

## **‘The economic world of choice’: Mainstreaming discourses and Indigenous bilingual education in Australia 1998-99**

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Indigenous language bilingual schooling, introduced in Australia’s Northern Territory (NT) in 1973, was a reality for over twenty-five schools at the program’s height. Today, the language-of-instruction in these same settings is English only, with only 7 state schools operating bilingual programs. Overt Government hostility began with an attempt to defund Indigenous bilingual education in 1998-99. This paper argues that the discursive techniques used to justify these cuts were crucial to developing key themes in ‘mainstreaming discourses’ in Indigenous politics, which has rehabilitated assimilationist thinking in a neoliberal context through the 2000s and since. Using a discourse-historical method, this paper elucidates how mainstreaming discourses were constructed against bilingual education in the 1998-99 debate, and how they emphasized English-only education geared towards neoliberal assimilation for remote Indigenous communities. Indigenous bilingual education was conceived as part of ‘failed’ self-determination in remote Australia. This paper enhances understanding of the patterns and themes of mainstreaming discourses by tracing their genealogical development in this debate.

### **Author biographical details**

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We really need to take a good, cold look at what we’re doing in the bilingual program and see whether it’s okay. They agree that if they’re going to get on in today’s world, the economic world of choice, they need to be strong in English.

Loraine Braham, Northern Territory Minister for Aboriginal Development  
(Northern Territory Parliament, 1999)

A report on the first year of Indigenous bilingual education in Australia’s Northern Territory (NT) declared that it ‘might be the most exciting educational development in the world’ (1974, p. 1). After the new Whitlam Labor Government announced funding for programs in 1972, bilingual programs were trialled in five locations in 1973. On the back of local enthusiasm, twenty-five programs were built across Government (public), religious and independent schools (private) throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in trying conditions (Devlin et al., 2017). This paper focuses on the first overt attempt to abolish this program of Indigenous bilingual education and the debate surrounding it: an announcement by the NT’s Country Liberal Party (CLP) Government on 1 December 1998 that it intended to remove all special purpose funding for the programs and divert it into English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in 1999, as part of a reform package named *Schools our Focus* (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). This attempt was the first of several to disestablish the program, the most recent being the

‘First Four Hours policy’ which banned teaching in Indigenous languages in NT schools in the first four hours of the day between 2008 and 2012 (Anderson et al., 2017).

Using a discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2015) this paper reveals the construction of what I label ‘mainstreaming discourses’ through the 1998-99 debate over the proposed abolition of bilingual schooling. These discourses were constructed through Government statements about the proposed reforms, and consolidated through a Government-commissioned review, *Learning Lessons* (Collins & Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). These mainstreaming discourses posit education as a key vehicle to produce assimilation into an imagined market economy for remote Indigenous communities. I show how, in these discourses, bilingual education is presented as an obstacle, conceived of as a part of failed Indigenous self-determination experiments that have held back commercial economic development and wrongly prioritised Indigenous culture. Mainstreaming discourses provide the scaffolding for a neoassimilationist phase in the settler colonial relationship between the Australian state and Indigenous peoples (Morphy, 2008).

Mainstreaming has been used as both a label for the formal national Australian Government policy approach of moving Indigenous affairs funding away from Indigenous specific departments and funding streams into other, ‘mainstream’ Government agencies (Sanders, 2015), *and* as a general term to describe the wider ideological justifications for a process of normalization and assimilation that has characterized Indigenous policy for over two decades (Altman, 2014). Here, I clarify its use in the second sense, and develop a clearer set of themes that define mainstreaming discourses. By locating the emergence of three key themes of mainstreaming discourses

in the 1998-99 debate over Indigenous bilingual education, I show this policy moment to be an antecedent for the development of more widely recognised versions of these discourses that became commonplace in Australian Indigenous politics from the mid-2000s (Fforde et al., 2013; McCallum & Waller, 2020).

