



# Australian Society for Indigenous Languages

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releasing the power of words



8 March 2014

Indigenous Education Review Team  
Department of Education,  
GPO Box 4821,  
Darwin NT 0801

Re: DRAFT REPORT on the *Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*  
by Bruce Wilson, The Education Business (2013)

To the Review Team,

It is timely to have a Review of Indigenous Education in the NT with the ongoing deterioration in performance in the education sector since 2000, and even more so since 2008. With the recent change in government it is entirely appropriate to do a Review at this time.

AuSIL has over 50 years of service in indigenous communities around Australia (both Aboriginal and Torres Strait), and we have recognised expertise and experience behind the insights that we share with this Review. To get an overview of the language communities where we have worked, and a sample of some resources AuSIL has produced, see our website at: [www.ausil.org.au](http://www.ausil.org.au).

AuSIL has repeatedly offered to sit at the table with the policy-makers, educators, Indigenous leaders, and other stakeholders to develop *positive* long-term approaches and solutions to achieve better educational outcomes that are respectful of Indigenous languages and cultures, and also help more Indigenous students reach higher levels of education, better English proficiency and better English literacy—consistent with a huge body of language-in-education research from Australia and around the world. The offer still stands.

Some of the information in the Draft Review is helpful, and we support and even applaud some of the recommendations.


However, this present Draft Review has been quite hasty and is so full of serious omissions on core aspects of the ‘Indigenous’ part of Indigenous Education, that it is also deserving of some fairly harsh criticism. It does not show due diligence of being informed by the very significant bodies of research in several disciplines that make “Indigenous education” different from “mainstream education”. It is also full of internal contradictions and methodological problems, some of which are identified below. I attended the Darwin consultation, and many of the verbal concessions were at odds with the written Draft. I address primarily what is in the written Draft.

The Review correctly identifies constant shifts in policies, approaches, and programs as contributing to making many aspects of Indigenous education even worse. To counter that, the Review advocates locking in its recommendations for at least 10 years. *If* those recommendations were actually informed by the research and based on long-term understanding and on-going consultation with the stakeholders, and had been pilot tested to ensure they “got it right”, that might be a good idea. However, this hasty Review has so many glaring omissions, had only trivial “consultation”, and is clearly uninformed by the research that speaks to the core business of the ‘Indigenous’ side of Indigenous Education, that **to follow its recommendations would be educationally disastrous, socially destructive, morally reprehensible, and economically wasteful.**

Quite honestly, this Review needs to go back to the drawing board. It is advocating uninformed approaches that go against over 60 years of research and over 1200 case studies in the NT, Australia, and abroad. It is uninformed about what actually works in the long term for students in remote communities who grow up speaking a different language in the home and community than the language of instruction used in school (in this case Standard Australian English). The Review dismisses several approaches that the Review itself acknowledges are evidence-based, and dismisses them by declaration, without explaining the rationale behind the cavalier dismissals. The Review makes several assumptions that fly in the face of the research, and are shown to be false in this submission. The Review identifies things such as social dislocation as contributing to poor attendance and poor performance among Indigenous students, and yet bewilderingly recommends shutting down secondary schools in remote and very remote communities and sending students from those communities away to boarding facilities in the towns—which clearly exacerbates the problem of social dislocation and will be even more costly to society down the road! One can't help but wonder if that recommendation is driven by an economic mandate, rather than an understanding and respect for issues in Indigenous education. Boarding itself introduces a whole host of social and educational challenges, and while there are some bright spots, a little honesty says too often we don't get it right—at great cost to individuals, families, and communities. Not to mention that this recommendation is likely to make the already too high rate of suicide among Indigenous youth even worse.

The government should either ignore the recommendations in this Review and go back to the drawing board, or be willing to wear the legacy of being the government that did not help Close the Gap, but rather made a bad situation even worse—and did so against all the research. You cannot say that you did not know or were not told.

Respectfully submitted,



(Prof.) Charles E. Grimes, PhD

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- (Adjunct) Professor of Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, School of Culture, History & Language, College of Asia & the Pacific, Australian National University. Canberra

Attachments:

1. **Indigenous languages in education: what the research actually shows.** (AuSIL, 2009; *filename: 2 2009 Grimes-Indig Lgs in Ed-AuSIL.pdf*).
2. **AuSIL submission to 2011 HOR Inquiry.** (AuSIL, 2011; *filename: 3 AuSIL ind lgs to HOR inquiry Aug 2011.pdf*)
3. **Multilingual Education.** (SIL International, 2009; *filename: 4 SIL MLE 2009.pdf*)

cc:

1. Hon. Adam Giles, MLA, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory.
2. Hon. Peter Chandler, MLA, Minister for Education
3. Hon. Delia Lawrie, MLA, Leader of the Opposition, Northern Territory
4. Yurranydjil Dhurrkay, Board Secretary, Aboriginal Resource & Development Services, Inc.
5. Maratja Dhamarrandji, Board Member, Aboriginal Resource & Development Services, Inc.
6. Prof. Nicholas Evans, Linguistics, Australian National University
7. Prof. Jane Simpson, Chair of Indigenous Linguistics, Australian National University
8. Assoc. Prof. Brian Devlin, Associate Professor, Bilingual Education and Applied Linguistics, Charles Darwin University
9. Stuart McMillan, Moderator, Northern Synod, Uniting Church in Australia
10. Greg Thomson, Bishop, Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory
11. Eugene Hurley, Bishop, Roman Catholic Diocese of Darwin
12. Director, Australian Society for Indigenous Languages, Darwin.



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## Have we learned nothing about the ‘Indigenous’ part of “Indigenous education”?

