

No Warlpiri, No School? A preliminary look at attendance in Warlpiri schools since introducing the First Four Hours of English policy

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Abstract

Bilingual education programs had been delivered in some Northern Territory schools for over three decades until the development of a policy in 2008 requiring all schools to teach in English for the first four hours of each school day. In justifying the policy, the Northern Territory government claimed bilingual education programs had a negative effect on attendance and enrolment. These claims have since been challenged and human rights breaches identified. Two years after the abolition of bilingual education, attendance and enrolment data from four Warlpiri schools do not show improvement in attendance rates and in some cases attendance rates and levels of student engagement within Warlpiri schools have reduced significantly. This provides serious challenges to NT Government claims and supposed evidence that bilingual education programs have a negative impact on enrolment and attendance and suggests a re-evaluation of policy relating to bilingual education is required.

Bilingual education programs, while not without their difficulties in proper implementation, have been shown through decades of research evidence to be a successful teaching methodology (see, for example, Grimes (2009) for a bibliography of recent research confirming advantages of bilingual education). When offered to government schools in the Northern Territory in the 1970s, bilingual education was embraced by many remote communities, keen to see their local schools give their own language, culture and knowledge a valued place in their children's education for the first time. (See Ngoonjook #16 for numerous papers exemplifying the energy put into bilingual education, e.g. Egan (1999), Marika (1999)) .

First-Four-Hours - policy development, justification and backlash

The Northern Territory Government delivered bilingual education programs in a handful of remote school with varying degrees of support until the end of 2008, when then NT Minister for Education, Marion Scrymgour announced the First-Four-Hours-of-English policy. Under the policy, all NT school students are taught in English for the first four hours of every school day (see NT DET 2009). This policy rendered the delivery of quality, structured bilingual education programs an impossibility;

effectively resulting in the abolition of bilingual education in Northern Territory schools. Scrymgour, and her ministerial successor Paul Henderson, claimed that bilingual education was a factor in unsatisfactory attendance and poor testing results in bush schools (ABC 2009) (even though only 9 out of over 80 “very remote” schools were designated “two-way” (i.e. bilingual) schools at the time of the policy announcement). After receiving considerable backlash and criticism in the weeks following the policy announcement, Scrymgour tabled evidence in the NT Parliament (subsequently shown to be flawed – see below) to justify the introduction of the First-Four-Hours policy. She presented statistics from two areas: enrolment/attendance and the NAPLAN national benchmark testing results and provided statistical comparisons between bilingual schools and ‘like’ non-bilingual schools (see NT DET 2008).¹

The evidence tabled in parliament in 2008 by Marion Scrymgour was subsequently shown to be flawed and somewhat misleading by Devlin (2009, 2010). Devlin pointed out selection bias within the sample of schools used in the Scrymgour data such as:

- including non-government (catholic) schools in the data sample (yet excluding the award-winning Murrupurtiyanuwu bilingual catholic school) (Devlin 2009, pp. 10-11)
- including a secondary-only school in the sample (*ibid*: p. 10)
- presenting NAPLAN testing data incorrectly (*ibid*: pp. 12-13)

Devlin (2010) has also demonstrated that by repeating the statistical analysis methodology used by NT DET in 2008, but instead using a more appropriate sample of schools and using data made available in 2009 via the Federal Governments MySchools website, bilingual schools actually perform much better than the NT Legislative Assembly was led to believe by the NT DET data analysis presented in November 2008.

¹ Interestingly, three years earlier the NT Government had announced it was “putting bilingual education back on the agenda” (Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, *Debates* 2005) and had published a report with findings that conflicted with Scrymgour’s 2008 tabled data. The 2005 report found bilingual schools performing favourably when compared to like non-bilingual schools presenting “...preliminary and provisional data to confirm that outcomes for students participating in bilingual education programs in the NT are marginally better than for students in ‘like’ non-bilingual schools.” (NT DEET 2005: xii)

Concurrently, the First-Four-Hours policy has come under sustained criticism for impinging on the rights of Aboriginal students to be taught in their own language, if so desired. The AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper by Simpson, Caffery & McConvell (2009) is heavily critical of the development of the First-Four-Hours policy and cites a number of relevant United Nations conventions to which Australia are signatories; most prominently the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (p. 13). In particular, Article 14 of the Declaration is being breached by the NT Government through the application of the First-Four-Hours policy:

“14.1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” and,

“14.3. States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.”