Scholars have often responded to policy hostile to Indigenous bilingual programs by advocating for bilingual education's pedagogical benefits for English language learning (Devlin, 2017; Harris, 1990; May, 2014; Simpson et al., 2009). But if attacks on bilingual education are centrally understood as undermining Indigenous-self-determination through processes of normalization and assimilation, a different response is required. Gomeri scholar Nikki Moodie (2018) has argued those researching Indigenous education should recenter the importance of self-determination, sovereignty, and survival in considering both the discursive and material operation of race and racism in education systems. This study, by tracing the genealogy of mainstreaming discourses and locating their development within anti-bilingual education policy moves, brings these wider sociopolitical questions of Indigenous-settler relations into view.

### **The discourse-historical method**

This research was motivated by an effort to understand the how anti-Indigenous bilingual education discourses have developed in Australia, how Governments have framed and justified moves to undermine and abolish Indigenous bilingual education programs, and how these may relate to wider questions of Indigenous-settler relations and governance including concepts such as self-determination and assimilation. I use a discourse-historical approach, informed by the work of Ruth Wodak (2015) and Norman Fairclough

(Wodak & Fairclough, 2013). Wodak argues that the systematic analysis of social and historical context is necessary to interpret and critique meaning. Following this, the study is framed by critical scholarship from Indigenous studies that explores the governance of Indigenous subjects through education, and emphasises the importance of education to wider questions of Indigenous-settler relations (Moodie, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2009). I borrow from Foucault the notion of discourse genealogy, or the reproduction of forms of knowledge through time (Fairclough, 1992), to explore the historical significance and antecedents of this moment of discourse shift in the making. The paper begins by exploring the existing understanding of the socio-political contests over Indigenous bilingual education in Australia, and of mainstreaming discourses and their rise in the 2000s. It then turns to the past to locate the origins of self-determination and Indigenous bilingual education in Australia as a response and alternative to assimilationism, but with different and sometimes contradictory goals and expectations between Government and Indigenous groups. Through a textual analysis, I then show how self-determination was rejected, and assimilationist ideology rehabilitated discursively in new ways in the 1998-99 debate, and outline three central themes of mainstreaming discourses that were developed here.

Two types of discourses are chosen for analysis: firstly, statements by Government ministers and those directly involved in the development of *Schools Our Focus* policy. These statements were primarily made in parliament and recorded in Hansard, though some supplementary statements made in domestic and international media are considered. I also analyze an NT Government-commissioned review, set up after an outcry in Indigenous communities, *Learning Lessons*. The selection deliberately focuses on texts generated by Governments and actors affiliated with them to better understand how

justifications for abolishing bilingual education have been developed by policymakers. In tracing their genealogy, I also carefully categorise these discourses and their ideological implications for the wider debate.

I do not attribute shifts in Indigenous policy simply to discourses or seek to locate power only within discursive constructions. Instead, this methodological choice is a recognition of how language is the expression of ideological positions, which have material effects. Discourses, understood here as the association of certain structures of language with particular meanings, categories of explanations and deeper historical narratives, are part of the complex ideological scaffolding around material relations of power in society, and can also dialectically influence and reshape those relations (Block, 2017; Thomas et al., 2019). This approach allows a focus on the material effects neoassimilationist modes of governance *and* their enactment through discourses (Lattas & Morris, 2010).

I am a white, settler scholar of education, media and Indigenous studies currently working on Gadigal land. My interest in this topic has been motivated by my desire to understand and to challenge the colonial practices of education systems, which is crucial work for non-Indigenous academics (Smith et al., 2018). My focus on bilingual education in the NT emerged through my involvement in advocacy against the First Four Hours policy and connections developed to Arrernte communities in this process. However, my perspective is limited by my position and lack of situated knowledge, meaning this study too is deliberately focused on how policy debate has been shaped discursively by Government actors. There remains much room for Indigenous-led scholarship on the impact of mainstreaming discourses in context.

