

Working Together on Languages Education
A NATIONAL SEMINAR

REPORT

– Melbourne –
30-31 May 2002

conducted by the
Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council

for the
Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training

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Languages Education Seminar Advisory Group

This project has been guided by an advisory group with representation from school leaders, teachers and their relevant professional associations, educational agencies, and the Commonwealth.

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Background

The seminar arose from approaches made to the Commonwealth Minister and to the former NALSAS Taskforce by the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Association (AFMLTA), Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) and the Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) regarding critical concerns about the implementation of languages programmes in Australian schools.

The fundamental concerns focus on primary and secondary schools' ability to provide quality languages learning experiences in situations where:

- a consistent supply of teachers of suitable quality is not assured
- continuity of student language learning experience is unlikely or impossible
- uncertainty exists about which languages should be taught and the types of outcomes which might realistically be sought, and
- a sustaining level of community support is absent, and demands, from many sources, to concentrate on other curricular areas predominate.

In some sectors of education, especially during the primary years where languages education on a mass scale has a comparatively short history, these issues have reached critical proportions. But regardless of the sector, there is broad agreement that outcomes in languages education in Australian schools can and ought to be improved.

Purpose

The intended outcomes of the seminar were to provide participants with the opportunity to:

- exchange views on issues related to the teaching of languages in Australian schools
- develop strategies with which key stakeholders could work together to support and sustain languages education programmes in Australian schools, recognising the role of leadership in consolidating and strengthening languages education programmes, and
- develop a 'commitment to action' that could be used to underpin future collaborative activities.

It was also described as an early step in an ongoing collaborative process between school leaders, teachers and their relevant professional associations, educational agencies, the Commonwealth and other relevant stakeholders to improve the reach, quality and effectiveness of languages education in this country.

Participants and their reactions

The seminar was the first national gathering of school leaders, language teachers and representatives of education authorities to be held on languages education in Australia. There were 82 participants in the seminar: 46 representatives of the seven national principals organisations and three from the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC); eight representatives of education systems, and one from each of the National Catholic Education Commission and the National Council Independent Schools of Australia; ten representing the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Association (AFMLTA); one from the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA); two from parent organisations; one from the Asia Education Foundation; three from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and others in various contributing roles. The principal representatives included senior office bearers from the associations with strong representation from school-based personnel.

The evaluation of the seminar indicated a very strongly positive response from participants. One participant wrote in his or her evaluation that: 'If such a program [as agreed at the seminar] is actually enacted this seminar will be looked back on as seminal in the development of students' education in the future years. It is the biggest step forward languages has ever had.'

He or she was not alone in believing that the seminar could become a historic moment in languages education. The flavour of many reactions is caught in the following comments. 'Very encouraging that we reached agreement on ways forward.' 'Outstanding seminar with a very encouraging result.' 'Very positive to see the goodwill and collaboration that has been established between the principal associations and the AFMLTA – historic achievement.'

Others were more measured in their reactions. The impact of resource issues was noted, tempering the general feeling with some caution. However the vast majority of participants indicated that they left feeling encouraged by what they had heard and optimistic about the future of languages education. As one noted, typically, participants appreciated the conversation between participants, the airing of the issues and the coming together on generally agreed directions supporting languages education.

Process

The seminar program was designed to provide interaction between a range of relevant input and group discussion with the overarching purpose of reaching agreement about appropriate ways of moving forward.

Plenary input was provided by:

- General Peter Cosgrove, the Commander in Chief of the Australian Defence Forces (the opening address). Among other things he indicated that he could not imagine a future in which people of differing background language were not increasingly connected by commerce, trade and communication. 'Language skills and intercultural sensitivity will be the keys to the new world order. ... It is impossible', he said, 'to overstate the importance of coming to terms with the language and culture of our neighbours.' His speech remained as a reference point for many of the other contributions to the seminar, and in particular his stress on the importance of finding 'champions for language learning'.
- Lindy Norris from Murdoch University (WA) who provided a framework of factors in successful language programmes, and Paul Ganderton, Principal of Busselton HS (WA), who spoke about the factors in his school which had led to improved outcomes in languages learning.
- a panel of senior figures from the key organisations represented at the seminar who commented on the issues as they impacted on the members of those organisations. Their focus was not only on factors currently impeding successful implementation, but also included ideas about ways in which those issues might be successfully resolved.
- a second panel, beginning the second day, which concentrated on the key issues emerging from previous discussion. Which languages should be taught? How many? What outcomes could realistically be expected from students? What sorts of outcomes – communicative competence, linguistic awareness, cultural understanding? What was to be done about attracting and retaining teachers? What action could be expected from the various government sources? What was in train?

