

ACSSO National Education Conference 2007

Session 6: Realising Australia's Potential in a Global World

Australian Context: Rob McConchie

In introducing Dr Philip Mahnken, Rob provided the following insights derived from the recent ACSSO research report, "Attitudes Towards the Study of Languages in Australian Schools."

This research canvassed the opinions of six stakeholder groups across the government and non-government schooling sectors: parents, students, school language teachers, principals, languages advisors and tertiary language teachers. The main instrument was an on-line survey, consisting of approximately 50 questions on a five point Likert scale, with an opportunity for an extended written response. The survey was administered late in 2006 with the final report being published in June 2007.

Indigenous and community languages were not included in the scope of the study, which was confined to mainstream school issues. 3274 responses were received, which included 1300 written comments.

In summary, the languages landscape in Australian schools is generally bleak, although there are some good news stories dotted across the country. Indeed, some of the good news emanates from rural and remote locations, where technology is used optimally. But the overarching message from this study is that Australian schools can do better in the provision of language education. Some of the areas in obvious need of improvement are the following:

- The purpose of language education needs to be clarified. It seems that anything is good enough in many primary schools, where programs are extraordinarily diverse – offerings range from cultural experiences supported by a few words, through to programs where language acquisition is the prime focus.
- Language teachers are poorly supported in general. Very few primary school teachers are provided with a syllabus. Most have to rely on very general guidelines to construct their own programs.
- The model of languages teachers providing mainstream primary school teachers preparation time simply ensures that languages can never be part of a whole school effort. Language teachers are often regarded as visitors to the classrooms of teachers who do the important curriculum work.
- Language teachers rarely have a place to call their own, being consigned to an itinerant role in many schools.
- Many parents complained of very low standards, or outcomes, of the language curriculum. A common reaction was "why bother, if all my child can do after years of study is to say Konichi wa and fold a paper crane?"
- The case for literacy in English being supported by a study of other languages is poorly made in many schools.

- Making languages compulsory can be counterproductive in situations where such a policy is not properly supported. For example, many NSW principals argued that the 100 hours of compulsory languages in NSW high schools simply does not work.
- Planning and cooperation between primary and high schools, and across regions can be improved.
- The supply of quality trained teachers is inadequate.
- Immersion programs work but they are so rare that they have little national impact.
- The time allocated to language programs is often insufficient to develop any real understanding and proficiency.
- The university and school sectors typically operate in isolation from one another. Even within universities, the education faculty may be disconnected from the languages department.
- All groups believed that the Australian public was apathetic. Many supported the implementation of a campaign to educate the public about the importance of language education. Some believed that current federal government policies and statements had turned people's thinking inwards.

Finally, the study made a number of recommendations, some in relation to the MCEETYA National Statement and Plan for Languages Education 2005 – 08. It concluded that whilst the National Statement provided aspirational platform and rationale for the development of school language education, the National Plan was totally inadequate. The Plan is short term, project based and poorly resourced if its intent is to drive systemic change. Perhaps controversially, the report recommended that the National Statement be withdrawn as it will be seen as fundamentally misleading and dishonest if there is not substantial commitment from governments to implement it.

Once again it should be stressed that despite the impediments mentioned above, there are schools in both the government and non-government sectors where language programs enjoy a high profile and level of support from their communities. The challenge is to make this situation the norm, rather than the exception in our schools.