

October 2012

## Learning in Both Worlds: Academic Journalism as a Research Outcome

Lisa J. Waller  
*Deakin University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/research\\_journalism](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/research_journalism)

---

Waller, Lisa J. (2012) "Learning in Both Worlds: Academic Journalism as a Research Outcome," *Research Journalism*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/research\\_journalism/vol2/iss1/1](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/research_journalism/vol2/iss1/1)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Australia](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/au/).

This Journal Article is brought to you by Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Journalism by an authorized administrator of Research Online. For more information, please contact [researchonline@ecu.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@ecu.edu.au).

---

## Learning in Both Worlds: Academic Journalism as a Research Outcome

### Cover Page Footnote

Lisa Waller is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra researching the relationship between news media and bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory as part of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988–2008. She lectures in journalism at Deakin University and has worked as a journalist for the Canberra Times, the Australian and the Australian Financial Review.

## Learning in both worlds: Academic journalism as a research outcome

### Introduction

Writing mainstream journalism on the issue of bilingual education policy from the viewpoint of Yolngu participants was agreed upon as an important outcome for my doctoral research<sup>1</sup> from early in its design. Their ongoing consent to participate rested on me agreeing to wear my journalist hat as well as my academic hat. This places my research within a critical studies paradigm, which is overtly political because it advocates for the rights of Yolngu under section 14.1 of the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 2004). It is a concrete *outcome* of research that has the explicit aim of contributing to their self-determination and liberation struggle, as defined and controlled by their community (Rigney, 1999, p. 109). Another outcome of this part of the project has been the development of an ethical model for journalists reporting on Indigenous people and affairs, which has been discussed elsewhere (Waller, 2010a). In brief, this model evolved through the process of gaining university ethics approval for the research project and my own practice of writing journalism within this Indigenous ethical framework. The third outcome is arguably the emergence of a specific form of academic journalism.

Veteran Indigenous affairs reporter Tony Koch, who participated in the study, emphasises the importance of respect, trust and listening in his journalism practice. I draw on Koch's practices as well as the recent scholarship on the politics and value of listening (Dreher, 2010), to support the proposal that Indigenous research ethics provide a concrete framework for improving media representations of Indigenous people and their access to news media (Waller, 2010). The university ethics process cannot replicate the understanding Koch has gained from 25 years of interacting with Indigenous people and their communities. However, I argue it provides a pathway along which journalism academics and their students can learn to engage with Indigenous people, navigate Indigenous public spheres and produce high quality reporting that reflects Indigenous peoples' aspirations. Journalists within the

---

<sup>1</sup> My doctoral work contributes to the Australian Research Council Discovery Project 'Australian news media and Indigenous policymaking 1988-2008' (DP0987457).

academy, who are not subject to the commercial or organisational pressures of the news industry, are especially well placed to collaborate with Indigenous people to develop new ways of conducting research and telling stories that privilege their perspectives. Koch's newsgathering practice demonstrates that many principles of this progressive approach are also desirable and achievable in mainstream journalism.

*Learning in both worlds* (Waller, 2011a) can be described as a piece of 'experimental' journalism as it contributes to operationalising the ethical framework developed through this study (Waller, 2010a). It could also be used to 'test' some of the research findings, especially the local understanding of participants that Australia's southern mainstream news media has little interest in the topic of bilingual education. It could also be used to 'test' whether a substantial piece of journalism that advocates an Indigenous perspective could influence the bilingual education policy debate (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010). The article and my account of the processes that drove its creation make a contribution to the ongoing discussion within the discipline of Journalism about the relationship between journalism practice and research within the academy. Some Australian journalism academics are developing the use of journalism as an academic methodology. They argue that journalism has an established body of information-gathering techniques, a framework for enquiry and an industry-based code of ethics (Lamble, 2004). While discussions about whether professional newsgathering practices and an industry code of ethics provide an adequate basis for works of journalism to be regarded as academic research are ongoing, I am advocating for journalism academics to write and use journalism as part of their research process and I have made this part of my own research practice.