### **Centering self-determination in Indigenous bilingual education**

In Indigenous education scholarship, the analysis of mainstreaming discourses usually begins with policy shifts around 2007-8—around the introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER, or Intervention), welfare restrictions linked to student truancy, and the 2008 ‘First Four Hours policy’ (McCallum et al., 2020; McCallum & Waller, 2020; Waller, 2012). In a critical, corpus-based analysis, Lisa Waller and Kerry McCallum (2020, p.15) demonstrate how the ‘unflinching acceptance of Western values of work, conformity, orderliness, competition and economic ambition’ has dominated media discourse on Indigenous education from 2008 to 2018. Waller (2012, p. 460) has argued that ‘neo-liberal discourses about education, especially literacy’ were a ‘key contributor’ to building support for First Four Hours in 2008. Their scholarship stands out for the clear recognition of links between attacks on bilingual education and attacks on self-determination via mainstreaming.

The wider literature on Indigenous bilingual education in Australia has rarely centred this. Largely, it has focused on pedagogical arguments: that Government policy is driven by a ‘monolingual mindset’; a lack of appreciation for the benefits of bi- and multi-lingualism; and/or a lack of understanding that that mother tongue bilingual programs represent the best route to success in English (Devlin, 2017; Harris, 1990; May, 2014; Simpson et al., 2009). Others have argued that Indigenous bilingual education is a scapegoat for falling standards in Indigenous education (Wigglesworth et al., 2011). Samantha Disbray and Brian Devlin (2017) blame the encroachment of ‘accountability’ discourses, and the obsession with evaluative data; while others have argued that bilingual education was

simply considered too expensive in the era of neoliberal restraints on spending (Nicholls, 2005).

US-based scholars Nelson Flores and Jonathon Rosa (2017) have criticized a similar focus in North American literature exploring anti-bilingual education policy moves and discourses, arguing that the transformative potential of bilingual education is part of what motivates state hostility. While scholars often acknowledge the importance of Indigenous bilingual education in realizing Indigenous aspirations, this is only now emerging as a topic of focus in the literature. In their collection of histories of the NT Indigenous language bilingual education program, Devlin et al. (2017, p. 2) note that bilingual education has been part of Indigenous peoples' historical struggle to 'take back control of their lives, to express and live their own identities, and to organise their communities according to their values and aspirations'. Scholarship led by Indigenous educators focuses on Indigenous control and ownership, and how Indigenous bilingual education gives Indigenous language speakers the power to decide on elements of the curriculum, lending value to Indigenous knowledges, and legitimating the position of Indigenous language speakers (Ross & Baarda, 2017; Stockley et al., 2017). I have argued (2021) this potential challenges hierarchies of knowledge and power, thus turning bilingual education into a prospective site of Indigenous self-determination and control. This is evidenced by efforts to 'Aboriginalise' schooling in the Yolngu schools in North East Arnhem land by taking greater control over school administration, teaching and curriculum development (Stockley et al. 2017, p. 142):

Yolngu have consistently reiterated their claim that they wanted recognition of their proud tradition of self-determination on their country and an understanding of the importance they placed on the maintenance of their culture and languages for their



children and their grandchildren. Yolŋu did not want assimilation, instead wanting to face the future with respect and strength along with a return of their right to self-determination, self-management and self-sufficiency.

Outside of bilingual education, critical scholars have turned their attention to other aspects of educational mainstreaming, including punishing student's non-attendance by garnishing parents' welfare payments (Behrendt & McCausland, 2008; Waller et al., 2018), and the increasing emphasis on standardization and accountability to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Heffernan & Maxwell, 2019). Other critical analysis explores 'deficit discourse', showing how via policy metaphors such as 'close the gap', Indigenous students have been characterized as deficient and in need of normalization (Fforde et al., 2013; Hogarth, 2017; Vass, 2012), while a range of scholars have explored the dominance of whiteness in schooling and its discursive operation and material effects (c.f Moore, 2020).

Informed by Indigenous scholars, this paper develops a critical lens exploring questions of self-determination and their relationship to education. I now turn to the discussion on the emergence of mainstreaming discourses in the literature.

