

LANGUAGES EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Volume One Number Nine: 12 July 2007

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Welcome to the **Languages Education in Australia Newsletter**. Produced by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) jointly with the Australian Parents Council (APC), this Newsletter started as a monthly publication and is rapidly evolving to be a much more frequent event through 2007 - to inform school communities and other subscribers about events, activities and initiatives around the country related to languages education.

We want this newsletter and our website (<http://www.languageseducation.com>) to become increasingly interactive, building two-way communication and providing a venue for school communities to put forward ideas, discussion topics, suggestions – and *a gallery of good news stories and photos about how your school is engaging its community around languages education*. Contact us on: info@languageseducation.com

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MAJOR RESEARCH REPORT LAUNCHED

Attitudes Towards the Study of Languages in Australian Schools

On 12 July 2007 ACSSO and APC jointly launched the final Report setting out the findings and recommendations of their National Survey of Attitudes to the Study of Languages in Australian Schools in 2006.

The initial analysis of the data was originally circulated as a national Discussion Paper on 15 April 2007. This was to encourage public discussion of the issues, and to enable anyone who had not participated in the survey to raise any further issues they felt had not been fully explored.

Executive Summary

"Learning a language in Australia should be seen like learning Maths or English, kicking a ball at recess time or eating lunch - it is a normal part of the curriculum in which every student should participate. It is part of an education for life."

Sadly, for many students in many Australian schools learning a language is not a normal part of the curriculum as envisaged by this South Australian teacher.

The sub-title of this report is deliberately provocative - will the National and State and Plan be acted upon to make a difference to the state of language education in Australian schools; or will the next decade parallel the history of the last, when the momentum for change in relation to languages was gradually lost only to be replaced by an indifferent political and educational leadership and a generally apathetic public?

"I think that in general, Australians think of educating their children for local, not global capacities."

Language has been the Key Learning Area that has been politically easy to ignore. Languages have slipped off the education agenda over the last decade, and public debate has been virtually non-

existent. No political party has sought votes for language education in the same way that other educational topics have been thrust into the spotlight from time to time.

If anything, the present Federal government rhetoric has turned Australians more inward, through a focus on "Australian values and culture", the primacy of learning English and emphasising the assimilation of new arrivals as opposed to the ideals of multiculturalism.

And the States, which have the fundamental responsibility for education in Australia, are just as complicit. They too have allowed languages to languish.

The National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools represents another restart of the languages debate. If it was the first time that languages education had been placed on the agenda for priority action, it surely would have been met with considerable enthusiasm.

However, a study of the recent history of this curriculum area reveals that languages education has been on a stop start pathway since the 1980s.

Aspirations and targets have not been matched by the resources to deliver quality programs. Reports such as **Language Teachers: The Pivot of Policy** (1996) reported that language teaching in Australia was hobbled by a shortage of qualified languages teachers. Eleven years on, this situation still exists.

The **National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools** ('the Statement') reads well, providing an excellent rationale for the reasons why languages should be taught in schools. It is a document which should be supported by all who are interested in making Australia a country that can genuinely take its place on the international stage.

In essence, it provides a strong argument that educational jurisdictions should be promoting and extending the reach of language education. In releasing this document, Education Ministers are to be commended, but they have set themselves a considerable challenge.

That challenge is to attach appropriate funding and high level strategies to match the ideals and intent of the document.

The Statement provides a strong foundation on which to base an implementation plan that realises the aspirations contained in the document. Unfortunately the accompanying **National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008** ('the Plan') cannot in any way be regarded as a plan which implements the Statement. It is a timid document which steps around the periphery of a major weakness in Australian education.

On analysis it has no priorities and no funding commitments attached to it. At best the Plan provides a basis for the allocation of project money designed to facilitate further research, information gathering and perhaps a public relations exercise. At worst it will do nothing to convince stakeholders that MCEETYA is serious about making the Statement one of reality.

In fact the MCEETYA response to languages education highlights the discontinuity between political vision and political will. The National Statement is indeed a visionary, aspirational statement, and as such is of significant value in progressing the goal of improving school languages education.