AuSIL Submission regarding the DRAFT REPORT on the  
*Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*  
by Bruce Wilson, The Education Business (2013).

AuSIL submission drafted by: *Charles E. Grimes, PhD*

### **Outline:**

- A. [Overview:](#)
- B. [The ‘language factor’ in education](#)
- C. [The links between reading, language, and educational outcomes](#)
- D. [The cost factor](#)
- E. [Internal contradictions](#)
- F. [Problems with methodology](#)
- G. [Engaging Indigenous communities for long-term buy-in](#)
- H. [Conclusion](#)
- I. [List of References](#)

### **A. Overview:**

The Review was commissioned in July 2013, Mr. Wilson began working in August, and completed the DRAFT in December (p.19 of the DRAFT). So by any standards this Review must be seen as a rush job, and cannot be seen as an informed and considered assessment of the long term state of Indigenous Education in the NT, which is widely known to be very a complex issue (and is acknowledged as such by Mr. Wilson, pp.8, 49).

While it may be the case that Mr. Wilson has awareness of some aspects of *mainstream* education, it is quite clear from reading the Review that it is uninformed by (and in some cases woefully ignorant of) the principles, research, literature and direct relevance of several entire disciplines relating to *Indigenous* education—the intended focus of this Review. These missing fields or subfields include:

- sociolinguistics,
- language acquisition,
- English as a Second Language (ESL),<sup>a</sup>
- cross-cultural communication,
- multi-lingual education (MLE) in its many forms,<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ESL is used as a cover label throughout this submission to include approaches such as English as a Second Language, and English as an Additional Language, English as an Additional Dialect, etc.

<sup>b</sup> MLE in its many forms is backed up by over 60 years of research and over 1200 very significant cases studies, many of which are strongly “evidence-based”. The many forms and approaches of MLE are concerned with the very common situation in which the language of instruction (LoI) in the schools is different from the language(s) spoken in the home and the community. It is well documented that children in these contexts are disadvantaged and not going to perform as well as children who speak the standard language or language of instruction in the home. This is not new, and it is not

- multi-literacy,
- community development,  
(relevant to long-term approaches to education and also community engagement)
- anthropology (relevant to understanding Indigenous ideas about ‘knowledge’, and learning styles, as well as community engagement).

A PhD can be obtained in each of these fields, so they are not trivial, and the bodies of literature in each field is vast. The primary and secondary sources of literature relating to issues in Indigenous Education is also vast—from both Australia and abroad. Yet these are the very areas critically missing in this Review, or only touched on trivially, but so necessary to understanding the complex differences between mainstream education, and *Indigenous* education supposed to be the core focus of this Review. (Specifics are given below.)

Given that the “problem” of Indigenous education is not about “remote” and “very remote” education per se, but focuses around the performance, disadvantages and challenges for children who do not speak Standard (Australian) English in the home and practical programs and strategies for the Department of Education to work in respectful partnership with parents, schools and local communities to achieve significantly better outcomes, therefore it is quite striking that in point after point, and chapter after chapter, this Review ignores the critical roles of *language and social identity*, which any informed view would recognise are at the heart of *Indigenous* education. But Mr. Wilson does not seem to be aware of how much he does not know that is directly relevant to this core topic of this Review.

Another way of approaching the issue is to ask, “*What is different about ‘Indigenous Education’ from ‘mainstream education’?*” At the very least, one would have to acknowledge that in mainstream anglo Australia, the language of instruction (LoI) in the schools, the language spoken by the teachers, the language spoken in the home, the language spoken in the surrounding community and the language of the government and mass media are all Standard (Australian) English. In contrast, in remote and very remote communities in the Northern Territory, the language of instruction in the schools and the language of government and mass media is *different from* the language(s) spoken in the home, and the language(s) spoken in the surrounding community. While there are parallels with speakers of migrant languages, there are also differences. Among other things, immigrants and migrant communities tend to not have the degree of separation and isolation from speakers of Standard English experienced in many remote and very remote Indigenous communities in the NT, and in cities down south there are various ESL programs and funding committed to assisting migrants to learn English. So at the very least, *language* is at the core of what makes ‘Indigenous Education’ different from ‘mainstream education’. For decades it has been widely understood that *language, culture, and social identity* are inherently linked together. Yet in chapter after chapter, this Review only trivially touches on these core aspects of *Indigenous* education. For example, the topic of ‘language use’ is given only one paragraph (pp.28-29) in a 165-page report on Indigenous education.

The Review was also surprisingly<sup>c</sup> uninformed by the content and recommendations of the recent bipartisan House of Representatives inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, published (2012) as *Our Land, Our Languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*. That inquiry and many of the submissions associated with it are directly relevant and directly addressing Indigenous Education in the NT. Like several other sources, it is listed, but does not inform the Review. (Grimes & Grimes, 2011, is one such submission that addresses several aspects of Indigenous education in the NT.)

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unique to Australia. Well designed and well implemented MLE programs can significantly improve the Indigenous students' performance in these situations. To ignore the research suggests either professional negligence, or a willful agenda with other purposes rather than an honest review done with academic integrity.

<sup>c</sup> Two different linguist-educators independently suggested this Review was “irresponsibly uninformed” by the HOR inquiry, particularly since so many of the submissions to that Inquiry directly addressed the topic of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.



These missing disciplines are also the ones that would inform the government about causes and contributing factors behind things like poor attendance, poor English literacy rates, poor English proficiency, poor community engagement, as well as point towards practical solutions that have already been shown to foster better reading skills, fuller participation by more students through higher levels of education, and even improved English. They also provide principles and approaches to engaging the students, their parents, and the communities in ways that are much more likely to achieve positive results over time, so necessary for many of Mr. Wilson's recommendations, but so lacking in the Review. Such consultation, mutual respect, mutual understanding, and collective improvement in performance cannot be “mandated” (an oft repeated word in Mr. Wilson's recommendations). Anyone with long-term familiarity with Indigenous issues on the ground in the NT would immediately recognise that such a heavy-handed top-down approach to working with Indigenous communities is bound to fail.