### **Mainstreaming as policy and discourse in the literature**

Mainstreaming as a policy framework differs from earlier forms of assimilationist social engineering because of its emphasis on producing 'greater exposure to market capitalism, individualism, entrepreneurship, and private accumulation' to solve supposed social dysfunction in Indigenous communities (Altman, 2019, p. 290). Ruth McCausland (2005) argues mainstreaming as policy began with former conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard's advocacy of 'practical reconciliation' over what he considered

‘symbolic’ anti-racism from 1996 onwards. It continued with the abolition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2005, an Indigenous body with some control over national policy (Sanders, 2018). Its zenith was the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER, also known as the Intervention) originating under the Howard Government in 2007, and continuing in a slightly-moderated form through Stronger Futures, introduced by the Labor Government in 2012. The NTER imposed federal Government managers in remote NT Indigenous communities, mandated Government control of assets, introduced income management for welfare, and banned alcohol and pornography, amongst other reforms (Shaw, 2012).

Political economist Elizabeth Humphrys (2019, p. 11) defines neoliberalism as a ‘political project’ and ‘macroeconomic approach’ that ‘promotes the benefits of markets over state action’ and the expansion of competitive markets into all sectors of the economy, including into Government departments and programs. From SRAs to the NTER, the state has acted to enforce neoliberal social norms in Indigenous affairs, claiming these will make remote Indigenous communities viable in the market economy (Strakosch, 2013). *Mainstreaming as a policy approach*, then, represents the interaction of emergent neoliberal norms and long-established processes of racialised settler colonial governance. It seeks to overrule Indigenous aspirations where necessary to transform Indigenous peoples into normative neoliberal subjects through coercion (Lattas & Morris, 2010).

Scholars have noted how, in the late 2000s, public advocates of mainstreaming were developing a discourse promoting profit-making, individual achievement, and commercial development as the way forward for remote Indigenous communities. The period has been heralded the rebirth of assimilationist-style discourses—with neoliberal

characteristics—in Australian Indigenous affairs (Altman & Hinkson, 2010). These ‘mainstreaming discourses’, as I label them here, were often explicitly mobilised against past policies of self-determination or ‘rights-based’ advocacy (Altman, 2014; Proudfoot & Habibis, 2015). They also lamented supposed welfare dependency and an apparent lack of Indigenous responsibility, with a particular focus on remote Indigenous communities (Moreton-Robinson, 2009). After the abolition of ATSIC in 2005, Stuart Bradfield argued that the ‘disadvantage’ of remote-living Indigenous people, measured against a normative non-Indigenous standard, was ‘increasingly being mobilised in order to set—or justify—a particular ideological trajectory for Indigenous policy in Australia’ (2006, p. 80). This trajectory can be seen as a backlash to self-determination and a return to a form of assimilation with neoliberal characteristics. The next section locates these discourses historically, and turns to the birth of bilingual education as a state policy in the self-determination era as a response to assimilation.

### **Assimilation and self-determination in Indigenous bilingual education policy**

Across all Australian states and territories, policies of assimilation based on racist imaginaries of blood quantum had created a dominant approach to Indigenous governance that sought sameness and homogenisation with the dominant white Australian population and culture (Ellinghaus, 2009). While the architecture differed from state-to-state, in settler schooling systems it had produced both inclusion in education for purposes of assimilation and exclusion from education due to racism. Forms of ‘inclusion’ usually involved forcefully removing Aboriginal children from their families for their inculcation into European culture and recruitment to the lower rungs of the labour market, while

forms of racist exclusion denied Aboriginal people education and access to settler services and rights (Thomas & Marsden, 2021).

In a multitude of ways, assimilationist visions started to fracture through the 1950s and 1960s. In 1953, UNESCO began to encourage the idea that teaching in a child's first language was a human right for minority language speakers, and across Australia, the idea was gaining some currency amongst both assimilationists, who saw it as a useful way to develop English skills, and teachers who were experimenting with critical and alternative approaches to education (Boughton, 2020; Devlin et al., 2017). At the same time, the Gurindji struggle for land rights at Wattie Creek in the NT from 1966 became a symbol of defiance for the national Indigenous movement, building new momentum in a battle which had been fought in multiple protracted ways since 1788. Many Indigenous activists hoped the successful 1967 referendum and resultant new Federal powers over Indigenous affairs would assist in ending state-based policies of assimilation (Briscoe, 2014). Self-determination became the rallying cry of the Indigenous social movement that aimed to 'smash the Acts' that upheld assimilative policies, and demanded land rights and Indigenous-controlled services for Aboriginal people, particularly in health, education, and legal representation (Briscoe, 2014). Across Australia, as in many other arenas around the globe, ideas of cultural nationalism, Black Power and anti-imperialism percolated on streets and meeting rooms, giving a new political life to the theory and practice of radical education (Boughton, 2020).