On the other hand, the National Plan represents an accurate manifestation of current political will, which falls well short of the aspirations contained in the Statement. Political will is best judged by examining strategies and funding allocations. Using these criteria, there can be little confidence that the current Plan, which is an aggregation of small scale projects, will result in any major improvement to this curriculum area.

Following the release of this report in draft form, the Group of Eight Universities launched a paper titled **Languages in Crisis**, and called a summit meeting of interested parties in Canberra. The Go8 view is entirely in accord with the findings of this report.

If one is to accept that there is a crisis in languages education, then one cannot accept mild, cautious solutions as the means to address the crisis. Language education needs a bold, high level intervention

- it needs transformational leadership - it needs a circuit breaker to arrest the continuing downward spiral of quality language provision.

Consequently this study believes that for the Statement to have credibility, it must be supported by a fully funded National Implementation Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2009 - 2012 which replaces the current plan on its expiry in 2008.

In the event that such a plan is not produced, this study recommends that the only honest approach is for MCEETYA to formally withdraw the National Statement, on the grounds that it provides the community with expectations that are both unrealistic and unachievable.

This research finds that there is strong support for languages education from those people who participated in the study. However all groups said that Australian society, and within it, the parents of Australian school-children, were in general apathetic towards languages education.

The study also found that a significant number of school communities reflected the same national apathy.

Whilst many of the findings of this study are not at all surprising, they are important as they bring together the views of six stakeholder groups. In this respect, the study is unique, as it introduces a broad perspective into the debate.

The main findings include:

- Governments need to exercise leadership through giving clear messages of support for language education, not mixing the messages with words and actions that detract from the intent of the National Statement and Plan.
- There are simply too few qualified language teachers to guarantee access to quality programs. More language teachers need to be trained. There should be incentive programs to recruit and retain language teachers in our schools.
- There is an appalling disconnect between the levels of schooling that affects the smooth transition of students. This needs to be addressed as a priority.
- The purpose of language education is not clearly articulated, judging by the range of programs that are regarded as acceptable by authorities. The nature of inter-cultural language learning is not clear to the public or to practitioners.
- Existing systemic syllabuses or teaching guidelines are at best unhelpful and at worst non-existent for language education in many primary schools.
- Incentives for schools to offer, and for students to study languages need to be introduced.
- Too little time is allocated by schools to language learning and the way that time is arranged often affects the continuity of study.
- In many primary schools, language teachers provide the release time for mainstream teachers. This practice is counter-productive to run effective language programs, and needs to be addressed.
- Language teachers often work in isolation, and need greater access to professional development and networking opportunities.
- Language teachers need classrooms to call their own.
- There is a disconnect between universities, schools and school systems which works against good planning and other aspects of languages education.
- A concerted campaign to promote language education is required. A part of this campaign should involve professional learning programs for school leadership teams, careers advisors and other classroom teachers to improve the level of whole school support.
- Parent organisations have a role to play in improving the status of languages in the eyes of the community.
- The national Plan should make explicit an expectation that parents have a role to play in the implementation of the Plan.
- Education jurisdictions and authorities should audit their current policies and operational practices and abandon any that work in opposition to the intent of the Statement and Plan.

The study concludes that despite the picture of systemic neglect that emerges in this study, there are many examples of good practice and sufficient community and professional support on which MCEETYA can build in implementing its vision, as expressed in the National Statement.

Note: The full report is basically in three sections: Each is quite substantial - especially for printing!

1. **Executive Summary, Recommendations:** overview of the data analysis and findings (89 pages)
2. **Appendix 1:** Quantitative Data: Analysis of Responses to set Survey Questions (75 pages)
3. **Appendix 2:** Qualitative Data: Open-ended written responses (by states and categories of respondents (466 pages)

Read more at: <http://www.languageseducation.com/attitudes.pdf>

ACSSO Media Release

A Time to Speak - and a Time to Act

"Learning a language in Australia should be like learning Maths or English" said one teacher respondent to a national Research Survey conducted by the peak parent organisations in late 2006 "It is a normal part of the curriculum in which every student should participate. It is part of an education for life!"