As recently as August 2010, the Australian Government has received international criticism for banning bilingual education in the NT. In a report from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, it was recommended that:

“the State party adopt all necessary measures to preserve native languages and develop and carry out programmes to revitalize Indigenous languages and bilingual and intercultural education for Indigenous peoples respecting cultural identity and history. In line with the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, to which Australia is a party, the Committee encourages the State party to consider providing adequate opportunities for national minorities to the use and teaching of their own language.” (CERD 2010, p. 6)

Two years on – revisiting the data

This paper presents a tentative step in quantitative analysis of attendance and enrolment levels in the two years following the First-Four-Hours policy which has been problematic since its development because of rights breaches and apparent absence of evidence-based policy. While benchmark testing results (e.g. NAPLAN) are a major component of such quantitative analyses, the 2010 NAPLAN data is not yet available. Instead, this paper focuses on some of the attendance and enrolment data available for the 2008-2010 period. This data is relevant considering the Northern Territory Government's previous use of attendance statistics to 'justify' the introduction of the First-Four-Hours policy at the expense of mother-tongue education.

When Marion Scrymgour tabled the so-called evidence in parliament in 2008, she quoted attendance and enrolment figures alongside benchmark testing results as justification for the dismantling of bilingual education. The data she presented contained the following claims relating to attendance and enrolment in bilingual schools:

- “Student participation rates bilingual schools (sic) were lower than (sic) non bilingual schools across all test areas and year levels”
- “The student enrolment numbers across year levels indicate that students in bilingual schools are dropping out earlier and at greater rates than students in non-bilingual schools”
- “The attendance rates in bilingual schools are less than (sic) the attendance rates for non-bilingual schools across all year levels.” (NT DET 2008, p.2)

Given that the poor attendance rates at bilingual schools were quoted by NT DET as a major justifying factor for scrapping bilingual programs and introducing the First Four Hours policy, it is worth evaluating attendance and enrolment data in the two subsequent years to see how former bilingual schools are responding to the First Four Hours policy. Obviously, if the Departmental claims of 2008 about the negative effects of bilingual education on enrolment and attendance are correct, then we would

see an increase in attendance in these areas in the former bilingual schools in the years following the inception of the First-Four-Hours policy.

In this paper, I present 2008-2010 enrolment/attendance data, using the four Warlpiri schools – Lajamanu, Nyirрпи, Willowra and Yuendumu - as a sample, with a particular focus on Lajamanu. I have selected only the four Warlpiri school as it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss statistics from all former bilingual schools (and, comparable non-bilingual schools) and also because these four schools provide a micro-sample of recently bilingual schools (Lajamanu, Willowra and Yuendumu) and a non-bilingual school (Nyirрпи) which is useful for comparative purposes. The reason for the special focus on Lajamanu school is because, firstly, Lajamanu’s Warlpiri-English program has received considerable media attention over the years and secondly, recent enrolment and attendance figures for Lajamanu School are dramatic, showing drastic reductions in both attendance and enrolment figures since the inception of the First Four Hours policy.

Lajamanu School - background

The Warlpiri-English bilingual program at Lajamanu School started in 1982 with strong community support. For example, a former principal reported ten adults working through all of 1982 without pay to develop resources for their Warlpiri-English bilingual program (Lingua Franca 1999). In 1999, Warlpiri teachers from Lajamanu proclaimed:

“When a new Principal comes to a Warlpiri school they are not to come and change the Bilingual Program. Never. Lajamanu school should always teach in both Warlpiri and English.” (Warlpiri Teachers at Lajamanu 1999, p. 54)

Former staff also suggest academic results showed improvement in both language domains during the height of the bilingual program (Four Corners 2009).

Lajamanu School received national media attention, being profiled in two programs produced by the ABC current affairs program 4 Corners – 1986’s *If we all die... No*

one speak language and 2009's *Going back to Lajamanu*. Together, the two programs show the school at the height of its bilingual program (Four Corners 1986) and the lows felt in the school and community following the departmental quashing of Warlpiri education. The 2009 program spoke with a number of Lajamanu residents about the demise of Warlpiri education in light of the new First-Four-Hours policy. Jerry Patrick Jangala said:

“Only one hour (of Warlpiri) - and that one not enough, it not enough for us” (Four Corners 2009)

Joe James Japanangka said:

“... you have to learn Warlpiri too because that's his first language.”
(*ibid*)

The short exchange between the ABC reporter and a Warlpiri parent indicates an ongoing community desire for Warlpiri language programs to be maintained:

Debbie Whitmont: What about your son? What do you hope for him?

