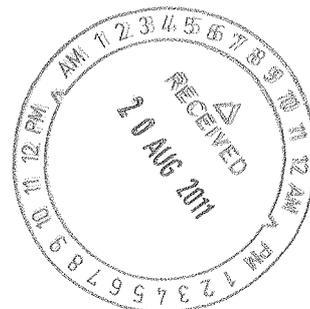


A Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES



This submission has two sections:

Section 1: Submission from Beth Graham M.Ed and Kathryn Gale M.Ed

This submission outlines the need for a bilingual/bicultural model of education for the Indigenous children of Australia who speak a language or dialect other than English, when they begin formal schooling.

To demonstrate their involvement in this area of education over many years, biographical information and a list of publications are attached.

Beth Graham and Kathryn Gale felt that the important contribution of Professor Grimes to this discussion needed to be brought to the attention of the committee. It is therefore attached to this submission.

Section 2: A Contribution by Professor Charles Grimes Ph.D

With the permission of Professor Grimes who was unable to prepare a submission at this time, the text of his booklet 'Indigenous languages in education: what the research really shows' has been included.

It should be noted that all those associated with this submission: Beth Graham, Kathryn Gale and Professor Charles Grimes would welcome the opportunity to speak to this submission on 'Language Learning in Indigenous Communities' in Canberra.

Section 1:

A Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

This submission is concerned with the education of Indigenous children who come to school speaking their mother tongue.

A Summary

Indigenous children, like all other children, need effective schools which are staffed by appropriately qualified teachers who take them from where they are to where they need to go. As experienced educators in Indigenous Education [Attachments 1, 2 & 3], we believe that when the mother tongue is valued and recognized, school can become a place where children explore and extend their cultural understandings, while they begin to learn English and the knowledge regarded as important by the Australian society.

The result is a school education for Indigenous children that can be regarded as ‘additive’ as opposed to the many ‘subtractive’ *English only* models of education. Such *English only* models of education, which allow for at most, just a token use of the children’s mother tongue, are destined to continue their pattern of failure, for they:

ignore the language, culture and the knowledge system Indigenous children bring with them to school, and so schools are simply not able to ‘start where the children are’;

result in Indigenous children being seen as ‘deficit’ and defined in terms of what they don’t know; eg English and such things as an understanding of our number system, rather than in terms of what they do know; eg one and possibly two or more languages and the spatial and other knowledge intrinsic to their culture.

Hence a bilingual/bicultural model of school education needs to be developed and implemented systematically, so these patterns of failure endemic in the current approaches are reversed. Some of the implications, for the development and training of all teachers and the system-wide support for bilingual/bicultural education, are briefly explored in this submission.

While such models of education provide a sounder approach to school learning, our experience is that they also contribute to the maintenance of the local language and so work to reinforce the cultural identity of the children concerned. Loss of these last remaining Indigenous languages is not only a calamity for the speakers of these languages but will diminish all those who consider Australia to be their home.

Discussion

'Research from Indigenous communities around the world as well as in the Northern Territory [Grimes, Section 2] has continued to demonstrate that the effective use of the child's mother tongue in school learning enhances their opportunities for success. Cummins [in the above] would argue that a two-language education empowers children and encourages the development of pride in their own language and culture. This in turn results in a strong sense of identity and self worth and leads to success in school.

In contrast, the current *English only* models of education which allow for only token use of the mother tongue, are destined to fail students who consequently will not achieve the required academic and cognitive gains assumed by the school process. These programs are also seen to contribute to the loss of language, culture and identity which is apparent in many Indigenous communities today.

Wherever possible, all such children would be best served by a model of schooling that:

- values and uses their mother tongue and the knowledge encoded in that language as the starting point for their formal schooling;

- demonstrates to the community that their way of being and knowing is valued and that the schooling offered will add on to what the children bring with them and not discard it or subtract from it;

- develops literacy in the mother tongue before doing so in English;

- continues Indigenous language and cultural studies as a highly valued strand of the total education program, leading to the development of translation, interpreting and other highly developed language skills [supporting the objectives of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership];

- develops an appropriate curriculum for the teaching of all aspects of English, Mathematics and other mainstream studies;

- attracts and maintains a body of teachers from both cultures who are specialists in teaching Indigenous children in a bilingual/bicultural setting.

