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Bilingual the best way to learn English: AIATSIS Symposium

Aboriginal people and researchers have urged the Northern Territory Government to reverse its decision to dismantle Indigenous bilingual education in schools because it is the best way for children with other first languages to learn English and achieve literacy.

The call comes from community members and academics attending Friday's *Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory Symposium* hosted by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. AIATSIS convened the symposium, inviting experts and community members from across Australia to discuss evidence-based research in this field.

"We want our children to grow up strong in our culture and strong in the Western world," Wugularr community member Miliwanga Sandy said. "We want our kids to learn English, to attend school, to finish Year 12 and go on to university and have good jobs. The best way for them to do that is through the bilingual two-way schooling because they learn better in their mother tongue. We need that English because nowadays you need certificates and qualifications to get good jobs. We must be strong in both cultures."

In a Research Discussion Paper launched at the symposium, authors Dr Jane Simpson (University of Sydney) Dr Patrick McConvell (Australian National University) and Dr Josephine Caffery (Australian Catholic University) said children learn best in their mother tongue in the early years of education.

"The decision to dismantle bilingual education was taken not on the basis of evidence but because of lack of understanding. Learning a dominant language such as English in Australia through the medium of the mother tongue has proved to be a successful approach both in Australia and internationally," Drs Simpson, McConvell and Caffery said.

"Australian governments have failed to consider national and international evidence-based research on the value of bilingual education and the language rights of Indigenous peoples before making such a momentous decision, which could spell the death of the remaining endangered Indigenous languages in Australia," the authors said.

Walpiri community representative Connie Nungarrayi Walit urged schools to work with families to strengthen language maintenance and prevent communication between old and young people from being broken.

"The one thing we have left from our parents and grandparents which is really our own is our language, Warlpiri. This is the last thing we have left to pass on to our children and grandchildren," Ms Nungarrayi Walit said.

The symposium will be held in the *Visions Theatre*, National Museum of Australia from 9am-5.15pm followed by a reception at AIATSIS.

Media: The Discussion Paper *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous Language Policy: Dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory* is available under embargo to 5am Friday 26 June. For an embargoed copy, further information or interviews contact Chris Ryan, AIATSIS Communications
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