The university ethics framework is far more rigorous than the Australian Journalists' Code of Ethics or professional protocols. It is a concrete path along which to explore the approach to Indigenous affairs reporting Meadows (2005) has called for. It involves learning to navigate Indigenous public spheres, just as journalists learn to move easily within and between more familiar information networks as part of the everyday practice of newsgathering. It facilitates active listening and thereby enables Indigenous speaking positions. Those journalism academics prepared to work within the ethical paradigm suggested here are in a position to improve public and media discourses through meaningful partnerships with Indigenous peoples.

The articles I have written as outcomes of my research (McCallum & Waller, 2012a, 2012b; Waller, 2012a, 2012b) are earnest attempts to do just that.

### Writing 'Learning in both worlds'

Decolonising research is enmeshed in activism. From our first contact, Yolngu were more interested in what I could offer their community as a journalist in return for their participation, than what I could offer as an academic writing journal articles and conference papers.

We agreed that I would produce a substantial work of journalism for the mainstream media that presented their perspective and advocated for their policy position in reciprocity for their participation in my academic research. Denzin & Lincoln (2008) describe this approach as 'decentring and redefining the field of research so the Western academy is not the locus of authorising power that defines the research agenda' (2008, p. 38). My project had ethics clearance from the University of Canberra, which included explicit approval for writing works of journalism. The article was constructed upon the Indigenous ethical framework I have described above and in detail elsewhere (Waller 2010).

Denzin & Lincoln (2008) stress that decolonising research emphasises performativity:

It is not only concerned with building a theoretical foundation but researchers are engaged performatively in decolonising acts framed as activism, advocacy or critical reclamation. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 38).

The article was published by the online news and opinion outlet *Inside Story* almost one year after I had completed my fieldwork in Northeast Arnhem Land. There were two reasons I did not write it sooner. The first was that I had further research interviews to complete with members of the policy field who I believed might not be prepared to participate if they did not like what I wrote in the mainstream media. The second goes to my journalistic *habitus*, especially my news sense (Benson & Neveu, 2005). The aims of the feature article were to present the Yolngu policy perspective, reach as wide an audience as possible and ideally to have an impact on the policy process. The wind did not blow the right way, according to my journalism 'nose', until I could spot a suitable opening in the national news agenda. The House of Representatives inquiry into Indigenous languages (Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Affairs Committee, 2011) announced in July 2011 provided an opportunity to link the bilingual education debate to a broader discussion about Indigenous languages at a national level.

There are strong similarities between ethnographic and journalistic methods (Waller, 2010b). My brief immersion in Yolgnu society while conducting fieldwork provided much of the observation used in the work of journalism. I quote some material from my research interviews, from interviews that were conducted specifically for the news article, and draw upon the scholarly literature and news coverage of bilingual education. The article briefly discusses the 'Australian news media and indigenous policymaking 1988-2008' ARC Discovery Project my research contributes to and highlights a key finding about the role of the media in the 2008 policy change. I had to undertake a considerable amount of routine journalistic research such as finding and checking facts and figures and gathering background information from websites, books and other secondary sources. In this sense the journalism I produced is a hybrid of my scholarship and journalism research, undertaken to meet a stated goal of the research.

#### **Lack of interest from mainstream southern news media**

Yolgnu wanted the piece to be published in a metropolitan daily newspaper in the south of Australia, so they were the media outlets I approached first. Neither the *Sydney Morning Herald* nor *The Canberra Times* was interested in publishing the article. As study participant and ANU linguist Jane Simpson said of her own experience of trying to publish an opinion piece on the Northern Territory's bilingual education policy in *The Age*, there are many possible reasons, including that the article might be badly written, deadline and resource pressures are another possibility, or as she was told by an editor, they have 'had their fill' of Indigenous stories that week. A rejection from one section editor I approached provides some evidence to support the local understanding of participants that the southern news media is not interested in the bilingual education issue and does not believe its audience is either. The editor wrote in an email:

*It's not for me, now. I think you should try to find another home for it. Sorry.*

The use of the term 'home' with its connotations of place and belonging, suggests this editor did not think the article belonged in her national news feature section.