Some scholars see Whitlam's Federal election win at the end of 1972 as a victory for the growing Indigenous movement, and certainly the national Labor Government's new approach to Indigenous affairs represented a history-making rearrangement of the settler

state's approach to Indigenous peoples (Hocking, 2018). Positioning itself as ready to take on the heady responsibility of liberating those it had once oppressed, the new Government tripled spending on Indigenous education (Hocking, 2018). The later legislation of land rights in the NT meant hundreds of former reserve and mission sites were handed back to Indigenous communities, who were now able to live on their ancestral lands as communal title owners (Libby, 2003). Indigenous organizations and corporations formed to manage and advocate around questions such as land rights, health, law, and education (Norman, 2015).

This official policy of self-determination in remote Indigenous communities was embraced by many who attempted to refigure communities in a way that suited their desires to maintain and/or re-establish connections to land, and cultural obligations (Perheentupa, 2020). The opportunities provided by this shift were significant, as they replaced a dominant political discourse that had been more concerned with the pace of assimilation (Rademaker & Rowse, 2020). For communities across the more remote north of the country, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages remained in wide use, bilingual education was one of these opportunities (Simpson, 2020). However, the meaning and enactment of self-determination was contested from its emergence. Some state and territory Governments held to assimilationist visions, while Indigenous communities who had hopes of freedom from Government interference found themselves now interfacing and negotiating with Government more than ever before (Norman, 2015).

At the time of Whitlam's election, the Federal Government had much control over NT policy. The NT did not gain self-government until 1987, and control over education was handed over in a staged process from July 1979. Federal control created the possibility

for bilingual education pilot programs in the NT, beginning in 1973 (Simpson, 2020). Whitlam's Education Minister Kim Beazley Snr made the decision to commence the program; apparently, the idea came to him while shaving the morning after his appointment to the role (Beazley & Beazley, 2009). Initial statements on the program's goals discussed the maintenance of language and culture, and, engaging the discourse of cultural pride, declared that its aims included for 'each child to believe in himself and be proud of his heritage by the regular use of the Indigenous language in school and by learning about Indigenous culture' (Australian Department of Education, 1975). The Federal Government commissioned the Watts, McGrath and Tandy report (1973, p. 7) which borrowed its definition of bilingual education from the United States, including the idea that a 'complete program develops and maintains the children's self-esteem and legitimate pride in both cultures'. Beazley's interest in bilingual education, however, came from different motivations: during his 1961 visit to the Hermannsburg mission on Western Arrernte land, and its Lutheran missionary bilingual school, he had admired the students' 'quality of spoken English', judging it 'vastly superior to that of Indigenous children in government schools' (Beazley & Beazley, 2009, p. 205).

While Beazley's enthusiasm for bilingual schooling was produced by his desire to improve spoken English, the motivations from below were markedly different (Devlin et al., 2017). In the face of these potentially contradictory aims and goals, NT educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, seized on the opportunity the new pilot program to train Indigenous teachers and gain new influence over the schooling of their children. Many communities lobbied and campaigned for the program to extend to them. Their actions secured over 25 bilingual and multilingual language-of-instruction programs through the 1970s and 1980s, in a total of 17 different languages (Devlin et al., 2017). By

1982 bilingual programs were estimated to be reaching nearly half of Indigenous people in the NT and were in place at twenty schools when the abolition was proposed in 1998 (Devlin, 2017). After the proposed abolition, several schools closed their bilingual programs, despite the ultimate decision to maintain funding (Nicholls, 2005). Today, special purpose funding for bilingual programs is only received by seven Government schools in the NT.