Yet the Review approaches “Indigenous education” through the very limited spectacles of mainstream education, consequently leaving its recommendations with little or no credibility. An example is found on p.7, “*The recommendation is based on the view that Indigenous children learn English in the way that other children learn English.*” Statements like this miss the obvious point that most Australian children learn English because they grew up in an English speaking family and an English speaking community, and the schools had very little role in their learning to speak English—they came to their first day of school already speaking it! That particular “view” is behind several key recommendations. And Mr. Wilson's statement is also demonstrably *false*, defies common sense and simple observation. More importantly it shows an appalling ignorance of decades of serious qualitative and quantitative research in sociolinguistics, language acquisition, MLE, and ESL, among others.

Repeatedly throughout the Review, not only is there a lack of awareness of the critical roles of *language and social identity* to Indigenous education, but also there is a profound lack of respect and sensitivity for the inherent value of Indigenous languages, Indigenous identity, literacy in Indigenous languages, Indigenous culture, a social organisation that has worked for thousands of years, Indigenous cultural frameworks for problem-solving and resolving conflict, and Indigenous frameworks of knowledge and sources of knowledge on their own merits. For example, Etherington (2006) points out that in some Aboriginal societies, knowledge is understood to be ‘relational’ rather than ‘conceptual’. That the sort of issue that should inform this Review on *Indigenous* education, but does not. The validity of individuals and communities becoming fully bilingual, bicultural, biliterate, functioning and productive adult members of *both* their traditional societies *and* mainstream society seems to have no place in this Review. Yet research and experience show that the *either/or* (English-only) approach advocated in this Review rarely works. Indigenous language, culture, literacy and social identity are tolerated only insofar as they can be manipulated to achieve better outcomes in education (for the Department), and get Indigenous people into the mainstream workforce. Likewise training in cultural sensitivity for school principals is limited to how it can be used to manipulate communities. (p.103) “...*community engagement expectations of principals should be limited to engaging with key community members, communicating effectively with parents and the community about school expectations, and becoming familiar with local cultural practices with relevance to education.*” Shame! The arrogance, disrespect, and paternalism in this strongly assimilationist approach woven throughout the Review is quite disturbing, and has repeatedly been shown to result in destructive long-term trauma and social disengagement and instability. Have we learned nothing in the past 200 years? Are we really going back to the era and values portrayed in the movie “Rabbit-proof fence” and behind the trauma of the Stolen Generation?

While the DRAFT Review itself was a rush job, Mr. Wilson is nevertheless calling for mandating some very significant, costly, and far-reaching changes to education in the NT, and is asking that they be locked in for a period of ten years or more (at the Darwin “consultation” he suggested 25 would be better). Given that there are glaring holes in what should be considered part of the foundations or “core business” of Indigenous education, and some fairly serious internal

contradictions, it follows that several of Mr. Wilson's key recommendations will have to be discounted or discarded once these “core” areas of Indigenous education are given due consideration.

At the Darwin “consultation” on 24 February 2014, Mr. Wilson took great pains to say that either *all* of his recommendations need to be implemented as a coherent package, or *none* of them should be implemented—don't cherry pick.<sup>d</sup> Given that the Review is uninformed by the role of language and social identity as they relate very centrally to Indigenous education, and uninformed by several disciplines at the very heart of *Indigenous* Education, and has several internal contradictions, it is AuSIL's recommendation that Mr. Wilson's Review be either ignored or rejected outright. To implement his recommendations as a whole would be educationally and socially destructive, and morally reprehensible. Any government that does so must be prepared to wear the blame—as the government that made a bad situation even worse, choosing to ignore the relevant research, and perhaps prioritising budget over educational outcomes—with very serious consequences.

Rather than simply criticising, our preference at AuSIL would be to work positively and constructively with the government, educators and Indigenous leaders and other stakeholders to “get it right” and develop widely-tested long-term approaches that will get real and positive results. Mr. Wilson's Review “gets it wrong” on far too many points.

## **B. The ‘language factor’ in education**

The Review acknowledges (p.7) that, “*One of the key issues facing the Territory is the number and proportion of Indigenous children who enter school with little or no English. In some schools, the proportion of the cohort in this position approaches 100%.*” Yet the Review chooses to ignore the important role of the L1 language spoken in the home, widely known to be critically important to education in multilingual societies, and with no justification or explanation of the rationale, says (p.7), “*This review has made a decision to focus on the English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system.*” In one simple cavalier dismissal, Mr. Wilson thereby makes the entire Review to be peripheral to the real issues of Indigenous education, and its recommendations to be untrustworthy.

We have over 60 years of research (summarised in C. Grimes, 2009 with an extensive Bibliography), and over 1200 case studies (referred to by Prof. Joe LoBianco, Univ. Melbourne at a Public Forum on Indigenous Education at CDU sponsored by AuSIL, 9 September 2010), backing up our claim that the role of language, particularly the L1 language spoken in the home, is known to be critically important to education in multilingual societies. Mr. Wilson, on the other hand, is either uninformed by, ignorant of, or choosing to ignore the significant body of research (much of which is clearly “evidence-based”), and consequently many of his assumptions and recommendations fly in the face of this very significant body of research.