It is realistic to expect that not all this will be possible in every community. However, the research evidence supporting the use of the mother tongue in the education of Indigenous children is quite clear and therefore every effort should be made to do as much as possible in all situations [Gale & Graham, 1992]. For those who fear diminished English outcomes if a two language approach in schooling is adopted, should note that research also demonstrates that strength in the second language is directly related to strength in the child's first language [Cummins, in above].

Unless early education begins with the language the children speak, while also teaching English as a second [or third] language, success in the school environment will continue to elude Indigenous children throughout Australia.

Some Implications for Learning and Teaching:

The need for qualified Indigenous teachers must be treated as a matter of urgency. Such teachers will not only teach children in their mother tongue, but will also need to develop curriculum for the variety of programs that emerge in their community and be aware when/if that knowledge differs from English. In the current context, children are left to work out these differences for themselves and frequently fail to do so [Graham, 1988].

In communities where initial literacy is developed in the mother tongue, Curriculum Centres staffed by local writers and artists are needed to produce necessary materials for school programs. With modern technology, such materials can be as attractive and accessible, as those in English. Facilities in major language communities could also provide Indigenous education resources to the smaller communities around them.

In this way, the bilingual/bicultural model of school learning ensures employment for; teachers, writers, artists, illustrators, linguists, story-tellers and other language and culture specialists. The outcome is a highly skilled workforce in well paid positions in these remote communities. An added benefit is the retention of language and strengthening of cultural identity.

Other teachers in these schools should be specialists in the teaching of English as a Second Language and have developed understandings of what is required to teach in cross-cultural contexts. Hence they need to be involved in ongoing and appropriate professional learning so they:

know how to teach English as a second language to Indigenous children, as well as using English as the language of instruction. [This can be compared with the expectations and qualifications of teachers in the Migrant education context];

are aware that at times, Indigenous languages have a different way of looking at the world. Teachers need to be aware of these differences and rather than ignore them, work with Indigenous teachers to deal with them;

appreciate that much of the learning and preparation for learning in mainstream education, occurs in life lived outside the school, and so starting points into western learning for children in Indigenous communities need to be adapted;

need to understand that the children not only need to learn English, but need to become proficient in the type of language interactions used in school [Graham, 1986];

need to have adequate pre-service and on-going professional learning to participate collaboratively in these cross-cultural contexts. They also need to demonstrate a willingness to learn the local language, so that they can be part of the community as well as a part of the teaching teams operating within the school [Graham, 1986 & 1999].

Some Implications for Schools and Education Systems

Excellence needs to be the defining word for bilingual/bicultural schools in remote communities. These schools should be recognized as essential to the on-going life of each community and respect and retain their own cultural knowledge base and the how and why of their own program. This requires strong school and community leadership as well as system-wide support. Principals and advisors need to be experienced, respected and highly qualified in Indigenous Education.

It would seem that there would be a role for the Australian Government in working with State and Territory Governments and appropriate Tertiary Institutions, to develop a large bank of teachers from both cultures who are qualified to work in Indigenous schools. Incentives then need to be provided to keep effective and committed teachers in place for longer and longer periods.

National Assessments undertaken at Year 3 through NAPLAN, are not applicable to Indigenous children who have their early education in their mother tongue. These children will not have advanced sufficiently in English to be able to participate at that level and will only measure what they can't do, not what they can. [Experience in the N.T. before the disbanding of the Bilingual program, indicated that by Year 5, participation in National Assessments (prior to NAPLAN) was more appropriate].

Finally, where communities, parents, teachers and students are involved in such a model of education, they need to be able to depend upon Commonwealth and State Government systems to structure administrative support ensuring the optimum conditions for the success of these programs.

Conclusion

When mother tongue education becomes a reality in the Indigenous schools of Australia, it will result in what Indigenous people are coming to refer to as 'two-way' schools. These schools will be repositories of a language and open knowledge that are integral to that community and will ensure that their students have access to English and the knowledge and ways of learning inherent in the wider community.

Such two-way school programs lead to confident, cross-culturally secure students who have real opportunities to make choices about where and how they live.

Beth Graham M.Ed., F.A.C.E

Kathryn Gale M. Ed.

Section 2:

‘Indigenous languages in education: what the research really shows’

by Charles E. Grimes Ph.D

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Professor Grimes’s experience and contribution to this area is as follows:

Professor Grimes is a member of an indigenous minority group. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University; a Linguistics Consultant with the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages (AuSIL), which is affiliated with SIL International, a partner organisation with UNESCO in language development and multilingual education (MLE); and Translation Coordinator at the Language & Culture Unit, GMIT, Kupang, Indonesia.