Editors' responses raised the question that as well as the subject matter, perhaps the *SMH* did not feel 'at home' with academic journalism. Online journalism outlets in Australia including *Crikey*, *New Matilda*, *The Conversation* and *Inside Story*, which responded quickly to accept the article, on the other hand, seem to welcome academic journalism into their 'home' pages. For example, *Crikey* has an arrangement with two universities to publish work by academics and journalism students (Posetti, 2011). *Inside Story* is produced by Swinburne University in partnership with *The Canberra Times* and the Copyright Agency Limited. Articles are published on the *Inside Story* website and an article from the site is often included in Forum, the news review section of *The Canberra Times*. Content from *Inside Story* is also published in a monthly magazine and included as an insert in the print version of *The Canberra Times*. *Learning in both worlds* appeared in the November 27 2011 issue of the magazine (Waller, 2011b). The magazine is also distributed nationally as a free publication available in independent bookshops. Benefits of online publication for academic journalists include reaching a highbrow audience, including decision makers and the wider academic community. It also allows for the inclusion of hyperlinks to relevant scholarly articles, reports and other research material. Reaching a wider academic audience can be valuable for journalism academics doing cross-disciplinary work. It can expand their networks and unearth potential research collaborations with academics working in related fields. For example, after my article appeared I met with Professor John Altman of ANU, who knew about my research as a result of reading the article. He is a leading academic opponent of the Intervention (Altman & Hinkson, 2007, 2010) and the author of many books and papers on Indigenous policy. I was subsequently invited by Professor Altman to co-author a piece of journalism for a special issue of *Arena* magazine on the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Intervention (McCallum & Waller, 2012a). I was also contacted by Nicolas Rothwell, a senior writer on *The Australian*, who had previously declined to participate in my study, but offered to meet me to discuss the issues raised in the article after reading it.

*Inside Story* editor Peter Browne submitted the article to *The Canberra Times* for publication in Forum but it was rejected. He said the site usually offered an international news feature for the slot, although the newspaper had published national news stories as well. It chose to run an article about the post-Gadaffi Arab

Spring instead of the story about bilingual education. Browne said in an email he thought their decision not to publish had more to do with 'geography' – the space usually reserved for an international feature - than disinterest in the subject of bilingual education. As Cottle (2003) observes, the processes and formats of news have a great deal to do with media representation, rather than any ideological agenda. Patterns of representation come about through journalists acting as they are trained to – given the pressures, limitations and incentives they face in a highly competitive market. He says to change this, journalists would have to undergo training where they confront the possible consequences of their news agendas and reporting practices and explore ways to prevent undesirable effects, but he doubts this idea would receive institutional support and that given the pressures journalists are under, they would not be eager to pursue the issues. As Dreher (2010) argues, these routine news processes and formats can effectively shut out and silence marginalised voices. For the average person, simply the appearance in the news of a person, object, or public act is enough to mean that they are important. The media bestows status and legitimacy on people, groups, issues and objects. But what is missing in the news is just as important as what is contained in the news (Couldry, 2010). When people, groups, issues or objects are ignored or left out of news media coverage, they do not exist in the public sphere; and therefore they have no status or legitimacy (Dreher, 2010). Tuchman (1981) has called this symbolic annihilation. Even when marginalised citizens' viewpoints are admitted, those views 'are further contextualized with symbolic cues that colour their credibility and salience for news audiences' (Bennett, 1996, p. 374). Tuchman says condemnations or trivializations are further examples of symbolic annihilation (1981).

### **Journalism as a research instrument**

Writing and placing the article provided a research instrument I could utilise in my scholarly work in several ways. Firstly, the process of researching and writing the article contributed to operationalising the ethical framework developed through the university ethics process (Waller, 2010a). Reader feedback to *Inside Story* and discussion of the article in the Friends of Bilingual Learning Google group provide a measure for evaluating whether the ethical framework supported the desired outcome. The comments suggest these readers are not disinterested members of the

public, but rather active members of the bilingual education lobby with an understanding of the Yolngu perspective. Comments include:

*It is a tremendously well written and correct version of things at Yirrkala. Lisa has got so many things right, and has sympathetically reported the events and people's feelings and reactions. A real change, easy to read and the truth.*

*Lisa Waller has got it right, crafting a respectful and accurate account of the continual battles (war) Yolngu have fought for many years to have their land, ceremonies, culture and languages acknowledged, and their rights to continue utilising their land, ceremonies, culture and languages in contemporary Australia. Lisa has also shown us the long and significant history of Yolngu public contributions to wider Australian society...Importantly, Multhara's voice can be heard, sharing with Lisa on her country at Garrthalala, the depth of Yolngu feelings, about land, culture, family and two-way education.*