As an educator, Mr. Wilson should be aware of one of the most basic principles of education: *to work from what is known, to teach what is unknown*. A corollary of this summarises a lot of research in multilingual societies: *children learn best in the language they understand best*. In addition to the research summarised in Grimes (2009, and in process), Gove & Cvelich (2011:16-17) observe:

“An estimated 221 million school-age children speak languages not used as the primary medium of instruction in the formal school system (Dutcher, 2004), creating significant obstacles for teaching and learning (Pinnock, 2009a). These children arrive on the first day of school with thousands of oral vocabulary words and considerable phonemic awareness in their mother tongue, but are unable to use and build upon their skills. Dismissing this prior knowledge, and trying to teach children to read in a language they are not accustomed to

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<sup>d</sup> I found this a bit silly on the face of it, since recommendations such as: *teachers and principals working in remote or very remote areas could benefit greatly from orientation to the ethnolinguistic demographics of the NT, training in cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural living*, should be implemented regardless of whether Mr. Wilson's recommendations regarding secondary schools are implemented or not. AuSIL has been advocating for this kind of training and orientation for teachers for many years.

hearing or speaking, makes the teaching of reading difficult, especially in under-resourced schools. ... As a result, many students repeat grades or drop out of school, while those who stay in school lack basic literacy skills and therefore do not master further content knowledge.”

The World Bank (2005:1) puts it this way:

“Fifty percent of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition.”

Yet what Mr. Wilson is promoting is precisely what both research and experience in the NT show to be those “non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition.”

In multilingual societies, unless the policy-makers start informing themselves about language-in-education issues, the individual teachers at the community level will continue to be hamstrung in regard to being as effective as they could be, the children will continue to be seriously hindered in their learning and cognitive development, and poor test scores and other performance indicators will continue to be embarrassing—just as we have in the NT.

The research backing that up is not trivial—covering over a thousand case studies (see for example the bibliography in Grimes 2009). One study alone tracked 42,000 non-English speaking students using different ESL and bilingual approaches over 11 years (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Another single study analyses the data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups (Smits et al., 2008). In multilingual societies, there are many significant and long term benefits to education, development, and society at large if the policies, curricula, and teacher training understand and incorporate language-in-education issues.

“Children learn better if they understand the language spoken in school. This is a straightforward observation borne out by study after study (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Dutcher, 1995; Patrinos and Velez, 1996; Walter, 2003). Even the important goal of learning a second language is facilitated by starting with a language the children already know. Cummins (2000) and others provide convincing evidence of the principle of interdependence—that second language learning is helped, not hindered by first language study. This leads to a simple axiom: the first language is the language of learning. It is by far the easiest way for children to interact with the world. And when the language of learning and the language of instruction do not match, learning difficulties are bound to follow.”

*(World Bank 2006:3)*

“In countries with linguistically diverse populations, language of instruction policy and practice may hinder the learning process if students are taught at school in a language different from the mother tongue they speak at home and if they are not yet literate in their mother tongue. The process takes longer in many low-literacy environments, where children are not exposed to print before they are challenged to begin reading.”

*(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:7)*

“The most powerful factor in predicting educational success for minority learners was the amount of formal schooling they received in their L1.” *(Thomas and Collier, 1997, reporting on an 11-year study of 42,000 minority language speakers in the USA.*

“Despite growing evidence that mother tongue based bilingual or multilingual education is crucial to improving education access and quality, (UNESCO, 2008; Heugh et al., 2007; Alidou et al., 2006; Fafunwa et al., 1989; Smits et al., 2008), implementation of mother tongue-based education policies continues to be hampered by political debates that are not focused on what best facilitates children’s learning.”

*(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:17)*

All of the above quotations appear to be addressing the multilingual and educational situation and challenges and responses in which we find ourselves in the NT. Unfortunately the policy-makers in

the NT keep promoting approaches that are not educationally sound and almost guarantee poor results.

When educational policies in multilingual societies try to force education to happen exclusively or primarily in the national language (e.g. English), the results are usually quite disappointing and often disgraceful (as in the NT).

Then, because the children are clearly not learning very well, decision-makers often jump to the conclusion that it is “because these children don't speak the national language very well.” And then they further strengthen or reinforce already uninformed and destructive language of instruction policies that require teachers to use the national language more, and sometimes even ban the use of local languages in the classroom or on the school grounds. While this reflects experiences in many multilingual societies around the world, again it sounds like it is describing the NT.

What they don't realise is that this approach will give them even worse results. It may make intuitive sense, and even appeal to mainstream voters—but it goes against all the research. The best way to help minority language students in multilingual societies learn well *and* attain competency in the national language is through well designed, well implemented, and well resourced multi-lingual education (MLE) programs that have political will backing them up. Otherwise only a few students will succeed, and the majority will be left behind.

See SIL (2008) for more details about other important components of good MLE programs that build a strong foundation to bridge from L1 (Indigenous languages) to L2 (English) and promote English proficiency.

Language-in-education experts are repeatedly finding that deliberate and systematic approaches to MLE deliver much more significant and satisfactory results than ad hoc approaches, or poorly informed, poorly planned, poorly implemented, and under-resourced programs that only pay lip-service to the idea of multi-lingual education, or are undermined by decision-makers that do not understand or support the approach. Gove & Cvelish (2011:44-45) observe:

“Thorough planning in the implementation of language policies is important for ensuring that all actors (teachers, parents, school principals) understand the value of mother tongue-based education and that sufficient resources will be allocated to support effective implementation. This process should involve consultations with language specialists, NGOs, and teachers; advocacy to parents on the benefits of mother tongue instruction; meaningful investment in materials, such as leveled readers in local languages; training for teachers in local language instruction; and development of reading instruction methodologies that are appropriate for specific languages (Pinnock, 2009b). The growing availability of assessments and learning materials in local languages is an important resource for practitioners working to improve instruction in multilingual environments.”