In the following pages Professor Grimes discusses the importance of beginning the schooling of Indigenous children in their mother tongue. He also comments on the current education policies of the Northern Territory Government.

Indigenous languages in education: what the research actually shows

Charles E. Grimes, Ph.D.

“Children learn better if they understand the language spoken in school. This is a straightforward observation borne out by study after study (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Dutcher, 1995; Patrinos and Velez, 1996; Walter, 2003). Even the important goal of learning a second language is facilitated by starting with a language the children already know. Cummins (2000) and others provide convincing evidence of the principle of interdependence—that second language learning is helped, not hindered by first language study. This leads to a simple axiom: the first language is the language of learning. It is by far the easiest way for children to interact with the world. And when the language of learning and the language of instruction do not match, learning difficulties are bound to follow.” (World Bank 2006:3)

“The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development.” (Cummins. 2000)

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

The gap in the Northern Territory

With something like 30% of the population of around 200,000 of the Northern Territory being indigenous, and those indigenous citizens speaking several dozen heritage languages, it is clear that the Northern Territory is multilingual, perhaps to a greater degree than any other state or territory in Australia. (See www.ethnologue.com for a listing of languages in Australia.) This presents special challenges for education, health, the job market and the criminal justice system, just to name a few key sectors.

But with something like 80% of the prison population being disproportionately indigenous, and the disproportionate lack of indigenous people employed in the mainstream community (also as a result of being educationally disadvantaged), it is clear that past and current policies and practices of the Northern Territory government (both current and past) in relation to the role of language in education, and cross-cultural communication in other sectors such as health and the criminal justice system, are for the most part ineffective. And as the adage says, ***“If you keep doing what you've always done, you will keep getting the results you've always gotten.”*** So it is time for the NT government to show the courage of taking a fresh look and a more informed approach to education in indigenous communities, and pursue a better understanding of the role of language in undergirding current problems in education, health, the job market, and the criminal justice system.

Around the world (including Australia), the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and English as a Second Language (ESL) have made huge advances in the past several decades, as have studies of issues facing speakers of minority languages in mainstream education (see attached bibliography). But there is a big gap between these fields, and the attitudes and practices of

general educators, policy-makers, and the national curriculum in education for the subject of English as it is taught in schools, which has for the most part been fairly static for decades and assumes that students are native speakers of Standard English. The latter field is either ignorant of, or chooses to ignore the developments in the former fields, even though the demographic of English-speaking countries such as Australia is increasingly multilingual, and the proportion is increasing of children in schools who do not come from homes where Standard English is the primary language. There is a move in some countries to force the educators through legislation to become aware of and accommodate many of these advances in related fields which are directly relevant to the language-related challenges faced in education and society.

This gap between what the research actually shows and the policies and practices in Northern Territory schools relating to language issues is quite glaring. The specifics of this are well documented in Simpson, Caffery and McConvell (2009), and in Devlin (2009). It does not speak well of the NT government, nor of its commitment to making a real difference in indigenous communities. It is time for a significant change in direction—but one that is better informed on the issues.

The World Bank (2005:1) observes:

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

The Northern Territory government ultimately wants their indigenous citizens to be part of:

- stable communities, who are
- both literate *and* competent in the national language—English;
- have a strong sense of identity and pride in their unique ethnic heritage (there can be no community stability without this);
- stay in school at least through most of secondary school, and preferably beyond;
- are productive and contributing members of society in whatever rural or urban community in which they live.

