



ACT Bilingual
Education Alliance

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Affiliated with Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Inc

Introduction

ACT Bilingual Education Alliance (ACTBEA) commends the ACT Government for organising for such a thorough and considered community consultation process, with opportunities for two-way feedback, and for the chance to comment on the themes identified to date.

ACTBEA espouses the identified themes but seeks to provide input to address some gaps in those themes. Specifically, our input contributes to discussions on

- Learning for the Future,
- Inclusion, and
- Individualised Learning

We highlight the importance of languages and languages education in these three themes, and put forward a number of recommendations and practical suggestions the Government could implement to promote excellence and equity in education in the ACT.

About ACTBEA

The ACT Bilingual Education Alliance (ACTBEA) is a local non-profit community group that promotes and supports bilingualism in the Canberra region. ACTBEA organises seminars and social events for families raising children in more than one language and others who recognise the importance of learning languages. It also offers tailored talks to staff of schools and preschools with bilingual programs, as well as parents who have children attending these programs. Our members include linguists and literacy educators with academic background in bilingualism and bilingual education.

Theme: Learning for the Future

The majority of students today will ultimately work in jobs that do not yet exist. This is broadly acknowledged, and the advice given to young people to navigate this opaque future and to stay competitive is both practical and highly personal. Young people are advised to 'expect the unexpected', to 'get an education' and to pay attention to the impact of technology. Of deeper personal significance, they are advised to pursue their passion and to develop human skills, in particular to focus on cultivating uniquely human soft skills like communication, creativity and compassion (<https://www.payscale.com/career-news/2017/08/65-percent-tomorrows-workers-jobs-dont-exist-today>). The General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum echo the same message in the personal and social capabilities it lists to develop: self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and social management. Researchers and government alike have placed great emphasis on strengthening the personal and social capacities of young Australians, in order to equip them with skills to best navigate an unpredictable future and to carve out their own niche and to

contribute to the future development of society. It is specifically in this context that bilingualism and multilingualism are of importance.

The majority of the world's population is bilingual, with the trend towards bilingualism and multilingualism continuing, so we can expect that in future more and more people will be multilingual and open to learning further languages. For the majority of the multilingual population this will involve competency in English plus another language or languages. For Australians to be globally competitive (in terms of study and employment opportunities) they would need to be adding a language or languages other than English to their skills repertoire, as a matter of routine.

Language learning also adds to the human soft skills discussed above. Learning languages helps develop a person's lateral thinking, metalinguistic awareness, intercultural understanding and empathy towards others. In a world where the future of work moves towards greater automation and transformation of the nature of jobs, these skills will become even more important than they are today.

Intercultural communication and understanding are also critical in today's Australian schools, where our multicultural reality demands a shared social perspective to maintain social cohesion. Intercultural Understanding is one of the seven General Capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, and is expected to be taught from Foundation to Year 10, across all Learning Areas. Achieving this General Capability is closely tied to the study of languages (LOTE). Direct exposure to other cultures through learning another language can promote both self-awareness and self-management and social awareness and social management, all key to intercultural communication and understanding. Exposure to other cultures through increased awareness of heritage languages and cultures within schools and in the community can also promote this.

Despite the above, ACT students have a poor record of continuing LOTE subjects once they become optional, particularly at college level. The Government needs to support exposure to LOTE learning and experience in negotiating meanings across different languages and cultures.

Recommendation 1

Learning languages should be given high priority within the Learning for the Future Theme. This will help to

- ensure that our young people are globally competitive in terms of future study and employment opportunities, and
- strengthen the personal and social capabilities that will enable students to fully participate in, and contribute to, future life in a harmonious multicultural society.

Theme: Inclusion

The theme of Inclusion has been excessively narrowed down to a discussion about disability. In Australia's highly diverse and multicultural society, discussions about Inclusion in our education system must consider culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students who form a substantial segment of the student population.