Zachariah Patterson: Keep, always keep his language, you know, strong.

Debbie Whitmont: And English? You want him to learn that too?

Zachariah Patterson: No, ah for me I want him to learn Warlpiri first, then English come later. (*ibid*)

Lajamanu School – 2008-2010 enrolment and attendance data

Lajamanu School was once held up as a model for good bilingual programs and community engagement but now the NT Department of Education and Training's own data shows a significant reduction in both enrolment levels and attendance rates at Lajamanu School since 2008.

The series of graphs presented below utilise data provided by NT DET on their website² in the *Student Enrolment and Attendance* series (NT DET 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d). NT DET collates enrolment numbers and attendance rates in every NT school at eight separate ‘data collection points’ throughout the school year. The data presented here is a continuation of the same data series that was used in the *Data from bilingual school* report (NT DET 2008) tabled in NT Parliament in 2008 as ‘evidence’ to support the dismantling of bilingual education.

Chart 1: Lajamanu School enrolments 2008-2010

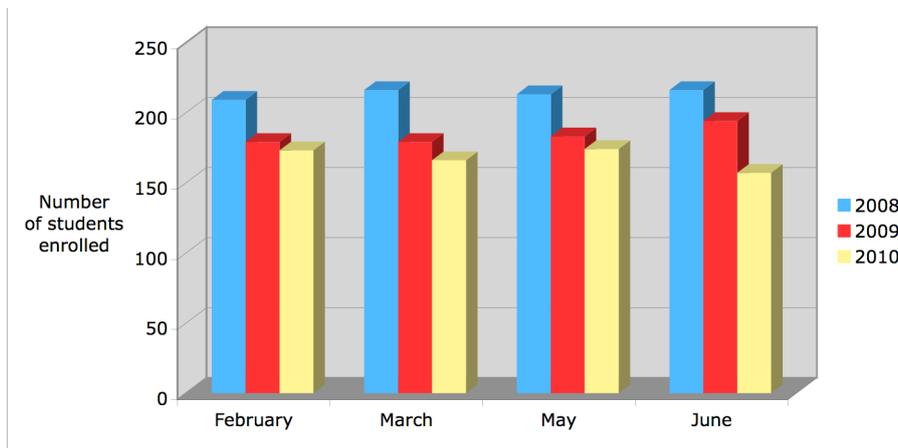
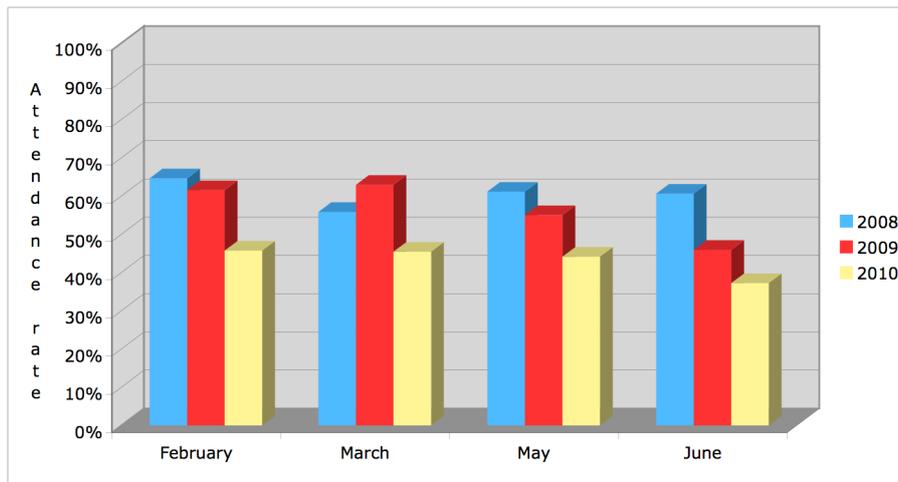


Chart 1 provides a comparison of total number of enrolments at the March, May and June collection points in years 2008-2010. The chart clearly shows the number of enrolled students at Lajamanu School has dropped considerably since the collection of the 2008 data, which, incidentally, was prior to the announcement of the First-Four-Hours policy. Note also that it is not possible to claim that the 20-25% reduction in enrolments is matched by a drop in overall number of school-age children in the general population at Lajamanu.

Chart 2 below shows the attendance rates at the same three collection points (March, May and June) from 2008-2010. This shows that not only are enrolments dropping but that attendance has also dropped drastically to levels consistently below 50% since the First-Four-Hours policy was announced.