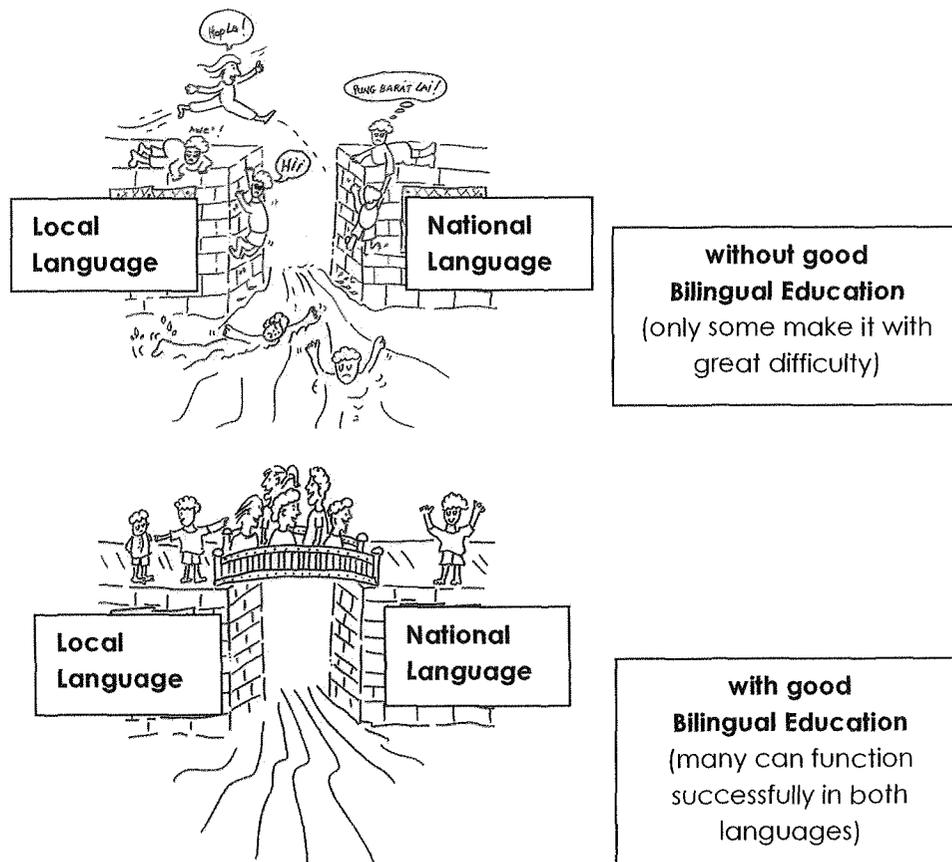
Worldwide experience and decades of research (including in Australia and the Northern Territory—see attached bibliography) show an overwhelmingly unified picture that:

- People who speak more than one language competently are not only enriched by it, but true bilinguals can also see the legitimacy of and appreciate multiple perspectives in ways that monolinguals can't. They have greater opportunities of participation and advancement in multiple communities.
- People who can function competently in *both* the national (majority) language and the local (minority) language tend to ‘succeed’ in both worlds (*bilingual*). They are the ones who become respected community leaders within the community, can represent the interests of the community to outsiders, and can also participate fully in mainstream society.
- In contrast, members of indigenous communities who are not fully competent in *either* the national language *nor* in the local language (*semi-lingual*), tend to be frustrated. They do not have a complete or mature cultural or linguistic framework for problem-solving, and they also aren't accepted by their own societies as having a legitimate voice in community affairs. Semi-linguals are often involved in anti-social behaviour.

- Where the government and educational system promotes only the national language and does not make space for or actively discourages the legitimate roles and use of local languages, this has been shown to contribute significantly to lack of self worth, marginalisation, and for some, active resentment. These also contribute to anti-social behaviour.
- Literacy is far more effective when the basic skills are done in the ‘mother tongue’—the language most actively used in the home. The research supporting this is overwhelming.
- Education that bridges from the local languages, eventually transitioning fully into the national language is far more effective and far less destructive than education that only functions in the national language from the start. This is especially true for communities in which a local language continues to have important roles for communication and identity, and the national language (i.e. English) is not the main language used in the homes. Again, the research supporting this is overwhelming.

A graphic illustration

- The following cartoons are commonly used to graphically illustrate the experience and frustration of children speaking minority languages around the world without and with a good bilingual education program. The cartoonist of this particular version, June Jacob, is a native speaker of a stigmatized minority language and has experienced these struggles for herself. She is now an educator who advocates for good multilingual education programs. (Cartoons ©2003 June Jacob, used with permission.)



Perceptions contributing to the problem

Bilingual education (or multilingual education), like other programs, can be done well or be done poorly. Policy-makers often dismiss the whole idea of bilingual education where it has been poorly thought through or poorly implemented, even though the poor practice may be in only a small number of communities. This seems to be true in the Northern Territory as well.

There is a misconception among some policy-makers that ‘bilingual education’ means the local language is taught, and the national language isn’t. However, the ‘bi-’ in bilingual means ‘two’. The goals of well implemented bilingual education programs are to help the students achieve full competence in *both* languages—not just one or the other. And this is healthy for the whole of society. Poorly implemented bilingual education programs may get this wrong.

Summary of research findings

The World Bank (2005) summarizes the findings of extensive and recent research relating to educating children initially in their own language and transitioning them to the national language. These are all outcomes that we assume would be valued in the Northern Territory.

