

By National Indigenous Times
reporter Gerry Georgatos



First Nations languages will not survive if English is pushed throughout communities as the exclusive language in Australia.

Languages and language restoration academics and linguists argue the loss of one's mother tongue or that of their parents is the loss of a significant part of their identity and they argue this would lead to the death of Culture. Some argue the push for English and the neglect of first languages are old-school racism.

Many experts say the first languages of region should be taught their schools. The East Arnhem's Yalmay Yunupingu, an educator who is fluent in her region's several languages, said the "bush languages must be taught in our schools by our bush teachers."

"The Education Department needs to support our bush teachers and the retention of our languages and to stop getting in the way of this," Ms Yunupingu said.

"Our children are sky-high literate in our languages even if they are not in English. If we teach in our languages our students will do very well."

Ms Yunupingu has argued again and again the United Nation's Declaration of the Rights Indigenous Peoples states First Nations children have the right to education in their own language.

Many believe the Australian continent would be enriched by many of its regions speaking their first language as other than English.

Oxford and Cambridge scholar, linguist Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann said the Federal, State and Territory governments should fund language reclamation and restorations. He said governments should compensate First Peoples for the loss of their languages.

"People who have lost their mother tongue due to linguistic should receive generous financial compensation to be used for linguistic revival activities," Professor Zuckermann said. "Each Indigenous Australian tongue ought to be declared the official language of its respective region and bilingual signs should be erected throughout Australia, just like in Wellington, New Zealand.

"Schools in Australia should be bilingual and both languages, English and the regional Indigenous languages should be taught.

"The importance of language to one's self esteem should not be underestimated. Language is about belonging, just like belonging to the Land is."

The Australian National University's Chair of Indigenous Linguistics, Professor Jane Simpson said language must be practiced in order to survive. Professor Simpson has studied several First Nations languages including Warungu, Kaurna and Warlpiri.

"There's a broad consensus Indigenous students need to be taught English to fully participate in society. Most people also agree Indigenous languages need to be preserved," Professor Simpson said.

Professor Simpson said children who are

Yalmay Yunupingu: Teach our kids in their native language and you'll see them grow and blossom



Yalmay Yunupingu ... "Education Department needs to support our bush teachers and the retention of our languages and to stop getting in the way of this". Image: Geoff Bagnall

taught in their home language are best set up for various success.

"Where the home language is used as the medium of instruction in the classroom at the start, children begin school with teachers who explain what's happening in the classroom in their home language. These teachers can then teach children English in a systematic way, building up their confidence in speaking, reading and writing English grammatically," Professor Simpson said

"They can explain the fascinating and complicated ideas of maths and science in a language children can understand, until they have mastered enough English for a switch of language of instruction to English. This is ideal. For it to work, governments need to invest in training fluent speakers of the languages as teachers, in helping them learn how to teach children to speak, read, write and understanding English and in developing elementary curricula and material in the languages."

Stewart Riddle is a lecturer in Literacies Education at the University of Southern

Queensland. Mr Riddle warns the number of First Nations languages are shrinking and will be lost if governments do not act.

He said raising literacy levels in English in First Nations children at the expense of their first languages would work adversely to closing the gap.

"There are some concerns about the normalising effect of policies that claim to work towards Closing the Gap," he said. "One example might be the assumption raising Indigenous literacy levels across Australia is inherently a good thing, in and of itself. It might be argued such attempts are not better than historic attempts to make Aboriginal kids more 'white' by sending them off to missions to be properly educated.

"Perhaps we should be asking questions about the underlying assumptions that are made about what it actually means to be literate, how this changes over time and how it differs across cultures. Who gets to decide? Are there different literacy demands for students in our major cities and those who live in remote communities? What cultural

literacies are valued?

"What relevance does sitting for the NAPLAN tests have for a young child, living in a largely oral-language culture in remote communities, where English may be their third or fourth language?"

Mr Little said anything that "is imposed" simply does not work.

"When families and communities are not only involved, but also deeply committed and in control, then there is a real chance for lasting change," Mr Little said. "While direct instruction itself is not a bad thing, declaring a narrow focused top-down literacy intervention is going to fix anything is a pipe-dream."

The Dean of Aboriginal Scholarship at the University of South Australia, Professor Peter Buckskin is adamant the right to reclaim one's language is pivotal to recovery from the impacts of colonialism.

"People might not understand there were around about 54 First Peoples nations within the State of South Australia," he said.