² See: <http://www.det.nt.gov.au/students/at-school/enrolment-attendance/enrolment-attendance-statistics>

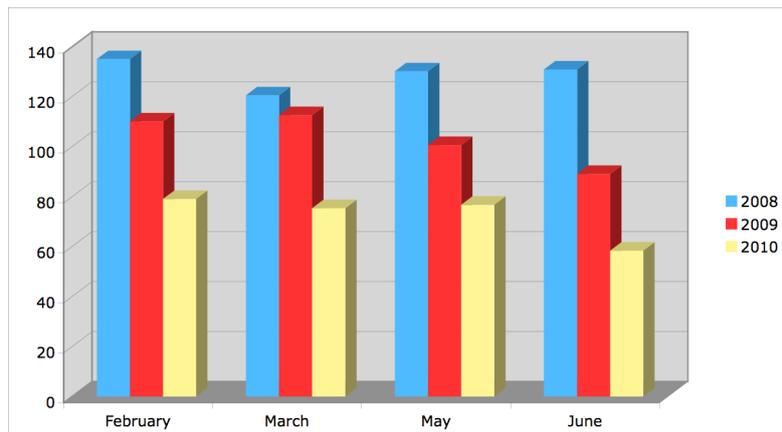
Chart 2: Lajamanu School attendance rates 2008-2010



Also note that the repeated drops in attendance shown in Chart 2 occurred despite the threat of parents and caregivers having welfare payments linked to school attendance under the measures of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or “Intervention” (see FAHCSIA 2009).

The third chart represents an attempt at providing a fuller picture of community engagement with schools. To do so, I have multiplied attendance rates by the enrolment figures at each data collection point to create a comparative picture of changing levels of student engagement. In the case of Lajamanu School which is seeing reductions in both attendance and enrolment levels, Chart 3 presents a dramatic picture of disengagement by the community with the school since the inception of the First-Four-Hours policy.

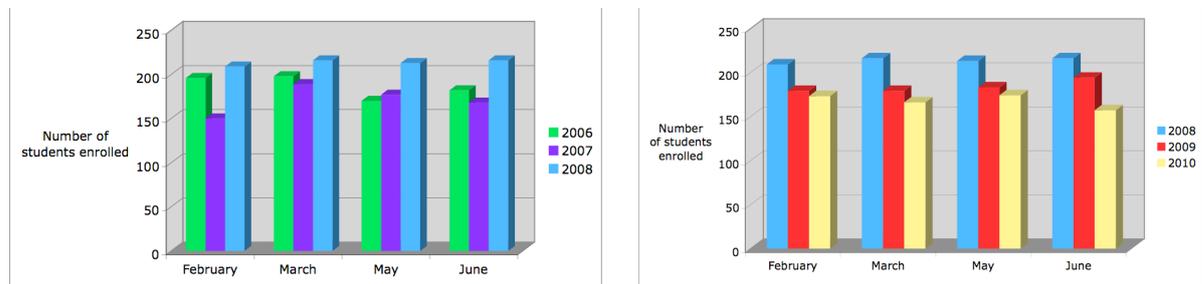
Chart 3: Lajamanu School overall student engagement³ 2008-2010



Although this data suggests significant deterioration in student engagement at Lajamanu School, it is not possible to conclude that the lack of a Warlpiri-English bilingual education program is the sole or even the main reason. However, given that the school was once one of the leaders in bilingual education programs and there is strong evidence of community support for Warlpiri language education, it is uncontroversial to suggest that the First Four Hours policy is a factor.

It is also interesting to compare the above charts with the equivalent charts that use data that was tabled in NT Parliament in 2008 as ‘evidence’ for the abolition of bilingual education (see NT DET 2008). For Lajamanu School, at least, there is no indication of falling enrolments or attendance from 2006-2008 in contrast to the post-First-Four-Hours data shown above.

Chart 4: Lajamanu School enrolments 2006-2008 and Chart 1 (as per above)



³ Overall student engagement = enrolment total x attendance rate

Chart 5: Lajamanu School attendance 2006-2008 and Chart 2 (as per above)

