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Early language support for Aboriginal school learning success

Almost three quarters of the 1,300 Aboriginal children who enter Northern Territory schools each year are from families where languages other than English are spoken in the home.

A review by the Menzies School of Health Research highlights the importance of additional language support in the early years to enable success in the school learning of Aboriginal children.

Menzies Professor Sven Silburn says there is evidence that both bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) instructional approaches can be effective but the most effective approach for a specific community depends on the availability of local language speakers, community preferences and the availability of suitably trained staff and other school resources.

“There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that there are cognitive, social and educational benefits for children exposed to two languages from early in life,” Professor Silburn said.

“The commonly held belief that children will become confused if they are exposed to more than one language in their initial years of schooling is challenged by recent evidence showing that the optimum time for children to commence second language learning is at the same time they begin learning their first language.”

Silburn says commitment and resources are needed for communities to support the introduction of English in the earlier years. These need to cater for the diversity of Indigenous languages across the NT and within some communities.

The review also found clear evidence that children from Indigenous language backgrounds who commence their primary schooling with some proficiency in English are advantaged in terms of their effective participation and success in the formal education system as well as within their own communities and wider society.

Menzies researchers reviewed the evidence from Australian and international studies on the best ways of supporting the early learning and language development of Aboriginal students.

A total of 243 eligible studies were located for review, and studies found that a consistent feature of successful Indigenous literacy and English learning support programs was that they were delivered with the close involvement and perceived relevance to family, school and community.

The Menzies review was conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Training.

A full text PDF of the report can be downloaded from:

<http://www.det.nt.gov.au/about-us/policies/documents/schools/literacy>

ENDS

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