CALD students – especially those who have daily contact with another language outside of school - bring capabilities that are “usually not considered in classroom practice”, and that remain as unharnessed resources for learning and general literacy development, as explained in a recent paper by Naomi Wilks (Babel, December 2017, Vol. 52, pp.27-34). The diverse language skills students bring to school are not always sufficiently valued and built upon. An understandable focus on English language and literacy, in a system where English is the language of instruction, can ignore the vital role other languages play in making sense of curriculum content. Research shows that bilingual children utilise both their languages to think about, discuss and plan for academic work in school. Additionally, home language use allows the child to draw on the language resources available in the child’s home, such as books, technology and conversations with knowledgeable members of the family.

There is potentially a future price to pay from ignoring the skills and learning styles of EAL/D learners. Providing them with timely, targeted English language instruction to enable them to participate earlier and more fully in the learning opportunities available in schools and in the broader community is vital. But so too is supporting their home languages. As the ACT Education and Training Directorate points out in Leaflet 5. ‘Bilingualism and Multilingualism: English as an Additional Language or Dialect Education’, failure to support this two-pronged approach may result in students only developing “limited competency in both languages. This will prevent them from reaching their full potential”. Failure to actively encourage and support the continued development of bilingual skills in students from CALD backgrounds thus militates against equity, a major focus of the ACT Future of Education exercise,

Classrooms where several languages are routinely heard and used can also benefit the whole class. Children can learn about the languages and cultures of others, extending their own knowledge of geography, history and culture; allowing for comparative language study; and developing intercultural appreciation and empathy. These are the attributes mentioned under the Theme ‘Learning for the Future’ that are so important in present attempts to strive for a more harmonious society and to prepare students for a global future.

To support a CALD child’s language learning (including both English and the child’s family language), teachers need to be competent in identifying the capabilities that CALD students bring to the classroom, even when the teachers are not themselves familiar with the particular languages/cultures in question, and to incorporate these across any learning area, not just in an EALD or LOTE class. Teachers also need to be confident about availing themselves of community resources when required. This can be a challenge for many teachers in the context of what many academics still lament as the ‘prevailing monolingual mindset’ of Australian society. One of our recommendations is thus that teachers’ professional development includes a fuller understanding of language learning and language learning processes.

Identity

When considering strategies to ensure the Inclusion of CALD students in schools, it is also critical to recognise that “the linguistic repertoires of students form part of students’ identities” (ibid. page 29). Our education systems should therefore support CALD students as they navigate the complex pathway of developing two or more sets of linguistic and cultural reference systems, helping students to develop a balanced bilingual and bicultural identity.

Living as we do in an age where disaffected young people risk being “radicalised” into activities that do not benefit other Australians, the issue of identity development is particularly relevant in discussions about inclusion within our education system.

A significant resource for helping bilingual children develop a balanced bilingual and bicultural identity is community language schools.

Community Language Schools

Community language schools (supported by funding through the Community Services Directorate) have an enormous, largely under-utilised potential. A de-facto bridge between the mainstream schooling system and the student’s heritage language, community language schools can help achieve two important goals:

- They are hubs of language learning resources within our community; and
- They support the development of cultural identities and home language skills.

In practice, however, there is little if any synergy between community language schools (CLS) and the mainstream education system. This is a missed opportunity for all parties but most of all for students; the disconnect between their mainstream school and their mother-tongue school not only disrupts the transference of language skills but, more importantly, can negatively affect perceptions of their heritage culture. CLS need to be supported if they are to fulfil their potential as valuable resources for ACT students, their families and for our mainstream schools.

CLS generally exist as community initiatives where scant resources can mean they become accustomed to operating in makeshift ways, dependant on volunteers and supplemented by some funding from the Directorate. They often exist on the basis of goodwill of a few individuals from a particular language community. There is a lot of scope for improvement. The financial support currently available is a laudable but incomplete way of supporting them.

It is not unusual for CLS to operate despite very limited teaching resources specific to their target language. This can mean, for example:

- few or no in-language textbooks or other children’s literature
- few or outdated classroom teaching resources (such as language-specific toys, books, games, apps, etc.)
- little or no technology or online resources. Even when classes are held in the rented premises of mainstream schools, as “non-Education Directorate” users they cannot access the established Wi-Fi or smartboard technology and often need to rely on classroom teaching methods from pre-Internet times.

