



Australian Society for Indigenous Languages

“To impact a life, we must speak to the heart”

Location: 30 Georgina Cres. Yarrowonga
Mail: PO Box 3575, Palmerston, NT 0831, Australia
ABN 66 763 306 359

Phone: 08 8931 3133
Fax: 08 8931 3177
Email: ausil@sil.org
Web: www.sil.org.au

Press Statement:

Education consultant shocked by Territory policies

Darwin, 28 October 2009

Visiting education consultant Dr. Kimmo Kosonen expressed shock to discover that the Northern Territory is ignoring international best practice for educating indigenous students in remote communities. He also noted that the trend for many other countries in the region is to abandon approaches that aren't working and develop policies that follow sound educational principles of “going from the known to the unknown”, acknowledging that “children learn best in the language they understand best”. But the NT seems to be going against this international trend, trying to implement approaches that are already widely known to be ineffective. He says, “I find this bewildering.”

Dr. Kosonen is a specialist in multilingual education and language-in-education policies and has worked in 11 Southeast Asian countries for more than 10 years as a researcher and a consultant. He consults with international agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and SEAMEO (Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation). He holds a PhD in Education from the University of Joensuu, Finland, with a specialisation on basic education in low-income countries.

He is visiting the Northern Territory this week at the invitation of the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages (AuSIL) and is holding discussions with various educators and politicians about the education of indigenous Australians in the Territory. After studying a number of recent scholarly reviews of NT policies and reading about the poor educational outcomes in the Territory, he expressed shock at finding the situation in the NT is not very different from many developing Asian countries in educating minority people who do not speak the dominant language in their home. He says, “I had assumed that a wealthy Western country such as Australia—well-known around the world for providing technical and financial assistance to many developing countries—would be providing a first-rate education to its indigenous people that meets their learning needs and actually helps indigenous children learn both English and the curriculum content.”

He fully agrees with many Australian educators and linguists that the current education policies in the NT—particularly the ‘first four hours in English’ policy—will not help indigenous children learn the curriculum content nor Standard Australian English. He says “From an educational standpoint, it is impossible that the current strategy of using Standard English for the first four hours as the sole language of instruction for those learners who are not first language speakers of English can achieve the desired outcomes, nor help these students reach the stated ‘benchmarks’ of educational achievement.”

He agrees with Assoc. Prof. Brian Devlin (CDU), Territory resident Prof. Charles Grimes (ANU), and many other scholars from around Australia who have been saying that the current NT policy goes against the research evidence from the NT, from Australia and internationally; it goes against international trends in educational policies and practices which are overwhelmingly supporting the use of first language-based education; and it also goes against common sense.

For further information contact: Phil Glasgow at AuSIL, 8931-3133

More information available at: www.sil.org.au.

[Dr. Kosonen & Prof. Grimes are available for interviews.]