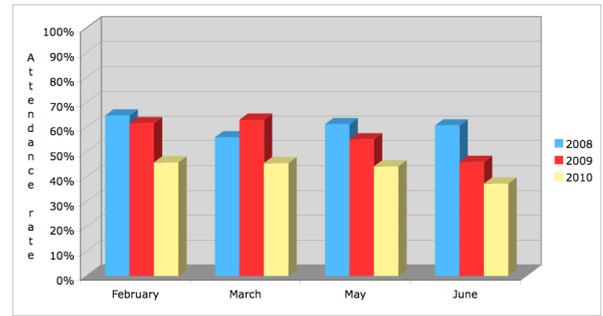
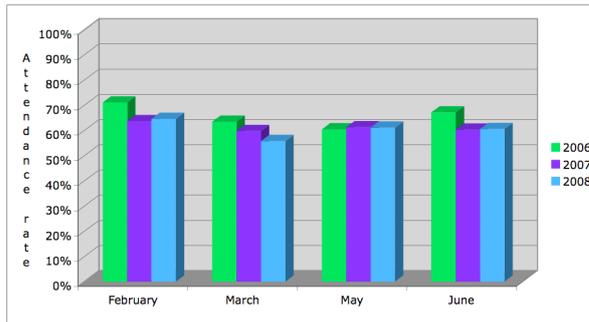
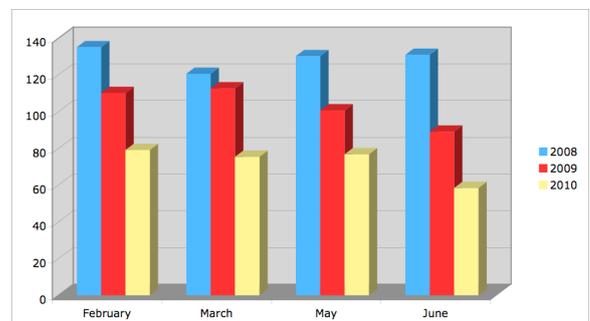
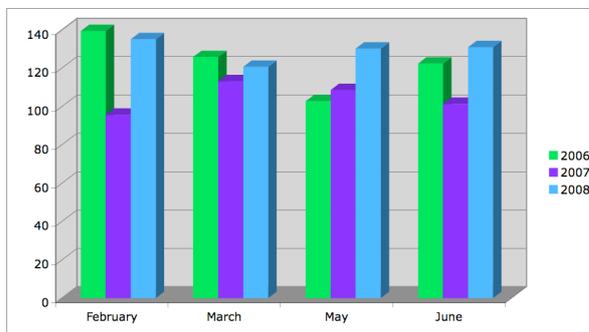


Chart 6: Lajamanu School overall student engagement 2006-2008 and Chart 3 (as per above)



The above comparisons show that for Lajamanu School, enrolment and attendance since the inception of the First-Four-Hours policy has dropped off significantly which clearly contrasts with claims made in the parliamentary-tabled report that non-bilingual schools outperform bilingual schools in these areas.

Data from other Warlpiri Schools – Nyirрпи, Willowra, Yuendumu

While children at Lajamanu seem to be virtually deserting their school, it is important to widen the scope of the analysis, to determine if similar results are evident in neighbouring schools since the development of the First-Four-Hours policy. I have selected the other three Warlpiri schools as a sample because two of them, Willowra and Yuendumu, were also bilingual schools at the time of the policy announcement and also used in the data provided to NT Parliament. Nyirрпи however lost its bilingual program in 2004 and so this data becomes a control sample.

Below is a repeat of the graph series presented above but using data from Willowra School.