The NT bilingual program has primarily involved two kinds of programs. The first involves initial literacy in a local language alongside English oracy, later moving towards English literacy through English Second Language (ESL) programming (a ‘step program’). The second involves the introduction of literacy and oracy in an Indigenous language and English at the same time (a ‘dual literacy program’) (Simpson, 2020). Programs which involve teaching an Indigenous language as a separate subject are not considered bilingual programs but language and culture programs (Devlin et al., 2017).

### **‘Making sure the children actually speak English’**

This context is essential for understanding how Government constructed their arguments about their proposal to defund Indigenous bilingual education programs through 1998-99. This section analyses Government statements about the proposed reforms, the subsequent Government-commissioned review, *Learning Lessons*. The NT Government’s announcement of *Schools Our Focus* in 1998 followed an initial review by their Education Task Review Group. This review did not investigate bilingual education explicitly (Nicholls, 2005). *Learning Lessons*, the subsequent review, began

consultations in May 1999. It ultimately allowed the NT Government to partly backdown on the decision to abolish bilingual education, by endorsing the idea of ‘two-way’ learning, a term originally used by Indigenous communities to explain a teaching model that equally valued Indigenous and Western knowledges (Hoogenraad, 2001; McConvell, 1982). Now, the term was to be used in place of bilingual education and represented a shift towards a much stronger focus on English.

This analysis of key texts and statements made by Government, and in their commissioned report, reveals how mainstreaming discourses were mobilised against Indigenous bilingual education through the 1998-1999 debate. It shows that these discourses positioned bilingual education as an obstacle to advancement in the market economy, and to goals of profit-making, individual achievement and commercial employment. By prioritizing Indigenous culture and languages, bilingual education programs were presented as standing in the way of an English-only curriculum that was necessary to normalize Indigenous citizens in neoliberal times. Bilingual education was characterized as a ‘failed’ experiment of the self-determination era.

The proposed cuts were revealed by the Government amidst announcements of the *Schools our Focus* policy. Factsheets on this new policy were distributed to schools across the NT. One factsheet was headlined with the policy aim: ‘Progressively withdraw the Bilingual Education program, allowing the schools to share in the savings and better resource English language programs’ (1998). The factsheet explained that the bilingual program ran on ‘funding exclusively provided by the NT government ... 20 schools in the Territory (including 4 non-government schools) have additional resources for bilingual programs.’ It declared there was:



no evidence to show that children in these schools are performing better in English literacy than children in other schools, which do not have extra resources ... In fact, on average, children in schools with funded bilingual programs are performing slightly worse in English literacy and numeracy.

It argued that it would redirect resources ‘more equitably to provide for improvements in literacy.’ The call to focus supposedly scarce resources on English suggests that the bilingual program was detracting from overall literacy education in all schools. This appeals to the idea that Indigenous self-determination is a special or separatist claim that involves the unfair distribution of resources, a claim associated with later mainstreaming policy discourses (Bradfield, 2006).

Further, the framing sets up literacy *as* English literacy: first by using the term ‘English literacy’ and thereafter simply ‘literacy’. In doing so it abridges the two, attributing value to English literacy only and ignoring literacies in Indigenous languages, and associated knowledges, linked to bilingual programs (Morales et al., 2018). Here, ultimate value and achievement is realised in English. This construction sets up goals for Indigenous education that are desirable within an idealized, market-based future, regardless of whether those are the communities’ goals (Altman, 2019).

In explaining the cuts in parliament, then Minister for Indigenous Development, Loraine Braham (1999), deepened this argument when she argued that ‘What you have to put your emphasis on is making sure the children actually speak English ... In bilingual schools they are still 5 years behind the norm.’ She argued that the NT Government wanted a future for Indigenous students:

that will see them learn, be educated and take their part in the next century with confidence, with the ability to be able to communicate, with the ability to be able to get things done, to participate in wider community than just their own community, because they won't be isolated like that forever. The Minister knows that they need to be able to take that step into the next century with confidence...

