

Blueprint for a Monolingual and Parochial Australia?

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A few days ago the Primary Principals' Association released a draft charter which they claim is a 'strategic, thoughtful and forward-looking statement of (the purposes of primary schooling)', which begins to equip 'our children...to lead the nation through the 21st century'. These principles are sensible and commendable. However, if we view the curriculum areas that are proposed as the core areas, which should 'equip children to play a part in the world beyond the school', they are narrow and limiting: English literacy, Mathematics (including numeracy), Science, and History (which 'shows children their place in the world through learning about important stories, people and events from the history of Australia and Australians'). The glaring omission in the draft charter is a recognition of the increasing trends towards globalization, and the fundamental need to equip students to participate in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world.

The need for the development of intercultural awareness and understanding through the study of languages has been incorporated into curriculum documents in Australia and in most other OECD countries. General Peter Cosgrove, former head of the Australian Defence Forces has stated that: 'Languages skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of the world order'. With a narrow emphasis on English literacy and the relegation of languages other than English to the category of 'supplementary subject', one might wonder how small the world is to which the principals are wishing to condemn future generations of Australians?

There are many reasons why Languages other than English should be among the core subjects at primary school. Some concern the crucial role of languages in the total education of the young child, others future benefits. In a recent report to the British Council, English linguist David Graddol, establishes that within 10-15 years, English will have become a basic skill around the world and that those who in addition know other languages will have the 'edge' while monolingual English speakers will be disadvantaged. All EU countries other than the UK now require children to take a second language at primary school and most EU countries and many Asian ones have three languages compulsory in education. Finland, which consistently outperforms Australia in achievements of school students throughout the curriculum, does not find the curriculum too crowded to require all students to take three languages throughout schooling.

Languages need to be given an adequate time allocation. Currently 97.8% of Victorian primary school programs give less than the government-recommended 150 minutes a week – that is, languages are treated as 'supplementary' subjects. In a recent survey conducted by the Australian Council of State School Organizations, some 70% of parents wanted languages to be compulsory from early primary school to Year 10 and 90% of parents and 70% of children believed learning a language would help their understanding of the world.

The monolingual 'world' offered by the draft blueprint would introduce children is not even present-day Australia. The 2006 Census shows, for instance, that 27.9% of Melbournians and 31.4% of Sydney-siders speak a language other than English at home, and that doesn't even take into account those who speak a LOTE regularly but not in their own homes.

Languages are needed in the core to give monolingual English speakers some of the experience of practising bilingualism which most children in the world have. It also assures those from bilingual backgrounds that there is nothing wrong with speaking two languages. (Australia experiences a high degree of shift to monolingualism among children of migrants.) Young children are very flexible in attitudes and in some of the skills that are needed to acquire a second language.

The draft blueprint erroneously assumes that literacy can only be acquired in English and assumes that other languages take time away from literacy. In fact, international and Australian literature convincingly shows that literacy can be acquired in more than one language and/or that literacy skills can be transferred between languages (even between ones with different writing systems). Research by psychologists at Monash University has demonstrated a direct link between learning a second language in early primary school and reading readiness in English, the children's first language.

This is not surprising, as acquiring a second language increases one's preoccupation with and understanding of the structure of words, of sentences and of sound systems, which are so important in the acquisition of literacy. Literacy is like learning to walk, it is only acquired once, even if adjustments have to be made when you walk backwards, uphill, in the water or on ice. The principals' understanding of literacy having to be acquired separately in each language is contradicted by research into speech processing. Adequate programs in a second language are an important contribution to literacy.

Victoria has been at the forefront of developments in primary school language and bilingual programs since the early 1980s. We owe it to our children for these programs to be improved and enhanced, not undermined.

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