

ATTITUDES TO STUDY OF LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Presentation to DEST Forum with ACSSO and APC Monday 19 February 2007

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) have been actively involved in the ongoing languages education debate at least since our national consultation process to provide input to the development of what became the National Statement and Plan for Languages Education 2005-2008.

An ongoing indicator of concern is the Year 12 position where for many years the numbers of students including a language subject stands steadily at about 12% for public schools and 13% for non-government schools. This despite an array of expensive national review and reporting projects going back to the landmark 1993 “Languages at the Crossroads” research analysis.

The 2002 LOTE Review highlighted the importance of parent and family understanding of the benefits of languages study and their role in forming positive student attitudes. This is consistent with the John Hattie (2003) research which attributes 30% of the factors of positive learning to effective teaching – and 60% to the student-family context and how that shapes the attitudes, values and behaviours of young people in the learning process.

We were keen to undertake a survey of family attitudes. And, from our discussions with stakeholders, it was clear that the total value of the survey would be enhanced by also including an attitudinal analysis of teachers, principals and other stakeholders. This would consider the extent to which their perceptions and attitudes are aligned – and the extent to which and areas in which there are significant divergences of their attitudes: which might raise strategic issues and identify areas for further exploration.

The survey was enthusiastically backed by all stakeholder organisations, and we received much positive mail from parents and teachers. The survey was launched online in early August 2006 and closed at the end of November 2006: and resulted in some 3,500 fully completed survey forms. Of these respondents, at least one-third provided extensive qualitative input in terms of their experiences, often in the form of mini “case studies”.

This range of data is currently being analysed, and a full report should be available for publication by end of March 2007. We believe it will provide a rich and multi-layered resource in itself – and its value should be enhanced when these findings are able to be cross-referenced with the findings of some of the other funded research projects on languages education e.g. the Scope and Nature of Languages Education, the Leadership project, etc.

The following provides only a very small snapshot of a first-cut of the data in relation to some key quantitative analysis questions; and much of it here focusing mainly on the parent and student perspectives, since that was the intended key audience DEST asked us to consider.

Usefulness and Relevance of Languages.

- 90% of parents and 70% of students said this helps students understand their world
- 74% of parents and 66% of students said it improves future employment prospects
- 63% said the best way to learn about another culture is via a language
- 50% of parents were worried at low levels of Year 12 students studying languages...
- ... But only 29% of parents were in favour of reducing the number of languages on offer – and there wasn't strong support for reduction from other respondents either.

- **However**, 66% of parents said that many parents and many students - and Australians in general - do not see the relevance of learning a language. This may suggest most respondents were motivated to do so because they are personally convinced – but are somewhat unsure about the commitment of others around them...

Should all students study a language?

- 86% of parents and 60% of students said language study should start in early primary
- Nearly 70% of parents and 40% of students said language should be compulsory in Primary – and also compulsory in early High School
- 65% said studying a language helps with English
- Less than 20% felt that students having problems with English, or special needs students, should be exempted.

Confidence in Language Programs and Teaching in Australian schools

- 55% of parents and 70% of students had positive regard for language teachers
- 84% of parents and 50% of students felt discipline was as good as in other subjects
- Only 25% of parents - **but 70% of students** - felt languages are well taught.
- Only 23% of parents felt languages sits strongly in the curriculum
- Every category of respondent felt that languages is a KLA in **name** but **not in practice**:
 - 82% of Tertiary language educators said this
 - 86% of education system bureaucrats said this
 - 63% of Principals said this
 - 40% of students said this
 - 55% of parents said this.

Coordination and leadership

- All categories strongly agreed that coordination and continuity is pretty appalling across the country between primary, secondary and tertiary.
- Is our Principal committed to languages education?
 - 83% of Principals said yes...
 - But only 8% of Departmental Languages Administrators agreed
 - Only 3% of tertiary educators agreed
 - However, 62% of languages teachers agreed their principal is supportive
 - And 45% of parents and students agreed.

Knowledge and Support of Languages Statement and Plan 2005-2008

- **18% of parents** were aware – and **only 60%** of other categories – need to raise awareness, understanding and commitment across all stakeholders.

- **Confidence in Commonwealth and States providing resources to implement the national plan was low:**
 - 8% of parents have this confidence
 - 13% of languages teachers have this confidence
 - 10% of Principals have this confidence
 - 13% of Departmental people have this confidence
 - 4% of tertiary language educators have this confidence
 - The rest plainly have reservations (the qualitative data in the open responses gives a range of experiential reasons they may feel this way...)

Parent involvement & engagement

- 76% of parents want and expect to be consulted and involved in school decisions affecting languages education (only some 20% felt this was safely in the hands of subject and education experts).
 - The majority of Principals and Language Teachers agreed with that.
 - Only **30%** of parents felt adequately informed, and
 - only **15%** felt they had been appropriately engaged
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As indicated, the full range of both quantitative and qualitative data will be explored in detail, with comprehensive findings and recommendations, in the full Report due by end of March 2007.

Some may say that what we have done is to highlight much the same issues as identified in earlier processes: the 1993 “Languages at the Crossroads” Research; the 2002 National Review of LOTE, the 2002 National Forum, the 2003 MCEETYA Review of issues affecting languages education and so on.

The reason for this continuity in identification of key issues is plain. Just as the level of Year 12 students including a language in their subjects has not shifted appreciably in many years, so we believe that the critical issues which bear upon this, have been pretty much constant through that time. They are still there, and need to be addressed.

This suggests that so long as we go on doing the same things in the same ways that we have always done them, we will continue to get the same results we have always got. It also suggests that things are unlikely to be changed just by commissioning more small-scale projects with a limited scope and short-term shelf life. Activities which just tinker temporarily with one issue or another generate some brief surface turmoil, which quickly fades when the project ends, leaving people disappointed and dispirited in its wake. What is needed is a longer term horizon, an integrated plan with joint commitment from States and Federal governments – an integrated strategy that will engage all the stakeholders and address all the issues concurrently and progressively, to achieve real and sustainable change.

While setting aside \$1 million for a number of pump-priming projects in each year of the quadrennium looks like action, the question is one of how much this results in “long term traction”. After all, an annual resourcing of \$1 million is only an investment of about \$0.30 in each student – not even a “sandwich and milkshake” – more like the price of two Minties.

We believe governments must work together to do better, because the families and young people of Australia certainly deserve much better than that.

Rupert Macgregor
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19 February 2007