*Lucky Lisa – reciprocity – well done.*

*This article should be read by everyone and serves an excellent model for us language activists. It's a clear and grounded summary of the issues that never devolves into righteousness and slogans. Of course, I think we have every right to be mad as hell but emotive language gives readers a license to switch off. Worse, it offers 'proof' to the Abbott's/Brough's/Scrymgour's of this world that we are somehow motivated by ideology over evidence (just as they are).*

The main aims of the ethical framework are to ensure reciprocity with Indigenous participants and privilege their perspectives (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003), which the comments suggest the article has succeeded in achieving.

Secondly, the process allowed me to index my experience against research participants' accounts of having difficulty getting stories about bilingual education through gatekeepers in southern newsrooms. Academics recounted having opinion pieces rejected and journalists reported having difficulty interesting editors in indigenous stories that did not fit the routine frames of violence, dysfunction and failure (McCallum, 2010). My experience of having the article rejected by several major metropolitan dailies aligns with participants' experiences, providing further

evidence to support the argument that most editors find little interest in the subject and do not think it will appeal to their assumed audiences.

Thirdly, publication of the article has allowed me to 'test' whether news media coverage can amplify marginalised people's perspectives in the policy process, as the literature contends (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010). The 'experiment' suggests it does. The article was a 'top read' in the influential Australian Policy Online, ensuring it was brought to the attention of opinion and policy makers. In the week of publication I received an email from a highly-placed public servant who participated in the study. He wrote: 'I talked with [NT Opposition Leader] Terry Mills, and he'd like to see it if you have the link.' It is possible to pinpoint the impact of the article through reader comments, any reference to it in Hansard, press releases, follow-up media interest and participants' comments.

#### **Can the 'experiment' be replicated?**

This form of journalism 'experiment' can be replicated by academics and participants if they are prepared to work together within a critical studies paradigm, guided by liberation epistemologies. As Dreher (2010) argues, fair representation and access to news media are more likely to be achieved by using different modes of information gathering and storytelling, as this 'experiment' does. This approach requires journalism academics to be committed to their research and its design supporting the self-determination struggle of their participants, as defined and controlled by their communities (Rigney, 1999, p. 109) The 'experiment' suggests that news media can amplify the perspectives of marginalised groups and that journalism academics are well placed to work with them towards these ends. This approach demands reflexivity on the part of the researcher through acknowledgment they are an active participant in their field of research. It also rests on the assumption that research participants are in the best position to speak on their own behalf. This underpins my research and is materialised through the Yolngu voices and perspectives in the work of journalism.

The approach offers a number of benefits, including reciprocity with research participants; providing a research instrument for testing theories and findings; making research topics accessible for mainstream audiences and developing journalism academics as public intellectuals. As Davies (2010) argues, it is also highly

appropriate for academics to incorporate their own journalism practices in the nexus between their research and their teaching.

I have proposed a new concept in journalism research, but hesitate to name it or define it too prescriptively. However, I suggest it is underpinned by a liberation epistemology and Indigenous methodologies; is produced by journalism academics; has approval by a university ethics committee; is published in mainstream news outlets; is not subject to academic peer review, but editorial review; is highly reflexive; designed in concert with participants as an *outcome* of research and has an 'experimental' dimension because it can be used as a research instrument to evaluate methodologies and 'test' findings. The results of such journalism 'experiments' may be reported and discussed in research outputs such as peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers, thereby contributing to the scholarship of journalism and culminating in full academic recognition.

