

Languages and School Leaders

The place of languages in education

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Australia's *National Statement and Plan for Languages* (<http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/default.asp?id=11912>) sets out a strong rationale for language learning in Australia, which grows out of the changing nature of the world and of languages education. As the world becomes more and more internationalised, education needs to prepare learners to work in a world where travelling and working abroad, working in multilingual and multicultural teams, working with international collaborators and dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity are a normal part of life.

Monolingual English speakers often believe that, because English is the major international language, English is the only language needed for working internationally. This view is, however, somewhat naive, because it does not recognise the realities of the ways in which the world is and the ways in which it is changing. While, English is a usual second or third language for educated people in many countries, even with the rate of growth which is currently expected, by 2050 at least two thirds of the world's population will not be able to speak English at all (Graddol, 2004) , and many of the remaining third will have limited proficiency in the language. Moreover, in a world where many educated people speak English as a second language, monolingual English speakers are disadvantaged by comparison because they can speak only one language and do not have the communication and intercultural skills that come from language learning.

David Graddol, a leading English as Second Language educator and researcher, recognises that increasing levels of study of English present a problem for native speakers:

“Monolingual speakers of any variety of English ... will experience increasing difficulty in employment and political life, and are likely to become bewildered by many aspects of society and culture around them.” (Graddol, 2004)

This view is developed further in the Nuffield Foundations report on language learning in the UK:

“Monolingualism will not serve [the next generation] well. It implies inflexibility and the presumption that others should always be prepared to use English; it creates a culture of dependence on the linguistic competence and the goodwill of others. Learning to use another language is about more than the acquisition of a useful skill, it reflects attitudes, conveying respect for the identity and culture of others and tolerance of diversity”. (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2002: 30)

Even in economically and culturally powerful English speaking countries such as the USA and the UK governments have responded to the erosion of the English native speaker's advantages', by increasing the amount and length of time spent on compulsory language learning (Freen, 2006: Glod, 2006). In Australia, however, schooling as a whole has still not dealt adequately with the place and nature of languages learning.

Languages Education in Australia

Languages education in Australia is in a state of change and many developments in Australian practice are leading the world in reshaping the ways in which languages are taught. Languages education is shifting its focus to developing the abilities learners need to engage with the multilingual and multicultural world. The focus now is much more on the language learner as an intercultural communicator and it involves integrating the study of the language itself with the development of an understanding of how language and culture affect the lives of learners as well as

those of the people whose language they are learning (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003).

School leadership and successful language programs

There are many variables which make up a successful language program. The AFMLTA in developing standards for accomplished language teaching articulated the view of the profession about what a good language program looks like (<http://www.afmlta.asn.au/afmlta/Standards%20for%20teachers.pdf>). While some aspects of good programs are the province of the language teacher, many depend on school leadership. In fact, school leadership has been identified in many studies as the crucial variable in the success or failure of a language program.

Successful language programs are characterised by school leaders who:

- are active supporters of the language program, valuing languages equally with other discipline areas and recognising what language learning adds to their students educational experiences as part of the whole school curriculum;
- ensure that the language program and the language teacher are fully integrated into the school community and the broad curriculum;
- plan for success in students' learning and for progress in learning over time by ensuring adequate and continued contact time for language learning;
- recognise and value the particular expertise that the language teacher brings to the school;
- are informed about what is happening in language teaching and supportive of innovation.

Many school leaders face a challenge when it comes to languages in that this area of the curriculum is one about which they know little and have had little prior learning, or success in learning. They may know little about the content, the pedagogy or the nature of the learning. The most important contribution a school leader can make is to see languages, and bring others to see languages, as less foreign and to use languages to build possibilities for life in an internationalised world.

References

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