"We have generational speakers in the north of the State but even they are under threat without funding support from the government for maintenance of languages. You need to develop curriculum."

Professor Buckskin said he remembers growing up on the Yorke Peninsula - part of the Narrunga nation - but "our languages were denied to us by government."

"We were not allowed to speak our languages or to have them taught to us in our schools," Professor Buckskin said. "Our language is our culture and it connects us to our spiritual belonging to our lands and waters."

Professor Buckskin said "when languages are reawakened they deliver a great sense of pride".

"A real simple thing for Australian schools to do is for every school to put a sign out of the front of their school stating whose land they stand on, will help make people aware who was there before using the land - the oldest living cultures," he said. "More so than just symbolically looking at the Aboriginal flag, we begin conversations of who were here before and this then becomes a national conversation."

The challenge before us is to value difference and embrace diversity

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What I'm asking here is for someone to produce the data that says things are significantly improving for people whom these programs are targeted at. The Forrest Report hailed by some as the answer to all things "black" again lends itself to the same kind of farcical outcomes we see today - ones where we are doing things "to" or "for" rather than "with".

In some ways it doesn't really matter who wrote it, whether it was the millionaire mining magnate, or Noel Pearson, or Warren Mundine, or God himself. If its starting point is always framed in deficit assumptions and perceptions of Aboriginality, then we get the same as we already got. Aboriginality (seen as deficient) again appears to be the reason for such strong government support of the Forrest Report.

These assumptions and perceptions have been laid down in peoples' mindsets so deeply, for so long, that it is most often out of their awareness, out of our awareness as well and have never been challenged in a sophisticated public debate.

Some Aboriginal people all over participate in the deficit assumptions and conversations as much as people who are not Aboriginal. This behaviour is still just as disabling and soul destroying, and in fact some believe it worse.

Dr Chris Sarra (Stronger Smarter Institute) talks about Aboriginal children buying into the negative stereotype of Aboriginality because they start to believe that's what it means to be an Aboriginal. I wrote on this subject as well to describe the way in which Aboriginal people engage and participate in destructive behaviour and abuse of each other around identity. We seem to be more focused to "who we are" rather than "how

we are".

Some Aboriginal people also assume that by buying into the "white bashing" or "government bashing", that it somehow unites us for the cause and sometimes it does. Yet, what I see it doing is denying agency of self, it gives away your own power to lead change - to lead change of self and to lead change with others.

This "bashing" occurs between Aboriginal people as well and prevents any real dialogue because we are always in either attack or defence mode - we must move beyond this. It's very tiring, dishonourable and most ineffective. Stop the blaming and start claiming!

All I'm currently experiencing and being exposed to are ideologies of the right-wing capitalist, or the left-wing socialist. The challenge is the same for both sides of the great divide. The deficit assumptions of Aboriginality are not defined by which side of the great divide you sit on, or whether you are Aboriginal or not, they either exists in you, or you exist in them - or not. I'm not saying ideologies (capitalist/socialist) are wrong, yet when they are overlaid onto a set of assumptions and perceptions of Aboriginal people that are deficit and the public discourse excludes, then they lead to debilitating outcomes both socially and economically.

The complexity of the challenges demands a sophisticated and informed public debate. Not a public debate that attacks and discredits individuals as a way to win, yet one of courage that engages people in a dialogue to challenge assumptions within current approaches; and one which can focus the energy of passionate people who want equity and peace with

all people.

I call for a "Bringing Together Leadership" that enables change, rather than imposes it. We need a leadership that will develop policy and embrace practices, which recognise and value the existing strengths within people, creates spaces for dialogue for them to articulate their future and then supports them to create it. The power is within the difference, not the sameness.

This leadership exists, yet currently it's being suppressed by a dominant discourse of deficit and a discourse of deflection that constantly describes the "problem". What I mean by this, is when people who advocate for the current approach are challenged, they always revert to describing the "problem" as if I need convincing that there is a "problem".

How can we be courageous enough to have a sophisticated public discourse? One that is founded on evidence-based practice that enables difference to be valued and diversity to be embraced so that together we can progress through this complex maze?

There is a challenge for all who read this; how do we as individuals influence this change? How do we embrace our own agency and participate in the leadership of these challenges? How can we initiate and participate in the sophisticated, informed debates that are required?

We can all do this just by challenging our own assumptions of people who are different to us. You can do this at the kitchen table, at the boardroom table and in the clubs and pubs across this great land of ours. Please stay strong, be safe and enable the space for others to be safe as well.