Moreover, not all CLS have a documented curriculum or teaching program, and few are linked in any way to the Australian Curriculum. Classes are often taught by volunteers who may or may not have relevant pedagogical competencies. Other staff may be highly qualified with overseas teaching experience, but their professional competency is compromised due to the makeshift conditions in which they have to teach and the disconnect with the broader education landscape in Australia. Another factor is the nature of the board or committee that manages each community language school, which may not fully appreciate or adequately

support educational initiatives put forward by their teaching staff. These challenges may be most common during the start-up years of a CLS but can remain unresolved over time.

Yet, if we pay heed to the earlier-mentioned close relationship between children's linguistic repertoires and identity development, then CLS community language schools have a distinct role to play in supporting positive identity development, and deserve support to develop into more robust teaching institutions contributing to the development of CALD student futures.

One way the Education Directorate can underscore positive identity development at CLS is by encouraging CLS teachers to incorporate certain key elements of the Australian curriculum in their teaching. The *Intercultural Understanding* General Capability (or parts of it) could be one such element required of CLS. However informal the linkage between the two curriculums might potentially be, it would still provide a reassuring consistency for enrolled students who transition from mainstream classes to community language classes each week. A further upshot is that boards or managing committees of CLS would be encouraged to ensure that at least one member in their team could bring pedagogical competencies and knowledge of the Australian curriculum to their decision-making.

Another way to encourage consistency of approach between CLS and mainstream schools is to provide CLS with opportunities for professional development, networking and information exchange with mainstream teachers. CLS staff who are otherwise not employed in the education sector are seldom "plugged in" to the professional networking circles of mainstream teachers, such as the Modern Language Teachers Association. As a result, teachers in the two sectors are unaware of each other's issues, what challenges they share in common and how they could integrate their approaches for the benefit of their students.

If CLS teachers were drawn into the broader teaching community through networking events and encouragement towards membership of professional organisations, the Directorate could help CLS feel more connected to the mainstream educational system.

A further example of how to reduce the disconnect between mainstream and community language teaching approaches is to allow the latter some degree of access to schools' digital technology, starting with Wi-Fi access for those CLS who rent premises from the Education Directorate. Standard teaching tools in Australian classrooms today include smartboards, Chromebooks, iPads, not to mention PCs and other technology, and every student now even has their own Google classroom account linked to the Directorate's network.

In stark contrast, use of technology in CLS is typically minimal - most often due to the lack of digital technology availability, as well as the lack of CLS teachers' skills in using such technology. This inequality needs to be addressed urgently, so we can ensure that students are receiving instruction through contemporary teaching practices.

Recommendation 2

The skills, learning styles, and educational needs of CALD students should be fully considered in the 'Inclusion' Theme.

Recommendation 3

The value of the home language skills that CALD students bring with them to mainstream school should be more widely recognised and built on to enable these students to reach their full potential and to add to the educational experience of all students. To facilitate this, the Education Directorate should:

- include a fuller understanding of language learning and language learning processes in the professional development it offers teachers
- encourage schools to share their ideas and practical examples of how to include a diversity of languages into mainstream classrooms. Specific activities can also be found in the literature, for example, in the paper by teacher and academic Naomi Wilks-Smith (Babel, December 2017, Vol. 52, pp. 27-34).

Recommendation 4

There should be stronger cooperation between the mainstream school system and community languages schooling. This can be achieved via:

- Professional networking to engage teachers of both systems in two-way learning. Thus, CLS teachers could learn about key aspects of the Australian school curriculum and effective language teaching strategies (including the use of technology) while mainstream teachers, potentially from curriculum areas beyond language teaching, could learn from their CLS colleagues about the language and cultural learning going on outside mainstream school hours.
- Raising awareness about (and potentially raising the status of) CLS attendance in a child's mainstream school. Mainstream schools are aware of the numbers of their students who attend CLS as they have to confirm their mainstream enrolment to meet the administrative requirements of the ACT CLS Association. This information could be better recorded, acknowledged and echoed in less formal ways by teachers in class, at school assemblies and in the school newsletter.

Recommendation 5

The status of language learning in general, both within and outside mainstream schooling should be raised.

