

Languages: All Key Learning Areas are Equal – But Some Are More Equal than Others

Tony Liddicoat et al: From "An Investigation of State and Nature of Languages in Australian Schools" March 2008

One of the differences in language education policies around Australia is whether languages are compulsory or elective parts of the curriculum. The mandating of languages is probably the most controversial of the policy issues around language study.

During the investigations for this project, a number of common themes were expressed both in favour and against mandating language studies.

The most common rationales for compulsory language study are:

- language study is important but languages will not be offered by schools or taken by students if they are not compulsory;
- mandating languages shows clearly that language education has value ;
- mandating languages gives direction in a context of general apathy or ignorance about languages.

The most common rationales against language study are:

- language study should not be made compulsory for people who simply do not want to study them as this only means that students are disengaged;
- other important subject areas are not mandated so languages should not get special treatment;
- the community does not want compulsory language study; and
- languages should be offered only if the quality of the programme is assured.

These rationales in many cases reflect different interpretations of the same phenomena. The perception that languages are not valued in the community leads some people to conclude that languages should be mandated for study, while others conclude that they should not be.

Some of the reasons for wanting compulsory language study reflect a pessimistic view of the future of languages education if they are not compulsory and reflect misgivings about the willingness of students, communities, and school leaders to engage voluntarily with language learning.

The reasons for not having languages as compulsory parts of the curriculum often reflect responses to perceived difficulties about languages education and argue that because such difficulties exist, those facing difficulties should not be required to act.

Some of these views appear to be based on some underlying assumptions that require further investigation.

The first is the idea that mandating languages where other subjects are not mandated gives a special place to languages. The first question this view raises is whether it is in fact true that other subject areas are not mandated. The question of mandated curriculum areas can be seen in two ways.

There are areas of the curriculum which are expected to be taught and for which such an expectation is normative – that is, these would be taught in all schools at all levels regardless of policy prescriptions and if they were not taught there would be important consequences for the school that did not offer them. Such curriculum areas are, for example, literacy and numeracy. These can be considered to be mandatory parts of the school curriculum and their inclusion is unquestioned.

Where questions of mandating arise for these areas, the issue is about mandated minimum time allocations.

In at least some jurisdictions other curriculum areas are mandated, most notably physical education. Where this is the case, the mandating is often unquestioned by significant parts of the community as they see the curriculum area as centrally important for the resolution of some identified problem, for example, childhood obesity. For these subjects, the mandating is seen as a way of ensuring that something that is believed to have value is included in the curriculum, which might not be included in all schools.

It would appear that mandating languages would therefore be consistent with the normal treatment of curriculum areas that are felt to need policy support to ensure their inclusion in the curriculum of all schools. If the lack of language learning in Australian schools is considered to be the cause of some problem for Australian school leavers, but if community expectations and students' study choices will not address this problem ecologically, then mandating languages would be the appropriate policy solution.

A second issue that calls for comment is that language learning should not be mandated as this would lead to classes with disengaged students. This view seems to be based on two underlying assumptions:

- that curriculum areas should only be required for all students if all students are engaged in studying them and
- that disengagement is a normal feature of the languages classroom.

The idea that only engaged students should be offered a curriculum area is one that makes the teacher's job in the classroom easier, but does not seem to be in and of itself an educative decision. Moreover, while languages may have particular problems around engagement because of community perspectives of the value of languages, it is not true that languages are the only curriculum area in which students are disengaged. Many teachers of other subject areas, including 'core' areas such as literacy and numeracy, also experience disengagement; however, this would not be used as an excuse to discontinue the subject area.

The argument against mandating languages on the basis of students' engagement is one that implicitly assumes that languages are not a necessary, integral part of education but rather an optional extra.

The argument that languages should be offered only if the school can ensure the quality of the programme also calls for comment.

At one level it seems obvious that schools should seek to provide high-quality education, and if a school is not able to offer a high-quality programme it should not offer the area. Features that affect programme quality for languages are usually articulated as the lack of suitably qualified teachers, problems with ensuring continuity if a teacher leaves the school, and problems with providing adequate time allocations because of the 'crowded curriculum'. This argument also has assumptions that relate to the ways in which languages are valued compared with other parts of the curriculum.

A school would not cancel a mathematics programme because there was no suitably qualified teacher, or because the teacher may leave the school, or because there was not enough time available in the curriculum to offer the subject. These sorts of arguments about languages again imply a view that languages are not an important part of the curriculum.

It is also questionable whether languages must be compulsory in order for students to take them as this implies a very pessimistic view of the community and students' perceptions of languages. However, it is true that at least some students continue to study languages whether they are mandated or not and some parents at least advise their students to continue in a language even if it is not compulsory to do so. This shows that where parents and students see the value of language learning, mandating languages is not necessary.

The question here is whether language learning should be only for those who value languages or whether what is gained through languages should be a part of every student's learning.

The solution to this problem of providing languages to all students would therefore require either mandating languages or significantly altering community values and perceptions.

In Australian policy documents, 'languages' is identified as a key learning area and it is this idea of 'key' that is at the heart of the debate about mandating languages. Effectively, if all key learning areas were actually understood in the same way, they would all be compulsory to some degree and the expectation would be that all students developed some capacity in each area.

The question of mandating languages can be resolved only with an understanding of education more broadly. If education is seen as embodying certain key learning areas, then the very idea of 'key areas' should be that they are educationally important for all learners. Such a formulation logically requires that these curriculum areas be provided to all learners and that schools be accountable for educating their students fully in accordance with the way a full education is understood, which is effectively what mandating means.

The issue therefore is not that languages need to be treated differently from other key learning areas but rather that they are treated equally as key learning areas.

Where languages remain elective and in schools and jurisdictions which provide only minimal language programmes, the issue is the overall quality and breadth of the education offered to learners in comparison with how a good education is understood.

If the national goals for schooling are in fact an expression of how Australian governments understand a complete education, then it is clear that some schools and some jurisdictions do not offer their learners a complete education.

The differing treatments of languages across Australia calls into question what is actually meant by the idea of languages as a key learning area in the *National Goals of Schooling* (MCEETYA, 1999).

A Principal's View:

Even though languages are compulsory, that doesn't mean schools will have a language programme. It's hard to set up and keep going and the Department is on my back about other things. As long as I don't have to report on languages, why would I make the effort? Principals think about what they have to do and if there's any time over then they focus on the other things, so unless languages are a real priority you won't get much change.

A Parent's View:

I don't understand the 'crowded curriculum' argument. Why is it like that? In Europe, kids study two or three languages and you don't hear about the crowded curriculum there. So why would languages crowd the curriculum here? In any case, how can giving a good education crowd the curriculum? Is that what the curriculum is for? To give kids an education?