Chart 7: Willowra School enrolments 2008-2010

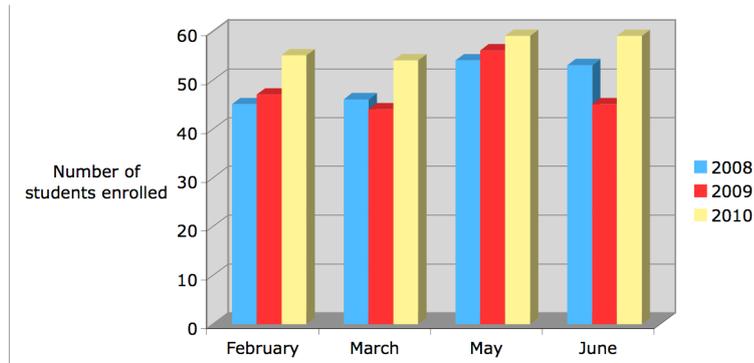


Chart 8: Willowra School attendance 2008-2010

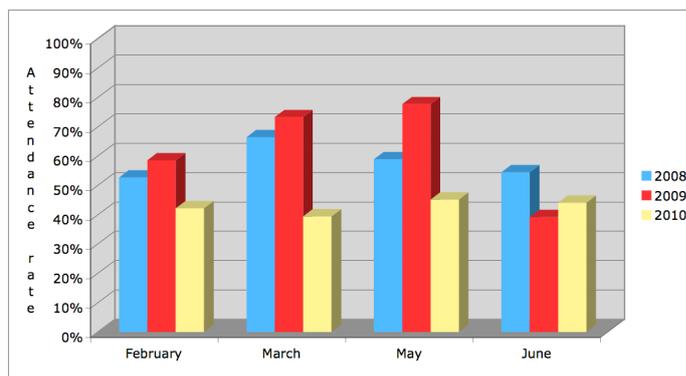
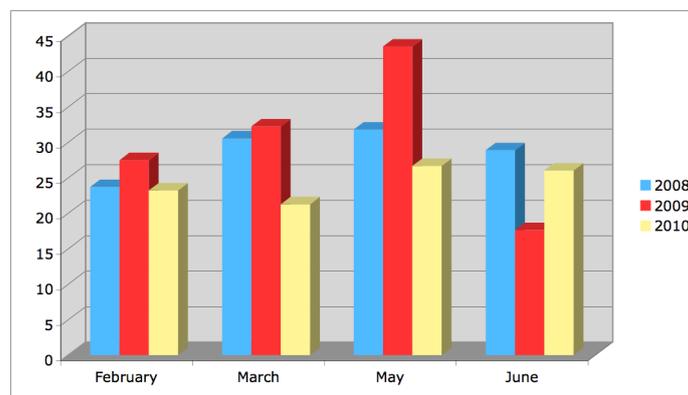


Chart 9: Willowra School overall student engagement 2008-2010



The Willowra data shows that since 2008, there has been a general upward trend in student enrolments (Chart 7) which is not likely to be significant considering most remote communities have young, growing populations. Chart 8 shows a spike in attendance in early 2009 until May, but, notably, the five data collections since then

show a significant drop-off with attendance consistently below 50%. This again, counters the governmental claim of 2008 that bilingual programs result in poorer attendance. The overall picture of student engagement given in Chart 9 shows that 2010 levels are in each instance lower than the 2008 figures, despite slight increases in enrolment numbers. This again is clear evidence that the First-Four-Hours policy is not resulting in an increase in school engagement by children at Willowra.

Below is the equivalent graph series for Yuendumu School which delivered a Warlpiri-English bilingual program from 1974-2008.