- At the school level: this could include promoting language learning activities and events, and celebrating students' language learning achievements.
- At a wider community level: the Education Directorate could work with the area of the Community Services Directorate that supports CLS to celebrate and showcase the linguistic diversity in the ACT and promote the benefits of language learning in a similar way to the very successful 'Languages in the Mainstream' project in WA (see <http://mltawa.asn.au/litm/2017/languagesweek/> for details).

Theme: Individualised Learning

The Individualised Learning Theme is focused on the need to engage students in school learning by better using their interests and skills. Among those skills, the language abilities

children bring to school are of critical importance, as they are central to the development of their social and academic skills and identity.

As noted in relation to the 'Inclusion' Theme, it is paramount that teachers tailor their approach to build on and encourage students to develop their home language skills. This will help ensure educational programs are better targeted to a child's strengths and learning needs. Teachers should recognise and encourage children to draw on all their language resources when learning across the curriculum.

A significant proportion of our student population comes from CALD home environments, but not all of these students are children of first-generation migrants learning English as a second language. Their experiences with other languages are varied, which gives rise to a need for an individualised approach to nurturing their literacy and encouraging their bilingualism / multilingualism to develop ever further. In the end, we can demonstrate how much we really value our children's languages skills by the amount of opportunity we give them to practice those skills. Those opportunities require an individualised approach.

English literacy is a frequent focus of attention in discussions about the quality of educational performance. Learning other languages has been shown to develop overall literacy. As the Australian Curriculum (General Capabilities – Literacy section <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/>) acknowledges, learning languages is 'value added', strengthening literacy-related capabilities that are transferable across languages" and across "domains of use", including the academic and across learning areas.

Recommendation 6

That the linguistic and literacy skills that CALD students bring to school be acknowledged, and built on in order:

- To better engage students, and
- To enable learning programs to be better tailored so each individual can reach their full potential, both academically and socially.

Recommendation 7

The following individualised approaches should be considered as ways to engage a child's home language to further their literacy and educational and social development:

- By leveraging existing reading programs:

Schools should have books in LOTE available in the classroom and school library to support reading skills in other languages. (This tactic would also benefit other students in that it could raise their awareness of diversity and arouse their curiosity about the possibilities of learning other languages). To source good quality books in LOTE, schools could avail themselves of specialist library suppliers who have systems in place to ensure that the LOTE literature is of suitable quality.

Home Reading programs (and similar initiatives) could explicitly encourage multilingual families to read books in LOTE with their child and to record these instances in their reading logs alongside books in English.

Public libraries in the ACT do encourage literacy in other languages by offering LOTE collections and even bilingual story times but there is potential to update the content of these collections and broaden the number of languages they cover, to more fully reflect the range of languages spoken in the community.

- Through ongoing communication with parents:

Schools have the opportunity to raise parents' awareness about the transferable nature of literacy skills across languages. Many multilingual parents need reassurance that using another language at home will not harm their child's abilities in English.

However, schools may first need to be sure that all of their teachers are equally aware of this fact and are sending consistent messages to parents.

- Across all Learning Areas:

Words, phrases and discussions in other languages need not be limited to EALD and LOTE classes – they can be incorporated across all learning areas. In any unit of work, students should be made to feel comfortable about using other languages, without fear of becoming “the odd one out”. It is the teacher's role to set the tone of the class environment and to implicitly “give permission” to individual students to use their full repertoire of languages to plan, research, think about and discuss their academic work.

In summary

In this submission, the ACT Bilingual Education Alliance has pointed out the importance of languages and languages education for the future of schools and education in the ACT. We have organised our discussion around three of the themes that have emerged from the public conversation to date: Learning for the Future, Inclusion, and Individualised Learning.

The key ideas that underpin our discussion, recommendations and practical suggestions for action are that:

- Learning languages has great educational value for all students and should be given higher priority in ACT schools
- The skills of bilingual students should be fully acknowledged and better utilised in the classroom
- Community Language Schools are a great potential asset that need to be further supported and developed
- The skills, learning styles, and educational needs of CALD students need to be explicitly addressed in relation to Inclusion and Individualised Learning

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