The NT already has 30 years of experience, materials, and some trained teachers remaining. We are not starting from nothing. And there has been enough attention paid in recent years to MLE approaches that *we can do it even better now than we have in the past*, as long as there is long-term political will and funding. In the long run a well designed and well implemented MLE approach will be much less costly, less destructive, and achieve better results than the uninformed approach(es) recommended by Mr. Wilson.

In addition to children in remote and very remote communities speaking Aboriginal languages in the home and community, there are also large numbers of Indigenous students in the NT who speak Kriol or some variety of Aboriginal English in the home and community. These sorts of non-standard varieties of standard languages require special attention and considerations in education (see: Reynolds, 1999; Siegel, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b). This is another area of Indigenous education not addressed in Mr. Wilson's Review.

Mr. Wilson correctly advocates improved teaching and awareness of phonemics and phonics. That is helpful in *oral* learning of the similarities and differences in both English and Aboriginal languages. However, Mr. Wilson does not address the discrepancy for educational purposes



(learning to read and write) of most Aboriginal languages having phonemic or near-phonemic *orthographies*, whereas the English orthography is not at all phonemic, and there are significant challenges in transferability (Smalley, 1963; Grimes, 2011).

Governments all over the world are sending mixed signals. On the one hand, maintaining indigenous languages and cultures is extremely important for the multi-billion dollar tourism industry. On the other hand, support and space for indigenous languages in the education sector does not exist, is trivial, or gets removed altogether—as we have seen repeatedly in the NT.

At the Darwin consultation, Mr. Wilson commented that the results that we have in the NT for Indigenous students in remote and very remote communities is equivalent to “third world” performances. That again shows how little he knows, and is an insult to a number of third world countries. For example, near neighbours such as the Philippines, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Indonesia, East Timor, and The Solomon Islands have or are implementing policies and programs that are much better informed, appropriate, and respectful for multilingual situations than what we have in Australia and the NT. If we are honest, *the NT is worse than third world*, and Mr. Wilson's recommendations will make us the brunt of even more ridicule. At this stage, the NT could learn a lot from the third world.

### **C. The links between reading, language, and educational outcomes**

The Review correctly identifies the important role of reading to early education. The problem is, the Review fails to understand the critical role of language as it relates to reading as foundational to all subsequent education. For example the recent research showing this link is summarised in the outstanding report written by Gove & Cvelich (2011):

“Children need to learn to read early to have success in school; success in school is a key factor to escaping poverty. Reading is a fundamental ability for higher learning.” (Gove & Cvelich, 2011:vi)

“Language of instruction policies and approaches do not meet children’s learning needs. While many factors affect education quality, *the language of classroom instruction fundamentally impacts whether a child is able to read and learn*. This is because learning in one’s first language is ‘essential for the initial teaching of reading’ (Dutcher & Tucker, 1997:36).” (Gove & Cvelich, 2011:16; *emphasis mine*)

“No matter the benchmark chosen for fluency and comprehension, if students are not reading with understanding by grade 2, this fact should act as a ‘warning light’ for their teachers and parents, and corrective action should be taken to remedy this lack by grade 3. ... a poor reader will struggle through every school day and be more likely to drop out, leaving behind potential education opportunities for the more immediate returns of employment or work in the home, perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of poverty.” (Gove & Cvelich, 2011:7)

The key phrase here is “reading with understanding”, which some educators also refer to as “reading for meaning”. In the context of the NT, with Indigenous students who speak languages other than Standard English in the home, this is possible to achieve by Year 2 through L1; it is quite difficult to achieve through L2 (Standard English). But once they can read in the L1, that skill transfers automatically to English as they continue to gain proficiency in it (dozens of studies have made this point that we learn to read only once; see bibliography in Grimes, 2009).

“A consistent pattern has been revealed: worrying proportions of students are not learning to read at all within the critical first two or three years of schooling.” (p.12) ... “Several major factors contribute to these shocking results, including lack of training and support for teachers, minimal instructional time, poorly resourced schools, absence of books in the home, and *problematic language of instruction policies and practices*.” (Gove & Cvelich, 2011:15; *emphasis mine*)

Positive results are being achieved by using well designed and well implemented MLE programs and targeted early reading programs. There are many examples from all over the world. Here are some specifics:

“In one study, analysis of data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups revealed that children who had access to instruction in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school. Conversely, lack of education in a child’s first language was a significant reason for children dropping out (Smits et al., 2008).” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:17 in footnote)*

“...participating students posted large reading gains in Hindi: the percentage of children who could previously read nothing dropped from 35% to 5%, and the percentage of children who could read a story or paragraph correctly increased from a combined 19% to 57% (Chavan, 2003).” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:38)*

“RTI found that after one-and-a-half years of intervention, students in the full treatment group outperformed their peers in all reading skills. The average student in the full treatment group (grades 2 and 3 combined) had increased their oral reading fluency and reading comprehension at four times the rate of students in the control group.” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:26)*

“Textbook provision continues to be woefully inadequate; reading books are even rarer, both in schools and homes. ... Yet children who report having reading books in the home, not just textbooks, are also more likely to be able to read. ... found that having a textbook boosted children’s oral reading fluency by 9.6 words per minute, and having other books at home boosted their fluency by 8.3 words per minute (Piper, 2010).” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:44)*

The assumption above is that these books are in the L1 language spoken in the home.