- Children **LEARN BETTER**. This is supported by study after study.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations **STAY IN SCHOOL LONGER**.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations **REACH HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION** overall.
- Children in rural and/or marginalised populations **INCREASE SOCIAL MOBILITY**.
- End-of-primary **PASS RATES ARE HIGHER** in statistically significant ways where effective MLE programs have been implemented.
- Use of a language that children understand allows teachers to use more active and **MORE EFFECTIVE TEACHING METHODS**.
- First language teaching has been linked to **BETTER ACQUISITION OF LITERACY SKILLS** that also bridge over to the second or national language.
- First language teaching has also been linked to **RAISING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS** in a variety of academic subjects, including mathematics.
- Children in good bilingual education programs have been shown to be up to 5 times **LESS LIKELY TO REPEAT** a year.
- Children in good bilingual education programs have been shown to be up to 3 times **LESS LIKELY TO DROP OUT** of school.
- The two points above are all the more significant because children receiving instruction in first languages are **OFTEN FROM MORE AT-RISK POPULATIONS**.
- The use of local languages for instruction often leads to inclusion of **MORE LOCAL CONTENT** in the curriculum and **GREATER PARTICIPATION** of parents and community members as classroom resources. The whole community benefits by this sense of inclusion.
- As parents see their children successfully learn to read and write in their own language, the parents are often motivated to attend literacy classes as well. **ADULT LITERACY** improves.
- **COST ANALYSIS** shows that after only a very few years, good bilingual education programs that are well implemented are actually cheaper for the budget, and also
- tend to produce more productive members of society and fewer dysfunctional members of society than traditional “national language only” approaches to education.

Implications for the Northern Territory

It is not true that an ‘English-only’ policy (even if just for the first 4 hours of school) will necessarily help indigenous children learn English better. The research shows it is very likely to further marginalise them and contribute even further to low self-esteem and low achievement in learning outcomes.

The research also shows that indigenous students are **MORE LIKELY TO LEARN ENGLISH BETTER** if they have a well-designed and well-implemented bilingual education program in their indigenous language.

Furthermore, to try to claim that indigenous communities in the Northern Territory are the exception to the patterns found in similar communities throughout the world, elsewhere in Australia, and even in the Northern Territory itself, is not only ill-informed, but it is irresponsible.

Informal polling of teachers over a period of ten years around the NT shows that many can teach for years in communities like Tennant Creek and Katherine without ever realising that their indigenous students are not native speakers of Standard English. So the teachers never dream of approaching their students as second-language speakers of English, or benefiting from the many language-in-education studies that would help them be more effective teachers. The same informal polling also shows that many school teachers in the NT are unaware of the existence of Kriol and Aboriginal English, both of which are well recognised by sociolinguists—*these varieties based on English are not Standard English, but have their own grammar and vocabulary*. And therefore, these teachers also do not benefit from lessons learned about creoles in education that even have professional journals dedicated to the topic.

Many school teachers also do not recall having been given even basic orientation to the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Northern Territory. Surely there is room for improvement here.

Without the political will to implement good MLE programs, the best policies (which we don't yet have in the Northern Territory), the best curriculum, the best materials, and the best teachers, with full community support cannot pull off what is known to be the ‘best practice’ for education in indigenous communities. The research is unified and overwhelming. So it is puzzling why it continues to be ignored by government policy-makers and general educators in the Northern Territory.

The Bibliography of research relating to language, social identity, social stability and education in multi-lingual societies

The bibliography contains a total 691 entries. 273 of these are either about Australia, involve Australian scholars, or are affiliated with an Australian institution

The bibliography, 54 pages in all, has not been included in this submission here, but is available in the booklet: ‘Indigenous languages in education: what the research really shows’ which has been enclosed with **the hard copy** of this submission.

Attachment 1: Introducing the Authors

Beth Graham M.Ed., F.A.C.E.

Beth Graham was involved in 'English only' education of Aboriginal children in the early 60s. She returned to Yirrkala in 1973 and with a team of Indigenous and other teachers established the bilingual program in that school. She then went on to become an adviser and later the senior adviser in the Bilingual Section of the NT Department of Education. During this time she published extensively in matters relating to a two-language education for Indigenous children and on the way teachers from two cultures can work together to produce such outcomes [Attachment 2].

For her Master's studies she looked at the mathematical world of Indigenous children and in addition, explored the need for these children to learn not only English but the way English is used to explore knowledge and to make and share meanings in the context of formal schooling.