The first day included five concurrent workshops on:

- The Le@rning Federation, and other MCEETYA developments (Di Kerr, The Le@rning Federation and Martin Stone, Curriculum Corporation)
- Teaching Languages for Intercultural Communication (Tony Liddicoat, Griffith University)
- Models of Implementation (Jim Dellit, University of SA)
- Primary School Perspectives on Implementation (Maxine Panegyrist, DETE SA, and Tony Misich, APPA)
- Secondary School Perspectives on Implementation (Paul Ganderton, Busselton HS, WA, and Helen Strauch, Narrabundah College, ACT).

Interspersed with these inputs were small group discussions involving all participants designed to define and clarify the issues, to provide ideas and to reach agreement about ways forward. The makeup of these groups was varied with their focus becoming increasingly concrete. Despite some apparent areas of disagreement, the first set of broad propositions was evolved at the end of the first day. A working plenary session at the end of the second indicated that broad agreement had in fact been reached about key directions.

Outcomes

The agreed positions reached by the participants were as follows.

1. It is crucial to develop a clear and credible **statement**, in forms suitable for varying audiences, about the purposes, nature and value of learning languages.
2. This statement should be the centrepiece of a **national communication strategy** in support of languages education.

This strategy should, among other things, re-affirm languages as one of the key learning areas, promote language learning as an educational endeavour, address issues of student interest, engagement and continuing participation in the learning of languages throughout the compulsory years of schooling and beyond.

It should also take cognisance of and respond to contemporary and future efforts to reconceptualise curricula to reflect, among other things, realistic levels of language learning and adopt new forms of pedagogy including, most importantly, the effective use of information and communication technologies.

Integral to the strategy should be the identification of champions for language learning who would promote the benefits of learning languages to the Australian community.

3. A **national action plan** must be developed which:
 - includes and is informed by the statement referred to above and the relevant sections of the Adelaide Declaration on *National Goals For Schooling in the 21st Century*.
 - establishes national agreement to offer six languages in common across jurisdictions, and in addition to provide recognition and support for the teaching of Indigenous and community languages. Further languages, of course, would be provided at the discretion of particular jurisdictions or in the context of local or regional circumstances.
 - establishes suitable targets. Participants proposed that, by 2012:
 - all students in primary and secondary years should participate in meaningful, effective and sustained programs in one or more languages
 - all students from Year 3 to Year 10 should display an appropriate level of communicative competence, linguistic awareness and intercultural understanding and skills related to a language
 - through a variety of incentives, students should be encouraged to continue language study in Years 11 and 12.
 - establishes a level of resourcing from Commonwealth, State/Territory and local sources adequate to deliver the established targets.
 - provides an effective approach to issues of teacher supply, including effective incentives to attract, train/retrain and retain appropriately-qualified teachers with suitable language proficiency as either specialist or generalist teachers.
 - identifies key responsibilities and consequent actions for school leaders to support the plan and its implementation.

Action to be taken

1. Delegations from the key peak bodies represented at the seminar to present and seek endorsement of the agreed positions from the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, his counterparts in States and Territories and other appropriate figures in education agencies and other relevant bodies.
2. The agreed proposals for national action contained in this report to be drawn to the attention of the MCEETYA Taskforce on Student Learning and Support Services (which has as one of its defined tasks 'mapping and evaluating the current implementation of Languages other than English in Australian schools and developing an agreed national approach').
3. This report to be made available to the members of the organisations represented at the seminar through their various media of communication.
4. A further seminar to monitor and advance progress on a national effort in languages education to be held in 2003.
5. A steering committee consisting of representatives of the key bodies involved in the seminar to be maintained to coordinate the promotion and consequent implementation of its agreed positions.