## REFERENCES

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee. (2011). Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities Retrieved 15 February 2012, from <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/languages/info.htm>
- Altman, J., & Hinkson, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Coercive reconciliation: Stabilise, normalise, exit Aboriginal Australia*. Melbourne: Arena Publications.
- Altman, J., & Hinkson, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Culture Crisis - Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Bennett, W. L. (1996). An introduction to journalism norms and representations of politics. *Journal of Political Communication*, 13, 373-384.
- Benson, R., & Neveu, E. (Eds.). (2005). *Bourdieu and the journalistic field*. London: Polity.
- Cottle, S. (2003). *Media organization and production*. London: Sage.
- Couldry, N. (2010, February 15 2010). [Media methodologies seminar for Higher Degree by Research students].
- Davies, K. (2010). A journalistic study of Narrogin's feuding families. *Research Journalism* 1. Retrieved August 17, 2010, from [http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=research\\_journalism](http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=research_journalism)
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: Critical methodologies and Indigenous inquiry. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (pp. 1-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dreher, T. (2010). Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. *Media, Culture & Society*, 32(1), 85-103.
- Koch-Baumgarten, S., & Voltmer, K. (2010). *Public policy and mass media*. London: Routledge.
- Lamble, S. (2004). Documenting the methodology of journalism. *Australian Journalism Review*, 26(1), 85-106.

- McCallum, K. (2010). News and local talk: Conversations about the crisis of "Indigenous Violence" in Australia. In S. E. Bird (Ed.), *The anthropology of news and journalism: Global perspectives* (pp. 151-167). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- McCallum, K., & Waller, L. (2012a). Failed state of health: Media 'realities' and policy 'optics'. *Arena Magazine*, 118, 33-35.
- McCallum, K., & Waller, L. (2012b). Managing the optics of the Intervention Retrieved 30 July, 2012, from <http://inside.org.au/?s=mccallum>
- Meadows, M. (2005). Journalism and indigenous public spheres. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 11(1), 36-41.
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2003). Values and Ethics - Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research Retrieved August 31, 2010, from <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e52syn.htm>
- Posetti, J. (2011). Aussie academic journal to publish peer-reviewed journalism Retrieved 6 November 2011, from <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2011/01/aussie-academic-journal-to-publish-peer-reviewed-journalism020.html>
- Rigney, L.-I. (1999). Internationalisation of an Indigenous anticolonial cultural critique of research methodologies: A guide to Indigenist research methodology and its principles. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 14(2), 109-121.
- Smith, L. T. (2004). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Tuchman, G. (1981). The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.), *The manufacture of news: Social problems, deviance, and the mass media* (rev. ed., pp. 169-185). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Waller, L. (2010a). Indigenous research ethics: new modes of information gathering and storytelling in journalism. *Australian Journalism Review*, 32(2), 19-31.
- Waller, L. (2010b). Singular influence: mapping the ascent of Daisy M. Bates in popular understanding and Indigenous policy. *Australian journal of communication*, 37(2), 1-14.
- Waller, L. (2011a). Learning in both worlds Retrieved 15 February 2011, from <http://www.insidestory.org.au>
- Waller, L. (2011b, December ). Learning in two worlds, *The Canberra Times Inside Story liftout*, pp. 12-13.
- Waller, L. (2012a). All talk, no action. *Australian Educator*, 73, 24-26.
- Waller, L. (2012b). A shift in the monolingual mood. Inside Story Retrieved 2 October 2012, from <http://www.inside.org.au/a-shift-in-the-monolingual-mood/>

