

The case for investing in diversity

Jieh-Yung Lo: 23 October 2007

The recent presentation by Kevin Rudd to Chinese President Hu Jintao showcased the importance of being bilingual. Yet the children of migrants face many challenges in negotiating between cultural identities as they attempt to participate in Australian society. For young new arrivals, the complexity of these challenges are heightened by the pressure to fit into their new environment, which may often conflict with the cultural norms, the social expectations of their country of origin and the values held by older generations. It is important for the many young Australians with culturally and linguistically diverse roots to be supported in maintaining their culture and language of origin.

Bilingual and bicultural skills have been recognised highly by the Victorian Government. According to the former education minister, John Lenders, "Language education is an integral part of the school education experience for Victorian students. In an increasingly globalised world characterised by the rapid movement of peoples and new information communication technologies, languages are and will continue to be a vital learning area in our schools."

The Victorian Government recently announced increased support for after-hours community ethnic schools by topping up existing funding with a further \$300,000 in training for community languages school teachers, and increasing the per capita funding from \$100 to \$120 a student. Better known as community language schools, they currently provide courses to more than 34,000 Victorian primary and secondary school students in more than 50 languages.

These schools are conducted by community organisations or individuals outside normal school hours teaching languages at the primary and secondary level for between two and five hours a week.

Another local initiative is the Victorian School of Languages. Usually held on a Saturday, it offers education programs in 44 languages to secondary students who do not have access to language programs in their mainstream schools.

Similar programs are currently being funded by the Queensland, South Australian and New South Wales governments.

Despite these state government commitments, many migrant communities are grappling with issues such as loss of their cultural identities, inter-generational problems - often due to a lack of common language skills and experiences - and the obvious difficulty of balancing two cultures.

Individuals with a second language and cultural identity are highly sort after in the workplace, and research shows that people with these skills have been successful in a number of careers, including business, diplomacy, journalism, education, tourism and government. Research also shows that young people with a proficiency in a second language are more likely to be successful in learning other languages.

It is important to acknowledge that language is more than just spoken and written communication, but also an expression of inherent cultural intricacies. Language and culture are inseparable. Their coexistence underpins most language courses, where language is taught in the context of the geography, history and culture of the countries of its origin.

For young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, maintaining and exploring one's culture of origin can be a commitment that leads to great personal development and fulfilment. More importantly, it develops an understanding of other countries and cultures, which in turn contributes to the rich tapestry of our increasingly culturally enlightened multicultural society.

Cultural exchange programs organised by governments, universities and non-government organisations are a valuable way of exploring one's own cultural identity and fostering diversity and harmony within and between cultures.

The success of young people in maintaining their culture and language are often linked to the strength of their parental relationships and guidance they have received. As suggested by the Australian Council of State School Organisations, a good strategy for encouraging young people to maintain their ancestral language is for one parent to speak and read with the child in English, and the other parent to speak and read in the home language, so the child becomes used to operating equally in both languages.

As the child of Chinese-Vietnamese migrants, I have had the privilege and opportunity of learning about my heritage and culture from my parents. I was raised in a very traditional Chinese family in Australia and my values and ethics are a convergence of the two cultures. In a society where multiculturalism has enabled ethnic communities to celebrate their traditions and heritage, we must continue to embrace our culture and share it with our peers.

Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have a great deal to offer the Australian community and economy. They should be encouraged to maintain and foster these important traits and talents and contribute their knowledge and experiences to our developing shared culture and increasingly diverse global workplace. Having bilingual and bicultural skills won't just lead to successful employment, but personal fulfilment and development.

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