“Primary education programs that begin in children’s mother tongue help students gain early reading skills more quickly, as well as transfer key skills to a second language. When students learn in a language that is familiar to them, they also are more likely to attend school (Smits et al., 2008) and significantly less likely to drop out or repeat a grade—50% less likely to repeat in some bilingual schools in Guatemala (Bender et al., 2007; Patrinos and Velez, 2009). Importantly, classroom instruction in languages that are familiar to students raises their academic achievement and provides a foundation for learning in a second language (Heugh et al., 2007; UNESCO, 2008; Alidou et al., 2006; Fafunwa et al., 1989; Dutcher, 2004). Given this evidence, governments, donors, and other education stakeholders in many countries must implement and support policies and programs that provide children with the opportunity to learn to read in their mother tongue.” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:44)*

#### **D. The cost factor**

“Meanwhile, investments that are made—by donors, governments, and others—are wasted as millions of children are either excluded from school, drop out, repeat a grade, or fail to learn because they do not understand the language used in school.” *(Gove & Cvelish, 2011:17)*

Many concerns of decision-makers relate to cost. The World Bank (2005) notes that MLE programs are cost effective and cites case studies. Gove & Cvelish, (2011:45) also put figures to it:

“The challenges and costs that will be encountered are not insurmountable: recent analysis shows that a 4%–5% increase in a country’s education budget would cover the immediate costs associated with mother tongue instruction and reduce education costs in the long run. For example, in the case of a bilingual versus French-only program in Mali, costs were reduced by 27% and resulted in higher academic achievement (Bender et al., 2007; Heugh, 2006a).”

These are direct costs. When considering indirect cost benefits to society, the long-term impact of good MLE programs becomes even more significant and far-reaching. When more children learn better, stay in school longer, and reach higher levels of education, they also tend to participate more

fully in mainstream society, contribute into the economy, have reduced antisocial behaviour, and be less of a drain on the health and justice sectors.

## E. Internal contradictions

The Review has a number of internal contradictions and confusing signals. For example:

Mr. Wilson advocates an English-only approach to instruction in the classroom and curriculum (pp. 12, 13, 69). He dismisses the notion of bilingual education under various labels (p.61), without explaining his rationale or the research behind his unilateral decisions (i.e. argument by declaration). On the other hand, he acknowledges that “*there is evidence of the effectiveness of these approaches in some settings...*” (p.61), but he goes on to say “*the evidence does not support a continued focus in the Northern Territory.*” (p.61). The first use of the word ‘evidence’ is correct; the second is quite strange and contradictory. What evidence?

As mentioned above, Mr. Wilson clearly advocates an English-only approach (pp. 12, 13, 69). On the other hand he seems unclear about the merits of ESL approaches and how it fits into his recommendations (pp.12, 13, 62). But on p. 63 he says further study should be carried out to see how ESL approaches can be “supported and improved”. Also on p.63 he lists a number of programs that have “no robust research evidence” supporting them, in contrast with whole-school ESL approach which has “some evidence” to support it, and MULTILIT which is “supported by a robust base of research evidence” (p.63). Since MULTILIT is actually an MLE approach (which has been unilaterally dismissed on p.61), one wonders if Mr. Wilson actually understands the significance of the studies he cites, since this undermines some of his core assumptions and recommendations.

It is unclear what the views of the Review are towards the Accelerated Literacy approach (mentioned on pp. 40, 41, 57, 63, 64). One source assessed it as “evidence-based” (p.41), whereas another decided it “had no robust research evidence” (p.63). On the one hand, it failed because it was “complex” (p.63), while on the other hand it failed because Indigenous students don't speak English in the home (p.64).

The Review doesn't seem to have read with a critical eye some of the reports it cites. For example it quotes from or refers positively to the Masters (2011) report repeatedly (pp. 37-38, 39-40, 48, 61, 62) without understanding that Masters also wrote his report from the perspective of mainstream education, with blinders towards the multilingual composition of the NT, the role of language in education, and other issues related to Indigenous education. Like this present Review, the Masters Report has so many obvious omissions or blind spots that it is not to be trusted as representing the reality or complexities of Indigenous students in the NT. Mr. Wilson incorrectly assumes it has merit and is based on sound methodology.

At the Darwin consultation there was some verbal concession to the idea of space being made in remote and very remote schools for using the L1 (the language spoken in the home). But what Wilson clearly meant (without apparently understanding the differences) was using L1 in the classroom as a **subject of teaching**. In contrast, we find the more successful and structured multi-lingual education programs systematically use more than one language as:

- the language of **instruction** (LoI)
- the language of **literacy**  
(using material written in the language for reading, writing, spelling, punctuation.)
- the **subject** of study in the classroom  
(learning about the genius of its grammar, poetry, oral & written literature, history, worldview, etc.)

Again Mr. Wilson does not seem to know what he does not know. Language-in-education experts are repeatedly finding that deliberate and systematic approaches to MLE deliver much more significant and satisfactory results than ad hoc approaches, or poorly informed, poorly planned, poorly implemented, and under resourced programs that only pay lip-service to the idea of MLE approaches or are undermined by decision-makers that do not understand or support the approach.

Several of Mr. Wilson's recommendations decry the *variety* of approaches found in NT schools and advocate a common one-size-fits-all approach (despite the huge demographic and ethnolinguistic diversity in the NT). I found 13 instances of this. The general pattern seems to be that a lack of a common approach is viewed as inherently bad, whereas having a common approach is viewed as inherently good, regardless of whether you get it right or not. The problem is, each issue needs to be evaluated on its own merits. If we haven't got it right, we need space for creative thinking and innovation (which Mr. Wilson does make some space for in town schools, but not bush schools, which in reality have more diversity).