Chart 10: Yuendumu School enrolments 2008-2010

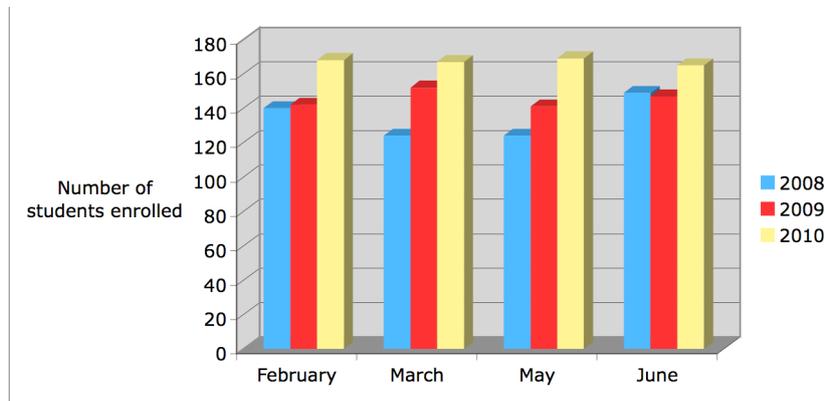


Chart 11: Yuendumu School attendance 2008-2010

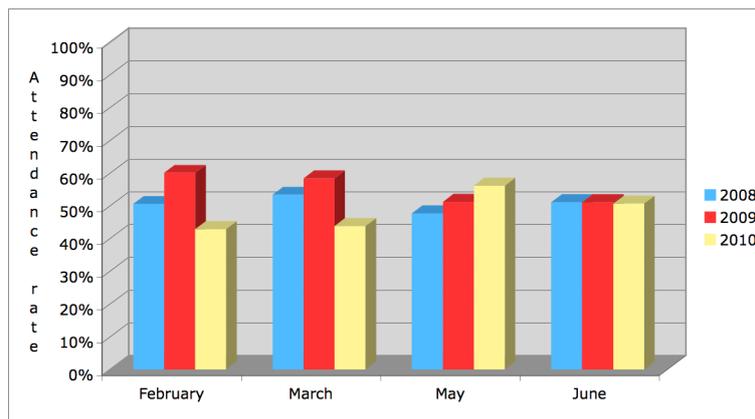
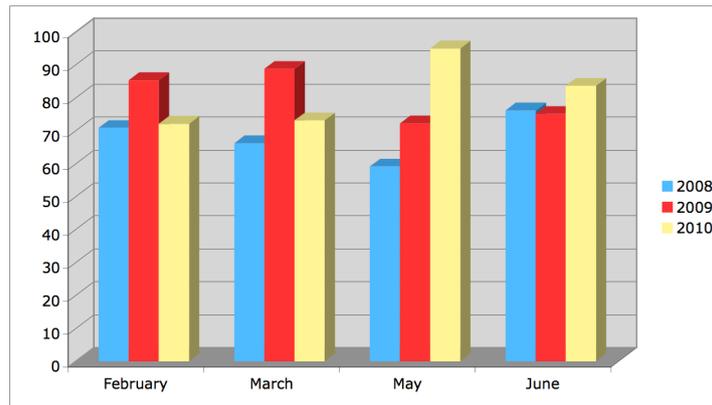


Chart 12: Yuendumu School overall student engagement 2008-2010



Like Willowra and unlike Lajamanu, Yuendumu is showing an increase in student enrolments (Chart 10) but attendance rates are generally poor, teetering around the 50% mark. Chart 11 doesn't indicate any clear trends in attendance in 2010; the February and March figures are the lowest out of the 12 readings whereas the May reading is relatively high. Looking at the overall student engagement in Chart 12, the 2008 figures are consistently lower, indicating there are slightly higher levels of engagement at Yuendumu since the First-Four-Hours policy was introduced, however this is due primarily to increases in enrolment, not improved attendance.

Lastly, the data for Nyirрпи School, which has been an 'English-only' school since 2004, can be considered control data for the other Warlpiri schools which were bilingual up until 2008, is presented below:

Chart 13: Nyirрпи School enrolments 2008-2010

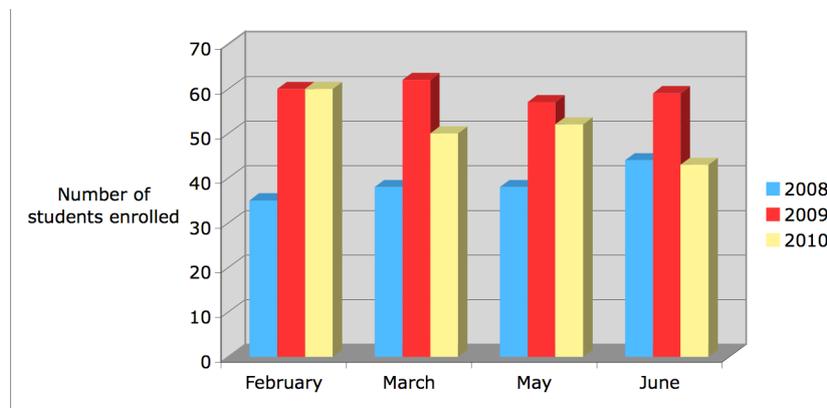


Chart 14: Nyirрпи School attendance 2008-2010

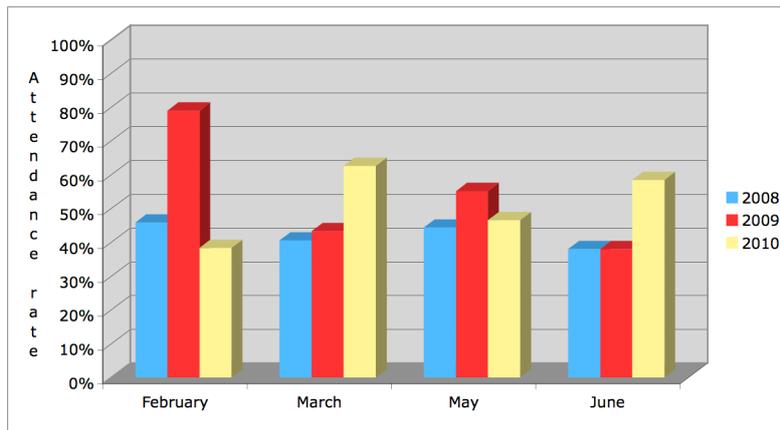
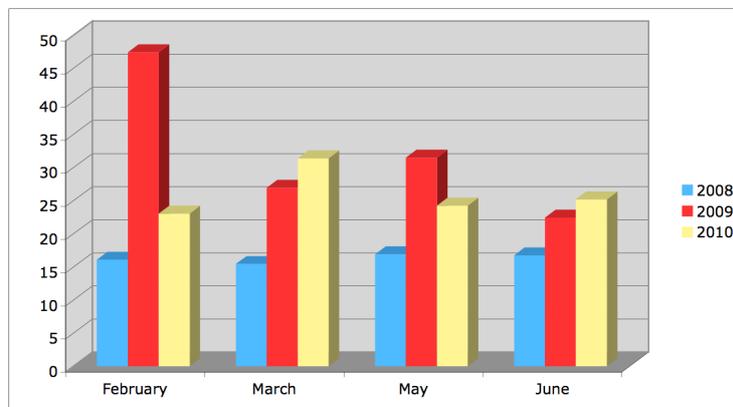