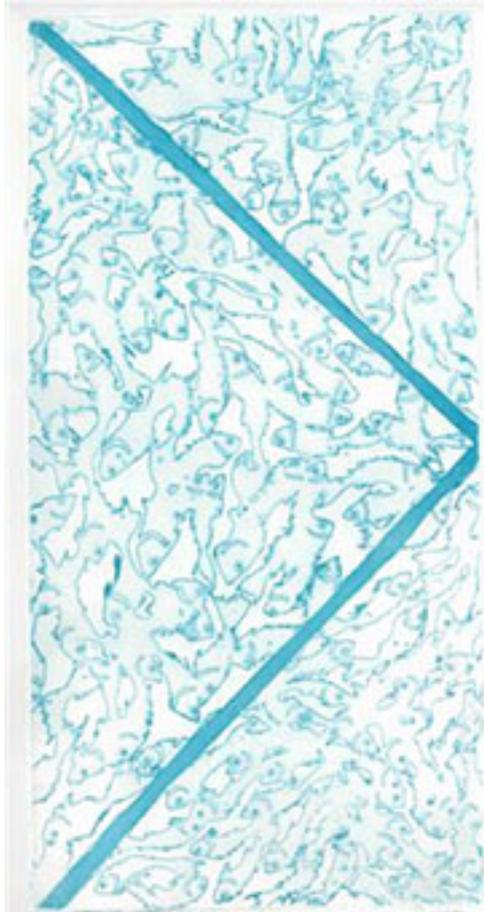
## Learning in both worlds

WE'RE belting along a bauxite-red dirt highway in northeast Arnhem Land, crossing country covered with the short, spindly eucalypts that are endemic to the region. Tall termite mounds rise from the forest floor, guaranteeing that many of the tree trunks are hollowed out – ready for Yolŋu craftsmen to harvest to make the *yidaki* (didgeridoo), the signature sound in their repertoire. Not too many cars pass on this road between Yirrkala and the Laynha homeland of Garrathalala, so when a white Falcon flashes past our driver waves to the occupants. “That’s Djakapurra and his family,” he says. “You know, Djakapurra Munyarryan, the songman who danced with Nikki Webster and led the traditional welcome ceremony at the opening of the Sydney Olympics.”

It was not surprising that the ceremony was led by a Yolŋu songman. The music of *yidaki* player Djalal Gurruwiwi, the band Yothu Yindi and Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu evokes the spirit of this spectacular country for audiences throughout the world. These are just a few of the high achievers in this society, who also include the brothers Galurrui and Mandawuy Yunupingu (both former Australians of the Year), the renowned actor David Gulpilil, Gatjil Djerrkura OAM, chairman of ATSIC from 1996 to 2000, and his son Nathan, who plays for the Western Bulldogs in the AFL. George Burarrwanga was the charismatic frontman for the Warumpi Band; among the many internationally acclaimed Yolŋu artists is David Malangi, one of whose designs was used on the reverse side of Australia’s \$1 note in 1966 without his knowledge (he was subsequently compensated). Yolŋu have since helped to set up national mechanisms to prevent such exploitation of their artists and have vigorously defended their copyright, notably through a famous legal case in 1993 in which they successfully took action against the importers of carpets featuring stolen Yolŋu designs.

The Yolŋu were among Australia’s earliest international traders, maintaining trade and cultural exchanges with the Macassans for six centuries. Yolŋu warriors, under the leadership of anthropologist Donald Thompson, formed a formidable squadron to defend the Arnhem coast from Japanese attack during the second world war. Perhaps most significantly, Yolŋu launched the first land rights case in 1963, when they presented a bark petition to the federal parliament protesting against the annexation and destruction of their lands by bauxite mining giant Nabalco. The petition, written in both English and Yolŋu Matha, hangs in Parliament House, Canberra.

Yolŋu insist it is their “both-ways” or “two-way” philosophy, represented by the *yambirrpa* (fish trap) metaphor (pictured), that gives them the strength to defend their culture and their rights both in their own world and in the mainstream, and to make their unique contribution to the life of the nation. Mandawuy Yunupingu has written that “active participation of Aboriginal peoples will renew Australian life during the twenty-first century.” But, he adds, “it will need Aboriginal people who are strong and balanced, rooted in their families and their land. This will depend on Aboriginal people being educated as balanced contemporary Aboriginal Australians, something which will only happen when this education is inspired by their land.”



---

**Image:** This etching by Banduk Marika depicts the yambirrpa (fish trap) metaphor which is used to describe how, within the Yolŋu philosophy of education, the whole community works together to guide young people into Yolŋu foundations for learning. Everyone helps to build the yambirrpa from rocks, which represent the elders, and the fish are the children. The children learn inside the yambirrpa. Yolŋu say that sometimes big storms come from the outside which break or fragment the yambirrpa. They work together as a community to mend it by putting more rocks in place.

---

Three years ago, the Northern Territory's education minister, Marion Scrymgour, [announced](#) that Territory schools "would have a greater focus on teaching English." Her media release did not directly mention the Northern Territory's bilingual education programs and none of the communities where the education department ran two-way programs were consulted or warned about the decision. The only detail provided in the announcement was that "the first four hours of education in all Northern Territory schools will be conducted in English." There are five hours of instruction in the Territory's school day.