Kathryn Gale M.Ed

Kathryn Gale's 37-year career in Education began in the Northern Territory and South Australia in Indigenous Education. She was involved in the early implementation and development of the bilingual program at Milingimbi in the N.T. from 1975 to 1980.

She has worked as a senior teacher, teacher-linguist and curriculum co-ordinator in bilingual/bicultural programs with 3 Indigenous language groups (in the N.T. and S.A), as an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) trainer (across a remote region in South Australia), and in an Aboriginal languages revival project for 3 language groups (in urban and rural South Australia). During this time she published articles and curriculum documents with as focus on the teaching of literacy in Bilingual schools. [Attachment 3].

Kathryn is currently working with *Independent Schools Victoria* as a Principal Advisor on the COAG Smarter Schools National Partnerships Program with Low SES and Literacy & Numeracy Partnership schools.

Attachment 2: Publications by Beth Graham

CURRICULUM DOCUMENTS.

- Wangkami: A Handbook for Aboriginal Teachers involved in Early Childhood Education, NT Department of Education, 1980
- A Guide for Early Childhood Education: Transition, Aboriginal Schools Edition, NT Department of Education, 1981, [with M.Moechel].
- Mathematics in Aboriginal Schools. [Videos], for the Remote Area Teacher Education Program, 1983.
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- Mathematics in Aboriginal Schools: T-3, NT Department of Education, Part One - Transition, 1982, Stage 1 and Stage 2, 1987.
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- Language Power: Towards better teaching methods for developing language and literacy in Aboriginal bilingual schools, Books 1, 2, &3, NT Department of Education, 1988.
- Let's talk our language: Language survival strategies for Aboriginal languages, Unpublished draft 1991. [with K. Gale].
- Working in Teams in Indigenous Schools in the Northern Territory, A teacher professional development resource, NT Department of Education, 1999.

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- 'Living at Yirrkala', in Handbook for Bilingual Education, 1976.
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Vol. 9, No. 3, 1981.
- 'Distance or Difference in Aboriginal Education', in Education of the Isolated,
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- 'From the Known to the Unknown When the Known is Unknown',
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- 'Aboriginal Teachers and Bicultural Schooling', [With Harris S. and Odling Smee], in The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol. 13, No. 3.1985.
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- 'Concentrated Language Encounters: An approach to Language Learning with Aboriginal Children', Australia and New Zealand Conference on The First Years of School, Sydney, 1986.
- 'Mathematics Culture and Curriculum', a review of the literature related to the teaching of Mathematics to Aboriginal children, in Resource Material 1, Language Learning and Culture, Darwin Institute of Technology, 1987.
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- 'Mathematics Education and Aboriginal Children', in [ed, A. Bishop], Educational Studies in Mathematics, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1988.
- 'Language and Mathematics in some Aboriginal Classrooms', [Version 1], in The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol. 16, No.1 1988.
- 'An Introduction to Systemic Linguistics', [3 Video Tapes] Darwin Institute of Technology, 1988.
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- 'Growing into Bilingual Education: Jottings from the Journey', in Ngoonjook A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, NT, NO 16, Dec 1999.

Attachment 3: Publications by Kathryn Gale

- *From code-mixing to code-switching – it's a matter of control: lessons Learned from Aboriginal education* In *Idiom* Volume 41, Number 3, VATE Journal. 2005
- *Integrated Literacy/VET Outcomes for Certificate 11 in Social and Community Services. (Community Work)* (with J. Richards) Victoria University of Technology. 1998.
- *Aboriginal Studies: A primary School Cultural-Exchange Program Between non Aboriginal and Aboriginal South Australians.* M.Ed. Thesis. LaTrobe University. 1994.
- *Let's Talk our Language: Language Survival Strategies for Aboriginal Languages* (with B. Graham). N.T. Department of Education. 1992.
- *Narrunga, Kurna & Ngarrintjeri Songs* (with J. Agius, R. Amery, L. Newton, S. Varcoe) Kurna Plains School. 1990.
- *Traditional Aboriginal Children in Mainstream Classroom: Some Helpful Hints* (with A. Bagshaw) S.A. Education Department. 1990.
- *Learning Language: Helping Aboriginal Students Learn the Language of School.* S.A. Education Department. 1989.
- *If You're Moving to Adelaide, Read this Book.* S.A. Education Department. 1989.
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- *Listening to Children Read in the Reading Conference.* S.A. Education Department. 1987.
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- *Look-Cover-Write-Check.* S.A. Education Department. 1987.
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