Chart 15: Nyirрпи School overall student engagement 2008-2010



The data from Nyirрпи shows very poor attendance in 2008 (around 40%) despite it operating under the now departmentally-preferred English-only model. Improvements in the following two years are evident, however again, this cannot be attributed to the introduction of the First-Four-Hours policy as this policy did not have a significant impact on education delivery at Nyirрпи School. The low attendances evident at Nyirрпи suggest that a re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches could be investigated in order to improve student engagement.

Conclusions

When it was announced in 2008 that the First Four Hours of teaching in all NT Schools was to be delivered in English, it essentially abolished bilingual education programs like those that were running in Lajamanu, Willowra and Yuendumu Schools. The Northern Territory Government attempted to justify the policy with

flawed data and one of the claims of the data was that attendance rates and enrolments in bilingual schools were less than that of equivalent non-bilingual schools. It should then follow that after implementing the policy, attendance and enrolment levels in recently bilingual schools should show improvement, yet the data from Warlpiri Schools does not demonstrate this. In fact, quite the opposite is happening in Willowra and in the case of Lajamanu, there has been a severe reduction in both enrolments and attendance since the First-Four-Hours policy was introduced. In the case of Yuendumu, the attendance figures are ambivalent, but enrolments have increased.

In November 2008, the then Minister for Education, Marion Scrymgour, tabled a document in Parliament that proclaimed:

“The attendance rates in bilingual schools are less than (sic) the attendance rates for non-bilingual schools across all year levels.” (NT DET 2008, p.2)

Since that time, Warlpiri students have been denied the opportunity to receive adequate instruction in their own language in local schools. Not only is this a breach of the rights of Warlpiri (and other Aboriginal) people, but it has not resulted in the proposed and desired increase in attendance in Warlpiri Schools.

Table 1 below collates the 36 attendance readings used in this paper – nine of the readings were taken while bilingual programs were in place, the remaining 27 readings were from English-only Warlpiri schools or those required to adhere to the First-Four-Hours policy. The table shows that the worst attendance readings (below 40%) have all come from English-only or post-First-Four-Hours schools. It shows that 58.3% of attendance readings from English-only or post-First-Four-Hours schools were below 50%. In contrast, 91.7% (or 11 out of 12) readings from bilingual schools were above 50%.

Table 1: Attendance figures in Warlpiri schools February-June 2008-2010: comparison between bilingual programs and English-only/First-Four-Hours

| Attendance rate | Under Bilingual programs | English-only/ post-First-Four-Hours |
|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| below 40% | 0 | 6 |
| 40.1-50% | 1 | 15 |
| 50.1-60% | 7 | 8 |
| 60.1-70% | 4 | 4 |
| over 70% | 0 | 3 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>12</i> | <i>36</i> |

It is not possible to claim that the First-Four-Hours policy is the sole or main factor driving changes in attendance and enrolment figures in former bilingual schools. However the data presented in this paper gives a clear indication that the policy is not leading to improved attendance or enrolments in the recently-bilingual Warlpiri schools. This is in distinct contrast to the claims made in 2008 by the Northern Territory Government about the negative effect of bilingual education on attendance.

It is hoped that the information presented here provides a case for ongoing evaluation of the data and a re-consideration of the potential, widely-known benefits of bilingual education. This necessity for such re-evaluation is becoming increasingly necessary given the international rights concern relating to the First-Four-Hours policy. Indeed, the Australian Human Rights Commission has recently recommended that:

“... the Government take urgent action to support the reinstatement of bilingual education approaches in schools, and safeguard the future of bilingual education through binding agreements with state and territory governments and the provision of ongoing resources to support its implementation.” (AHRC 2010, p. 13)

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