Again, English is positioned as the goal of education, and a generic non-Indigenous subject is normalized. The ability 'to communicate' is to communicate in English, and it is to do so outside of the apparent isolation of remote communities which are positioned as spaces of the past. As discussed earlier, mainstreaming policy discourses argue that Indigenous communities must become 'viable' in an idealized mainstream market economy, and communities that cannot do that are not considered worthy of state support (Strakosch, 2013). Here, the Minister suggests that remote communities may not have a long future if they cannot conform to neoliberal norms. She primarily values an English-only curriculum and the schooled, Western concepts that are tied to mainstream workforce participation (McCallum & Waller, 2020).

Don Zoeller, of the Northern Territory Principals Association, was part of the first review that led to the development of *Schools our Focus*. In his support for *Schools our Focus*, he links English skills to the necessity to break out of 'the dependency cycle': the idea that Indigenous communities are dependent on Government welfare and rejected 'responsibility', later a claim used for justifying Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) (McCausland, 2005). Zoeller told *Time* (1999, p. 46) magazine: 'You must be able to function in the mainstream language if you're ever going to break the dependency

cycle. Sticking with a process that's not producing the results is more open to criticism than this move, because it's more insidious.'

From these statements, three key discourse themes emerge: bilingual education as a barrier to English literacy (which is positioned as the singular most important reason for Indigenous education), the goal of employment in a marketized economy as the ultimate result of education, and dependence on state support as preventing Indigenous failure to integrate into the market. As discussed earlier, these became crucial features of mainstreaming discourses in the 2000s and 2010s.

These themes were recrafted in the *Learning Lessons* review. The review allowed the NT Government a way to back down from the decision to abolish bilingual education, after an outcry across Indigenous communities. Brian Devlin (2018, personal communication), then running a bilingual education teacher education program at Charles Darwin University (CDU), in Darwin, NT, explained the protests which followed the announcement of the proposed abolition:

There was a very strong reaction—internationally, nationally, territorially, with some quite superb things happening. For instance, the Minister [for Education] arrived at Wadeye/Port Keats, and to his amazement saw staff lining the airstrip wearing t-shirts ... [that said] 'don't cut out our tongues' ... Wherever the Minister went he was getting a very strong backlash. A lot of it was driven by Indigenous resentment.

*Learning Lessons*, however, developed along the same three discursive themes. The report gestures towards valuing Indigenous 'heritage' and 'identity' but is explicit about

valuing English as *the* skill that needs to be further ‘developed’, while Indigenous concepts are to be ‘maintained’. While it does not argue for an English-only approach, it does accept the argument that the goal of Indigenous education is English literacy (p. 17):

The predominant goal [of education]... [is for] children [to] develop their English language oracy, literacy and numeracy skills while maintaining their own language, cultural heritage and Indigenous identity.

It compares Indigenous students to a construction of the normative child who is achieving desired English literacy (p. 17): ‘The stark reality is that many Indigenous students are leaving the school system with the English literacy and numeracy ability of a six to seven-year-old mainstream child.’ It links the achievement of English literacy to employment outside communities, accepting this as *the* goal of Indigenous education (p. 18):

Indigenous people while able to engage effectively in their own world, are limited in their engagement with the world outside. They are almost unemployable outside their own communities ... One major employer peak body cited low literacy skills as the first, second, and third barrier inhibiting greater employment of local Indigenous people in their industry.

In doing so, it too sets up the notion of welfare dependency as tied to Indigenous non-achievement, bemoaning what it calls ‘a growing level of welfare dependency that is sapping the strength and morale of Indigenous communities’ (p. 28).

*Learning Lessons*’ explicit discussion of Indigenous bilingual schools shares the NT Government’s rationale for abolishing Indigenous bilingual education. It argues that the

“bilingual or not” debate conceals and distorts the generic concerns that are in need of urgent analysis’ (p. 125), and while conceding that the ‘child’s language and culture [must be] valued by the school’, it argues ‘so [should] ... English and its attendant Western culture.’ This sets up English and market employment outside communities as *the* goal of education, and sees Indigenous languages and culture as secondary concerns.