The government's decision undermined the achievements of the innovative two-way school curriculum that Mandawuy Yunupingu helped to pioneer. Community elders are deeply concerned that future generations will not be able to negotiate both worlds

with the integrity, sophistication and success of current and past generations. The bilingual curriculum involves the coordinated use of Yolŋu Matha and English for instructional purposes and brings together Yolŋu and Western knowledge in teaching all subjects, including mathematics.

No review or study of the effectiveness of the two-way programs was undertaken before the announcement. Joe Lo Bianco, professor of language and literacy education at the University of Melbourne, says that some 1200 international studies provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of bilingual education for students who do not speak the dominant language when they start school. In his booklet [\*Indigenous Languages in Education: What the Research Actually Shows\*](#), Australian National University adjunct professor, Charles Grimes, cites 691 of them. “It’s easy to think that if you teach more English, students will learn more English. But that’s not how it really works,” Professor Grimes says. “Study after study shows that children learn best in the language they understand best. That should be obvious. Study after study also shows that where the primary language spoken in the home is not English, teaching them in both their own language plus English will improve their English far better than just teaching them in English alone. The evidence is overwhelming.”

News of the demise of the bilingual programs inspired a rush of protest letters to both politicians and the media. Yolŋu, already worn down by the impacts of the Intervention, were angered by the complete lack of consultation on the decision and expressed distress at the devaluing of their languages. “We have been told we are not to use our students’ first language, only English,” wrote educator Yalmay Yunupingu in an open letter to then education minister Marion Scrymgour. “Well, I already know that the children won’t understand what I’m saying, they will laugh at me, and they may even misbehave because they’ll be bored and won’t know what the lessons are about. So perhaps I will cheat and use some Yolŋu *matha* – what will happen then? Will I have my mouth washed out with soap like in the mission times? Or will I have to stand on one leg outside the classroom? Or perhaps I will lose my job?”

Until recently, these protests were largely ignored. This is despite the fact that bilingual education expert Associate Professor Brian Devlin, of Charles Darwin University, [argued](#) strongly in 2009 that the figures the government used to justify the decision were flawed, and that more recent statistics show how the demise of bilingual programs has already had an adverse effect. Devlin has shown that the statistics tabled in parliament excluded the award-winning Tiwi bilingual school at Murrupurtiyanuwu, and that the NAPLAN testing data was presented incorrectly. A [2010 study](#) by Greg Dickson of the Australian National University showed attendance at Walpiri schools in Central Australia has declined dramatically since their bilingual programs were stopped. At Murrupurtiyanuwu, in the 2008 NAPLAN exams, Year 3 students performed “substantially above average” compared with similar schools in reading, grammar and numeracy; last year, students of the same age performed below average or equal to similar schools in those categories. At Lajamanu, about 870km south-west of Darwin, results in the reading and writing categories in last year’s NAPLAN tests were half of what they were in 2008 and this year attendance rates fell to just 37.2 per cent.

THE Northern Territory’s bilingual education policy dates back to two weeks after the Whitlam government came to power in 1972, when the new prime minister

launched the first federal policy for Indigenous self-determination. The following year, Yirrkala was among the first communities to take up the opportunity to introduce a bilingual program. During its long life, the curriculum was developed through a unique Yolŋu approach based on a philosophy of creating new knowledge through the mixing of Yolŋu and *balanda* (Western) thought. A team of Yolŋu educators, most notably Mandawuy Yunupingu and Raymattja Marika, worked with *balanda* educators on learning programs, including the creation of the *ganma* maths curriculum, developed in partnership with mathematicians from Melbourne University, which teaches maths in the early school years through the patterns of the Yolŋu kinship system.

A review was conducted in 1974 and among its twenty-five recommendations was a proposal that the federal government should take steps to educate the public about the program. A short film on the approach, *Not to Lose You, My Language*, was produced in 1975, but no further efforts were made to encourage public discussion and understanding of bilingual education. The issue has inspired little media interest except on the few occasions when it has attracted controversy.

In this deeply monolingual country, the idea that everyone must assimilate to the dominant culture endures. The failure to explain and discuss the value of Indigenous languages means that they have not been recognised by the public or in law as national assets. This is not the case in some other post-colonial nations – including New Zealand, where Māori is an official language and taught in schools. There is also little popular or government support for the right of Australian Indigenous peoples, under article 14.1 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, to control their educational systems and provide education in their own languages in culturally appropriate ways.