Mr. Wilson's use of the word 'literacy' is often imprecise. Most often it seems to refer to 'English literacy', and sometime 'English proficiency', without any apparent awareness that there may be L1 literacy (the language spoken in the home) happening side-by-side with English literacy. If by 'literacy' one means 'ability to read', then again Mr. Wilson shows his ignorance of decades of research which has convincingly demonstrated that the skill of reading itself transfers automatically to other languages (e.g. if you know how to read English, you don't have to learn how to read again to read Spanish, or Djambarrpuyṉu. And it works in both directions.)

Many of the recommendations are worded so vaguely that I am not sure I would know how to implement them. For example:

- p.10: "...including mandating evidence-based approaches for bush schools." Vague. How do you do this? What does it accomplish? How do you measure it? (I could choose to interpret this as mandating a good MLE program, since those are strongly evidence based, but I doubt that is what Mr. Wilson intends.)
- p.11: "*Develop a 10-year plan for Indigenous Education...*" Vague and contradictory. Mr. Wilson makes it clear he favours an English-only approach (by declaration), so he is not talking about what special approaches attending to language and cultural differences with the mainstream. Perhaps he is talking about "the education of Indigenous children" rather than "Indigenous education" as a specialised approach?
- p.11: "*Plan implementation carefully, aiming for slow and measured approaches...*" Given that the Review itself is hasty and uninformed, it seems a bit odd to tell others to take the time to "get it right" (although I agree with the intent).
- p.11: "*ensure that all research including that conducted by external agencies is aligned with Department priorities.*" Well, that sounds a bit sinister! One would not be amiss to think perhaps Mr. Wilson is advocating preventing research done with scientific integrity that might show what is really happening to Indigenous education and the education of Indigenous students. We certainly wouldn't want the truth to get out!
- and so forth, with recommendations throughout the Review.

Apparently Mr. Wilson knows what he means, but I often have to guess at what he means, even after reading the surrounding text. Perhaps it would be wise to check if DoE personnel would honestly know how to implement his recommendations before the final version of this Review is locked in.

## **F. Problems with methodology**

In comparing Indigenous students' performance in remote and very remote schools in the NT against a national average (p.12, 23, 33 [including the very central Figure 9], 57), Mr. Wilson does not seem to be aware that he may be comparing apples and oranges. The sociolinguistic make-up of schools and towns deemed 'similar', may actually be quite different. Many of the students in these NT schools speak an Aboriginal language not related to English. In contrast, many of their so-called 'counterparts' in other states speak Kriol, or one of several varieties of Aboriginal English—all very much related to English. (But just because they have some overlap with Standard English doesn't mean the speakers understand English.) So the issues relating to Indigenous education, English



literacy, and English proficiency in these communities are not at all ‘similar’ and one would not expect their scores to be similar. Mr. Wilson needs to explain to the readers why we should not dismiss these as talking about very different things.

Mr. Wilson appeals to the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) several times (pp.11-12, 24, 47) to show that Indigenous children are significantly behind their national counterparts on five different indicators.

1. Physical health and wellbeing;
2. Social competence;
3. Emotional maturity;
4. Language and cognitive skills;
5. Communication skills and general knowledge.

Any competent social scientist is immediately going to see that indicators 2-5 are prone to cultural bias in both *what* is assessed and *how* they are assessed. Add to this the fact that many of the children and parents have limited or no proficiency in Standard English. Therefore if Mr. Wilson is going to appeal to the AEDI for the plight of Indigenous children, he also needs to explain to the reader how cultural and linguistic factors have been accounted for and neutralised. Otherwise these figures are completely unreliable and paint a dramatically grimmer picture than reality. IQ tests and other assessment tools have also been shown to have cultural, racial, and sometimes urban biases built into them, so this is not an unknown phenomenon.

Mr. Wilson seems to over-use the term “evidence-based”. He uses it approximately 18 times. Sometimes he uses the term correctly, although he does not explain what he means by it. But sometimes it appears to be used inappropriately as a value-laden word to put a seal of approval on programs he wants to support, and dismiss things that are disfavoured, regardless of the weight of the “evidence-based” research behind them (e.g. MLE and ESL approaches, which have massive research behind them.) Each use of the term should be read critically. I would hope some of the occurrences would be removed before the final version.

Since the focus of the Review is supposed to be “Indigenous Education” it is curious that there seemed to be no attempt to see if there were any relevant trends in NAPLAN results in the under-resourced former bilingual schools since support was dropped in 2008. Several Figures in the Review looked at a snapshot of only one year and didn't distinguish former bilingual schools from others.

In contrast to the improved pass rates and decreased dropout rates reported elsewhere in the world with well-designed and well-implemented MLE programs, in Australia the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results posted on the [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au) website (*see table below*) show significant drops in attendance and literacy and numeracy scores in the Northern Territory *after* the government stopped bilingual programs in eight schools and changed to an English language of instruction policy—against the evidence (under-resourced bilingual schools were actually performing as good or better than fully resourced mainstream schools), against all the research, against all the recommendations of the experts, against the wishes of the communities involved, and against the recommendations of the NGOs and professional bodies. This disastrous policy change is detailed more fully in Simpson, Caffery, & McConvell (2009), and Devlin (2009, 2010).