The final Report of that research, "**Attitudes Towards the Study of Languages in Australian Schools**" was launched today in Canberra by ACSSO in conjunction with the Australian Parents Council (APC).

The Report shows that parents and students across the country have a similarly strong expectation that languages learning should be an essential element in a balanced curriculum, and that all students should have access to an appropriate range of language study opportunities:

- 90% of parents and 70% of students said language learning helps students understand their world
- 74% of parents and 66% of students said it improves their future employment prospects
- 63% said the best way to learn about another culture is via language
- 50% of parents expressed real concern about the continuing low numbers of Year 12 students studying languages
- 70% of parents and most students were strongly against reducing the number of languages on offer or of watering down the standards of languages courses
- Nearly 90% of parents and 60% of students strongly felt that language study should start in early Primary
- Some 70% of parents and 40% of students said languages should be compulsory from early Primary school through to Year 10

Sadly, the results of the research graphically illustrate the extent to which those high expectations of parents and students - despite the strongly evident commitment, passion and dedication of Languages Teachers in schools across the country - are not being met.

Instead, parents and students are telling us loud and clear that their experience is that continuity, co-ordination and consistency of languages programs is at an appalling level of disarray both within schools and between the various levels of schooling - that they do not have confidence in the level of commitment and leadership to change things.

It is a sad indictment that 92% of parents and families lack confidence in either Commonwealth or State systems providing the resources to turn this situation around. That lack of confidence is strongly shared by 90% of language teachers, 90% of Principals and 85% of Education Department people!

Read more at <http://www.acsso.org.au/MR070712.pdf>

ACSSO National Conference

Making Connections - Local and Global

This year's National Education Conference will be presented by ACSSO in Darwin on Monday 22 and Tuesday 23 October.

A major element of this year's Conference will be a symposium on **Languages Education in Australia**.

A range of expert speakers from around the country will present, explore and lead interactive discussion on the strategic needs and opportunities for languages education, in terms not only of: **Where it has been; Where it is at;** But – more particularly – **Where it should be going**, especially in the context of the recent UN Proclamation of 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

Discussion will consider the learnings from the international context. And the opportunities presented by modern technology to see and use the wider world as a "limitless classroom without walls".

Other speakers and discussions will explore critical aspects of cross-cultural communication and the need for informed understanding and engagement with Asia.

A further symposium will explore the issues around Indigenous education, currently a major strategic challenge for appropriate and effective cross-cultural engagement.

Read more at <http://www.acsso.org.au/natconf/index.htm>

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I am writing to suggest something of importance so that we can motivate younger teachers to teach a language at primary schools.

I have observed practising teachers from the university who come to the language classroom and become totally disinterested to pursue a career in language teaching.

We don't need any more language policy writers. We need a school inspector to oversee the timetable of language teachers especially those who are used merely as Non-Instruction providers (providing mainstream teachers 2 hours free time).

Language teachers at public primary schools in particular are not regarded as specialists but must have the same load as the other mainstream teachers, teach 30 classes per week plus playground duties, not allowing us time to mark students' work, thus impossible to write formative progress reports for our students. Of course, we can take more work home - to the detriment of our families ...

Languages should be taught from Year 3 when students have mastered writing their names, letters of the alphabet and they are ready to learn a second language.

New receptions should not start learning a language especially a scripted language as Chinese, Japanese or Korean. One can not sing and play all year to keep them entertained.

We have got to be realistic about language issues. Where are the pundits who will come to our classrooms and do the same work load??? None. Everyone says: why do it, get out!

When I raise these as collegiate planning issues, I get cold comfort messages like: grin and bear it, sink or swim ...

If we want Australia to be a clever country, this is not the way to do it. Give language specialists some consideration, maybe give principals some workshops so they understand what language learning is all about.

Or make all principals and mainstream teachers learn a second language - perhaps the language that their schools are learning, to lighten the load of the LOTE teacher: at least they can follow up the

lessons - and provide motivational support for young teachers from a position of informed understanding!

Diogenes of Dingley Dell (name and address supplied)

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REMINDERS

Applications close for 2008 Endeavour language Teacher Fellowships, 20 July 2007.
http://www.endeavour.dest.gov.au/language_teacher_fellowships/

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