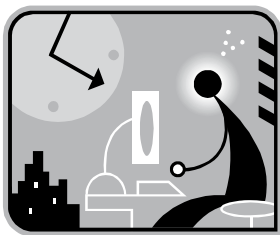




From the Secretary's **DESK**



English for the First Four Hours

The number four already has various significances in our culture. It's the smallest composite number equal to its prime factors; it's the atomic number for Beryllium; it's the number of wings all insects have, except for flies; there are also the four dimensions of the spacetime continuum, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the Fab Four. Now in the Northern Territory we have the compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day.

Why the first four hours of the school day? Why not three or five? The thinking behind such basic aspects of the policy is unclear. Generally, it aims 'to improve literacy and numeracy results, particularly for Indigenous students'. I use the word 'aims', because words like 'plans' or 'is designed' seem hardly appropriate for such an incoherent, inconsistent and irrational policy statement. For instance, four hours in English (arguably) attends to proficiencies in English, but how in any way does it address proficiencies in numeracy? Would the Chinese be any better at Maths if they learnt it in English? Stereotypically, the Chinese are superb at Maths. Perhaps we'd be better off teaching Maths in Chinese.

One of the more asinine features of the policy is the following statement: 'The requirement is subject to a common sense interpretation to allow for the timetabling of morning classes for Languages Other Than English (LOTE) in secondary schools and colleges.' Apparently LOTE does not include Indigenous languages, even though the guideline to the policy acknowledges that English may not be the first language of students, particularly in the early years of schooling. Indigenous languages can only be taught in the afternoon, while any other language can be approached more 'commonsensically'. Some LOTE, it seems, are more equal than others – a hypocrisy which is driven home by the staffing of ESL Indigenous students compared to the staffing of non-Indigenous ESL students.

A common sense view might see in this policy the disaffection of students from attending school or the breeding of resentment at the disrespect toward Indigenous culture. A commonsensical person may be able to understand the superstition of the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans with the word 'four', because in their languages it's a homonym for 'death'.