| NT School  | indicator                     | still bilingual | no longer bilingual |                | % of drop ↓<br>in performance |
|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
|            |                               | 2008<br>scores  | 2009<br>scores      | 2010<br>scores |                               |
| Lajamanu   | Yr 3 reading                  | 96              | 43                  |                | 56%                           |
|            | Yr 3 writing                  | 184             | 89                  |                | 52%                           |
| Maningrida | attendance                    | 49%             | 39%                 | 38%            | 22%                           |
|            | Yr 5 writing                  | 290             | 209                 | 160            | 45%                           |
| Milingimbi | attendance                    | 64%             | 64%                 | 65%            | stable                        |
|            | Yr 3 reading                  | 120             | 218                 | 13             | 89%                           |
|            | Yr 3 writing                  | 221             | 160                 | 175            | 21%                           |
|            | Yr 3 punctuation<br>& grammar | 159             | 177                 | 26             | 84%                           |
|            | Yr 3 numeracy                 | 303             | 257                 | 219            | 28%                           |
| Yuendumu   | Yr 5 numeracy                 | 351             | 220                 | N/A            | 38%                           |
|            | Yr 7 writing                  | 377             | 253                 | 265            | 30%                           |

Data from: [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au) (accessed 27 August 2011)

We all know there are methodological problems with NAPLAN data. And we know they have a wide margin for error. But even allowing for a massive margin for error, the results posted are still statistically significant—and shameful. Yet Mr. Wilson does not compare the data of former bilingual schools with others before dismissing the approach without justification. Perhaps he does not see that as related to his core topic of “*Indigenous* education”?

If the NT government is concerned about the NAPLAN scores of very remote Indigenous schools skewing the average for the whole Territory, then the solution is to argue that these schools are so fundamentally different and a special case that it is not appropriate to include their scores in the NAPLAN results—*remove the scores, not the schools!*

### G. Engaging Indigenous communities for long-term buy-in

Anyone who has lived in the Territory and interacted with Indigenous communities over several years knows that meaningful consultation requires respect, relationships, an awareness of cross-cultural communication issues, time, patience, and a genuine listening ear. People with long-term experience in the Territory also know that programs that are mandated or superimposed or forced on Indigenous communities are likely to be met with indifference, non-participation, or even active resistance. They also know that 2-hour fly-in fly-out “consultations” are essentially meaningless.

Apparently Mr. Wilson is unaware of these patterns, and this is reflected in the tone of his report. For example, I found the words “mandate”, “mandating”, and “mandatory” used 46 times. I found the words “require”, “requiring”, and “requirement” used 104 times. And yet many of the recommendations in the Review are based on the express need for community involvement, support, cooperation, and engagement. Some, such as the recommendations relating to secondary schools and boarding facilities are quite significant. There is a serious problem here.

While AuSIL applauds the call for better cross-cultural training and orientation for teachers and principals, which is something we have advocated for years, we diverge from Mr. Wilson on several points:

- We see value and merit in Indigenous languages and cultures on their own merits.
- We see value and merit in teachers and principals learning Indigenous languages and cultures on their own merits, not for the purposes of manipulating the community to get on board with the DoE programs (p.103). That is morally despicable.
- We see value and merit in teachers and principals having respectful relationships with individuals in Indigenous communities for their own sake. Benefits for the education sector are secondary to the trust built through respect.
- Mr. Wilson puts the burden of providing “cultural” training on the Indigenous communities themselves. And if they can't provide it, it doesn't happen. AuSIL would put the primary

burden on the Department of Education or the Government<sup>e</sup> to routinely provide quality basic training and orientation for *all* teachers and principals in:

- the ethnolinguistic makeup of the Northern Territory;
- basic awareness of and appreciation for other (particularly Aboriginal) cultures;
- basic principles of cross-cultural communication;
- basic approaches and start-up skills to learning another language;
- awareness of some of the common sounds found in Indigenous languages in the NT;
- orientation to the basics of Aboriginal kinship systems;
- basic awareness of some differences between Standard English with Kriol and Aboriginal English;
- basic skills for living successfully and productively and safely in remote and very remote communities.

Attending to these issues in a well designed 2-week training course is likely to improve retention rates for teachers in remote and very remote communities, improve their levels of satisfaction with their work, and also improve the trust of the communities towards the government—saving the government piles of money in the long run.

## H. Conclusion

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire” (W.B. Yeats).<sup>f</sup> The discovery of the joy of learning, profound change, paradigm shifts, changing core values, and meaningful transformation is something that is far more likely to be triggered or experienced through the language of the heart (L1), than through an L2 that is only partially understood and partially mastered. Reading skills in the early years is the key to reaching higher levels of education in the later years. And learning to read well in the early years is best achieved through the L1 in multilingual communities. Using the L1 to learn the L2 in systematic ways (achieving English proficiency and English literacy) has repeatedly been shown to achieve better results than the L2 (English) only approach advocated by Mr. Wilson—which clearly goes against the research.

Mr. Wilson's Review consistently assumes an *either/or* approach to language and education. Research and experience tells us this will only help a very small percentage of students “succeed”, and will leave behind the large majority, causing further social and educational marginalisation. In contrast, both research and experience show us that a respectful *both/and* approach will help many more people function and contribute positively in both of their worlds—and in the long run be less costly.

Many governments want to see significant change, and some of this change may even be properly motivated by good development principles to empower local people to grow and participate in mainstream society in a sustainable way that respects local identity and values. However, as long as the language factor in education continues to be ignored (as in this Review), programs in the education, health, justice, and job sectors will continue to positively impact only a very small portion of society—and leave the majority behind.

The bottom line: Mr. Wilson has clearly not done his homework on the critical ‘Indigenous’ aspects of Indigenous education, and his recommendations should not be followed.

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<sup>e</sup> Since this is equally a need in the education, health, and justice sectors.

<sup>f</sup> Quoted in Gove & Cvelish, 2011, cover.

[http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoclib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/FC86CD8D88B6F79085257289007C4D87/\\$file/mali\\_education.pdf](http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoclib.nsf/DocUNIDViewForJavaSearch/FC86CD8D88B6F79085257289007C4D87/$file/mali_education.pdf) (accessed: 30 Aug 2011)

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