

Who Values Australia's Language Potential?

Rupert Macgregor 6 August 2006

As planning is well under way to convene a **National Languages Education Forum** in October 2006 to review and have input to the implementation of the *National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005 – 2008* (at <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/pdf/languageeducation.pdf>) it is timely to focus on some critical questions.

- Who values Australia's extraordinarily rich language history and future potential?
- How can we best value and achieve that immense potential?
- ... And just what are we prepared to do about it?

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC) care about Australia's language potential and are keen to promote effective action to progress it.

In August 2006 ACSSO & APC will be making contact with school communities all over Australia to conduct baseline research for DEST into community attitudes and expectations across the country. This unique and long-needed research will inform the National Languages Forum and support effective action to implement the National Plan for Languages Education

General Peter Cosgrove values it thus. *"I cannot imagine a future in which people of all cultures and nations are not increasingly connected by ties of travel, commerce and migration... Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order. Along with computer literacy they will provide the keys to participation in the global economy."*

Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephen valued it in this way. *"The thing that distresses me most is how little most children and grandchildren of overseas-born Australians retain of the language and culture of their lands of origin. The loss of ancestral language is grievous for the individual and the nation. We should be a nation of great linguists."*

Dr Joshua Fishman, a leading international authority on reversing language shifts, says: *"The goal of promoting heritage [indigenous and community] language proficiency will revitalise our entire approach to non-English language instruction. It will not only give us more individuals proficient in these languages, it will also dignify our country's heritage language communities."*

Professor Michael Clyne values and understands the issues, and for many years has been pointing the ways we should go to do something useful about it – most recently in his landmark study ***"Australia's Language Potential"*** September 2005, UNSW Press rrp \$39.95

As cogently argued and demonstrated by Professor Clyne, the issues around languages education affect how we should prepare and equip our young people to take on an effective role in a changing world, in ways that bear directly upon their own opportunities in life, and the economic well-being of Australia.

In Michael's words, "This book argues that we need to develop our language potential to the fullest – so that young Australians, regardless of their background, can attain a high level of competence in at least one language in addition to English – to benefit them culturally, cognitively, in communicative competence, and in many cases in terms of understanding themselves and their families. At the same time, benefits will accrue to our nation economically and in our communication with other countries."

Michael notes, "There is a paradox between the linguistic diversity of our population and our gross utilisation of this diversity." To take one example with wide implications, he notes that Australian business leaders are competent in fewer languages than their counterparts in 27 other countries. This is just one manifestation of a persistent monolingual mindset – a mindset at odds with the context of a country which had developed

- some 250 native languages (of which at least 64 survive)
- a high level of involvement in bi-lingual education in the 19th century
- an expanding language potential with nearly 200 other community languages regularly spoken in homes and communities around the country.

For a country with such unique advantages (which have attracted a number of major international companies to Sydney or Melbourne because of those linguistic and cultural resources in the community) our national failure to maximise this potential must be a matter of deep concern. Concern for our young people, concern for their future; and concern for Australia's competitiveness in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-linguistic world community.

Much is made of our students' high top-end ranking against other countries in the OECD's PISA programme. But our results have a straggling tail. In Finland, whose results we seek to emulate, all year 12 students take three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English. Dutch students take English and Dutch and 40% take an additional language. In Australia, still only 13.4% of students in year 12 take a language other than English. So, how is it that countries whose academic results we aspire to, cope with the challenges of the famously "overcrowded curriculum" in ways that give such a level of prominence to languages – and regularly achieve outstanding results in these and other areas too?

Perhaps we should take more careful note that most European countries are working towards a standard of three languages as core curriculum for all students. Are there advantages that more than offset that level of commitment and resourcing? Michael Clyne notes a range of studies which indicate that bilinguals are superior on divergent thinking; and that there is a link between metalinguistic awareness and reading awareness in young children. "There are compelling advantages centring on certain cognitive skills that are said to be enhanced by early bilingualism"; and recent studies explore the positive impact on the development of the brain structure in young people who have acquired two languages by the age of five.

This point is emphasised in a recent major paper (February 2006) by Dr J. Fraser Mustard: "We know that the sounds that an infant is exposed to when very young influence how the auditory neurons develop and function; for example, infants exposed to two languages (e.g. Japanese and English) in the first seven to eight months of life will have little difficulty in setting the base for easily mastering the two

languages and they will not have an accent. Individuals who develop understanding of two languages early in life have a larger left hemisphere of the brain than individuals with monolingual backgrounds. Proficiency in the second language is directly related to the size of this part of the brain. Since acquisition of a second language is best achieved in very early life, this indicates there is a sensitive period for brain development and function for optimum language acquisition, literacy and the associated understanding. It is interesting that the other findings from these studies are that individuals who acquire a second language very early in life find it easier to learn third and fourth languages later in life."

What is to be done? Noting at the outset that "the best time to start the process of transmitting a language is at the birth of the child", Michael Clyne explores and describes a range of strategies which parents, families and school communities can progress – and also the ways in which State, Territory and Federal governments and their agencies can assist with programmes which can develop the potential of Australia's linguistic diversity. Working together, we can provide a wider and more inclusive range of opportunities for all students to access effective language learning in schools and their communities.

Certainly there is much to be done – but how can we afford not to do it? Encouragingly, it is the multi-linguistic and multi-cultural nature of Australian society itself - including the rich linguistic and cultural traditions of our indigenous peoples – and the ways in which this has been at least partially sustained through a variety of initiatives, which provides a basis on which we can build a stronger dynamic framework for the future.

Michael Clyne brings a lifetime's informed understanding to bear on the issues – he was a leading player in the excellent 1993 review "Languages at the Crossroads" whose recommendations provided a twenty-year strategic framework for improvement. Sadly, since that time of hope, little seems to have been done – apart from a variety of further review reports – and the negative decision to discontinue the NALSAS funding. Until the adoption by MCEETYA in 2005 of the National Statement and Action Plan 2005-2008 – a document three years in gestation and yet to make a significant impact or to achieve effective, transformative and sustainable action.

As Michael notes persuasively in conclusion to his recent book, the social, cognitive, economic and cultural reasons traversed show that "it is not multi-lingualism but mono-lingualism that is too costly for us. In the past few years this discussion has moved too far to the margins of our society. It is time for it to be re-instated... the initiative has to come from the grassroots... reigniting the flame and promoting more public discussion in this area." That whole community impetus is needed to prepare for that time not far along the track when we will need an agenda and an active program for Australia and Australians to develop their language potential to the fullest.

As recently quoted in a US State paper, Dr Robert Scott said: ***"We have a critical national need to know other cultures and to be competent in communicating with other people. These are not new needs. We have heard many calls to action to address these needs. So it is past time for a renewed focus on our role as members of the world community. Last call: it is time for action!"***

Guest Columnist Rupert Macgregor is the project manager of the national Families Matter initiative, a resource for families working in partnership with their schools to support the well-being and development of young people. Literacy skills, language and cultural links are critically important factors in the well-being and positive identity for a great many families and communities across the country. This paper was originally written in support of the work of the MCEETYA Working Party which advises the government on progressing the national languages plan.