1 Year 3 spelling				
Non-bilingual	School means	Bilingual	School means	
Alekarenge CEC	212	Lajamanu CEC		
Angurugu CEC	186	Maningrida CEC	202	
Borroloola	203	Milingimbi CEC	223	
Gapuwiyak CEC	186	OLSH Thamarrur CEC	198	
Kalkaringi CEC	197	Shepherdson Coll CEC	195	
Ngukurr CEC	229	Yirrkala CEC		
Ramingining CEC	220	Yuendumu CEC		
*Xavier		*Numbulwar	297	
Group School Mean	204.7	Group School Mean	223	

#3 Year 7 numeracy				
Non-bilingual	School means	Bilingual	School means	
Alekarenge CEC	239	Lajamanu CEC	363	
Angurugu CEC		Maningrida CEC	399	
Borroloola	394	Milingimbi CEC	362	
Gapuwiyak CEC	380	OLSH Thamarrur CEC	344	
Kalkaringi CEC	386	Shepherdson Coll CEC	417	
Ngukurr CEC	366	Yirrkala CEC	323	
Ramingining CEC	386	Yuendumu CEC	311	
*Xavier	368	*Numbulwar	361	
Group School Mean	359.9	Group School Mean	360	

#4 Year 9 Grammar & Punctuation				
Non-bilingual	School means	Bilingual	School means	
Alekareng CEC	164	Lajamanu CEC		
Angurugu CEC		Maningrida CEC	252	
Borroloola	221	Milingimbi CEC	271	
Gapuwiyak CEC		OLSH Thamarrur CEC	224	
Kalkaringi CEC		Shepherdson Coll CEC	414	
Ngukurr CEC	297	Yirrkala CEC	368	
Ramingining CEC	230	Yuendumu CEC		
*Xavier	382	*Numbulwar		
Group School Mean	258.8	Group School Mean	305.8	

Devlin (2009) explained why this sample of 16 schools selected by NT DET was invalid. Two of those reasons are indicated in the table below: Numbulwar did not have a bilingual program; Xavier did not have any primary classes and so its students did not even sit for the Year 3 or Year 5 NAPLAN tests! Also, its feeder school, Murrupurtiyanuwu, had a bilingual program, so Xavier students benefitted from their earlier learning in that program. Jane Simpson (pers. comm.) questions whether the ‘like’ schools are that similar. At Alekareng, for example, most children are speaking a creole, not traditional languages. This makes their situation less comparable to Yuendumu CEC.

*Schools in NT DET's comparative sample by grade range and program type
(Source: MySchool, 2008)*

'Non-bilingual schools'	Grades (Program)	'Bilingual schools'	Grades (Program)
Alekareng CEC	P-9 (xBL)	Lajamanu CEC	P-9 (Biling)
Angurugu CEC	P-9 (xBL)	Maningrida CEC	P-12 (Biling)
Borroloola CEC	P-9 (xBL)	Milingimbi CEC	P-9 (Biling)
Gapuwiyak CEC	P-9 (xBL)	Numbulwar CEC	P-9 (Revitalisation)
Kalkaringi CEC	P-12 (xBL)	OLSH Thamarrur CEC	P-12 (Biling)
Ngukurr CEC	P-9 (xBL)	Shepherdson College	P-12 (Biling)
Ramingining CEC	P-12 (xBL)	Yirrkala CEC	P-12 1 (Biling)
Xavier CEC	7-11 (xBL)	Yuendumu CEC	P-9 (Biling)

Recommendations

1. The four-hours-of-English policy should be reviewed in the light of these findings since the exaggerated claims which were put forward to justify its introduction have now been disproved.

2. The data document should be rescinded.

3. A bilingual program needs to be rigorous and well-supported. For advice on how to achieve this see the Bilingual handbook update (NT DEET, 2006) and two recent Catholic Education Policy documents: Language teaching policy for Indigenous Catholic Community Schools in the NT. (2008-2012) and Guidelines for Indigenous Catholic Community schools with bilingual education programs.

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