According to a former head of the NT Department of Education, it was the national news media's intense spotlight on the Territory's poor NAPLAN results in 2008 that motivated the policy change. "If you look, the media was actually the trigger behind all that policy change to go from bilingual to a four-hour, full-on English experience," the former head said. "It was the national publication of results – the Northern Territory's need to respond, to look like they were on top of this and handling it... There was no well constructed policy response as far as I could see. And nor has there been. It's... almost a kneejerk response."

A team of researchers led by Associate Professor Kerry McCallum of the University of Canberra is examining how Indigenous policies are developed in an increasingly media-saturated political environment. In this case, the NT government's tight media management of the bilingual education issue on the one hand, and lack of journalistic resources on the other, hampered journalists in their coverage. One senior Northern Territory journalist who participated in the study said covering the 2008 decision to axe the bilingual policy was an exercise in frustration: "It's such a shit fight to get even the statistics from the education department," she said. "The length of time between when they were saying that bilingual schools weren't performing and... when we got any kind of quantifiable data was ridiculous. Like months. And so it was repressive lines being fed by politicians, and then other opponents." She was one of a number of reporters who described it as a complex issue that posed big challenges for

inexperienced or disengaged journalists who did not understand the context of the debate.

People employed by the NT education department told researchers that they were reluctant to speak on the public record because it contravened department rules and they feared the repercussions. They gave examples of employees who were unsuccessful in applications for positions in bilingual schools or were moved out of schools because of their views and behaviour in regard to the “first four hours” policy.

Now, however, Yolŋu are hopeful that a federal inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities will ask better questions and arrive at different conclusions from the Territory government. On 5 July this year the federal Indigenous affairs minister, Jenny Macklin, and her colleague, arts minister Simon Crean, asked the Parliamentary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee to investigate the links between Indigenous languages and improving education, community well-being, interpreting services and strategies to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. The committee will examine how the use of Indigenous languages, particularly in early education, can help to improve education and vocational outcomes where English is a second language. It will also investigate the Indigenous languages policies of Australian governments and the effectiveness of Indigenous language maintenance and revival programs.

This inquiry follows the committee’s recent inquiry into Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system, which found that language is an important component of cultural connection, and strengthens intergenerational relationships and community building. Many people who made submissions to that inquiry referred to language as playing a significant role in the wellbeing of young Indigenous people.

The federal inquiry was announced in July and on 31 August the Territory government launched a new policy framework which enables “the relevant director of school performance” to consider “proposals for additional within-school opportunities to provide cultural and home language learning.” Schools must go through an exhaustive application process before the end of this year to be considered. While this softening of the “first four hours” policy offers Yolŋu some hope, they are indignant at having to apply for permission when they already have a sophisticated bilingual program that has met accreditation standards for decades. The relaunched policy contains no detail about how these language programs will be resourced, an issue that has been unresolved for decades.

WHEN we reach Garrathalala I meet senior teacher Multhara Mununggurr. She tells me about her father, Maw Mununggurr, an important ceremonial leader, veteran of the second world war squadron and an outstanding politician, painter, singer and dancer. She also tells me about her daughter, Yananymul Mununggurr, who was educated in a two-way Yolŋu school and is now the chief executive of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association.

“My strength, my strength is here,” she says, looking out at the land and sea. “I speak about my father. How I was taught. Because he’s not around the continuation of my study is challenging. But I got a fortune from my father – the greatest gifts. Now I’m passing that to my children. My daughter is CEO of the homelands – huge homelands

across the Arnhem region. I have to build up that strength – passing the value from my dad and me. My daughter got that. Two granddaughters are teachers as well. My students, now my teachers.”

Multhara says Yolŋu children need their two-way education so they can link Western and Yolŋu cultures and knowledge together successfully. “It is very important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous that everyone should share the ideas and the philosophy together,” she says. “The land is very important and our culture is very important as well, but there is more significance in both worlds – the two worlds – how our culture and *napaki* [non-Indigenous] live together.”

Multhara says she wants the opportunity to show journalists and politicians her country, explain how the two-way curriculum works and why it is crucial. They have not made the journey yet, but Yolŋu remain optimistic that the parliamentary inquiry will change that. •