While *Learning Lessons* states that full abolition of the bilingual program should not be pursued, it presents the bilingual programs as often problematic, and introduces a new ambiguousness about the purposes of including Indigenous languages in the curriculum with the name shift to ‘two-way’ learning. It argues that some bilingual programs have ‘failed, and failed badly’ (p. 227), and says that “two-way” learning does not necessarily imply support for a particular model of bilingual education’ (p. 121). Practically, it argues for a move away from a step program of bilingual schooling to a dual literacy program. It also suggests that language and culture classes that teach an Indigenous language or languages as a single subject would be sufficient. In the context—regardless of the pedagogical debate about models—this devalues the goal of literacy in Indigenous languages and the Indigenous aspirations for control and self-determination associated with it. In critiquing the debate around bilingual education as responsible for clouding the debate, the report suggests that bilingual education is an obstacle to the *real* purposes of education.

*Learning Lessons* argues Government truly represents Indigenous people who wanted ‘strong English’, suggesting that advocates for Indigenous bilingual education were people coming in from the outside. This positioning seeks to foreclose critique by painting bilingual advocates as outsiders, while suggesting the Government is responsive to

remote communities. This mirrors a statement by the then NT Education Minister, Peter Adamson, who in Parliament in 1999 referred sarcastically to ‘the good people of the Cossack pioneer, courtesy of the Maritime Union of Australia’ who had written to him to protest the abolition of bilingual education. Adamson went on to say, ‘I ask whether these good comrades have any idea or whether they have any clue of what they’re talking about’ (Northern Territory Parliament, 1999). This shares commonalities with later instances mainstreaming discourses where advocates of self-determination are positioned as white do-gooders, while Indigenous advocates are ignored or seen to be led on (Altman, 2014).

### **Learning lessons?**

In constructing three key assumptions, and attempting to prevent critique, Government statements in 1998-99, and the *Learning Lessons* report, shaped key themes in mainstreaming discourses that were to emerge more fully in the 2000s (Waller 2012). In positioning English literacy as *the* goal of remote Indigenous education, and positioning bilingual education as a barrier to it, mainstreaming discourses argue for Indigenous assimilation into the market economy as the only reasonable or viable option for the future, and argue that Indigenous dependence on welfare is responsible for unemployment, and supposed social dysfunction and disadvantage.

The anti-bilingual push can be understood, then, not just as a product of pedagogical ignorance of policymakers, but as part of efforts to foreclose on the self-determination era, and to institute a new neoliberal structure of governance seeking to normalize Indigenous subjects through coercive measures, with education systems central to this

(Altman, 2019). Mainstreaming *as a policy process* represents settler colonial governance seeking to overrule and undermine Indigenous aspirations to transform Indigenous peoples into normative subjects. The logics of the market—profit-making, individual achievement, work—are justification to move against self-determination in schooling (Altman, 2019).

Embedded within bilingual education and its valuing of Indigenous languages and culture is the potential for Indigenous control over schooling that legitimates Indigenous decision-making more generally (Ross & Baarda, 2017; Thomas, 2021). It prioritises Indigenous people's relationships with country and kin. Mainstreaming discourses position elements of Indigeneity not commensurate with market goals as standing in the way of the future, and thus in need of coercive transformation. In the 1998-1999 debate, that solidified into a determination to pursue English language education as *the* central goal of education, regardless of Indigenous aspirations. The *Indigeness* of remote-living Indigenous people, via their languages, was presented as standing in the way of the future (of 'step[ping] into the next century with confidence', as Minister Braham put it). These logics have since reappeared in discursive defence of policies such as the that banning Indigenous languages in the first four hours of the day in the NT. Then Australian Minister for Education Julia Gillard (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), declared that this was:

... about ensuring that Indigenous children have the opportunity to be taught and learn English. The learning of English is a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous Australians, must have to successfully progress through school and participate in life beyond their schooling years.

This study traces the genealogy of mainstreaming discourses earlier than previous studies. It shows that three key discursive constructions were developed through this policy moment that have since hardened as ‘common sense’ in mainstreaming discourses, which are explicitly clarified in this study (Altman, 2019; Page, 2018). By reframing the historical debate over Indigenous bilingual education this way, we can understand that there is much more at stake than efficacy of bilingual pedagogies for English language learning. Instead, the opposition to bilingual education can be seen as part of the neoliberal opposition to Indigenous aspirations for self-determination.



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